Making Sense of Self-Employment in Late Career: Understanding the Identity

Work of Olderpreneurs

Abstract

The enterprise culture is a pervasive socio-historical discourse. This article adopts a narrative identity work approach to explore how individuals may exert agency to make sense of and negotiate with the structuring features of such discourses. Older entrepreneurs are an interesting case through which to explore these processes because ageing is predominantly portrayed as a form of decline to be resisted or hidden and as inherently anti-enterprise (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). Qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two UK-based older entrepreneurs reveal how they engaged problematically with discourses around enterprise culture and ageing in constructing their identities. Sedimentation and innovation are proposed as valuable concepts for understanding how particular discourses become embedded in the understanding and identity work of individuals and how they seek to exert agency. Our findings demonstrate the difficulties in innovative identity work for older entrepreneurs and this is discussed in terms of narrative resource poverty.

Introduction

Enterprise culture reflects a neoliberal political ideology focused on individual responsibility and the achievement of goals such as economic growth and social inclusion through entrepreneurship (Dannreuther and Perren, 2013; Fenwick, 2002). It is a pervasive discourse and therefore influential when individuals in self-employment make sense of their work-based identities and negotiate their identity claims with others. This article focuses on older entrepreneurs ('olderpreneurs') as particularly interesting in this context since they do not necessarily fit with existing enterprise discourse and may be marginalised by age-related discourses around decline (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). We are interested in how entrepreneurs act as consumers of these discourses (Du Gay, 1996), how they engage in identity work and seek to exert agency.

This article presents the identity work of two UK-based olderpreneurs, as constructed in interview settings during a period of longitudinal research. It suggests that, in seeking to understand their identity work in relation to socio-historical discourses, the concepts of innovation and sedimentation (Ricoeur, 1991) provide valuable insights. The article identifies exclusionary discourses as a potential constraint owing to a mismatch or lack of positive narrative resources which we discuss as a problem of narrative resource poverty. Olderpreneurs, and members of other non-normative, marginalised or excluded groups, can lack suitable discourses to support their identity claims and the narrative

resources with which to innovate plausible, externally-acceptable accounts congruent with these claims. Such narrative resource poverty leads to difficulties in overcoming contrary or marginalising discourses, such as those related to age, and in escaping the sedimented assumptions that accompany them.

Literature Review

Enterprise culture

In the past 40 years capitalist economies have undergone significant changes in the structure and organisation of work within which an enterprise culture has gained prominence (Parker, 2001). Enterprise culture comprises policies and actions espousing '…the virtues of responsibility, initiative, competitiveness and risk-taking, and industrious effort' (Young, 1992: 33). With its central focus on individual action and responsibility 'the figure of the entrepreneur serves as a deus ex machina within enterprise ideology' (Armstrong, 2005: 146). Through this increasingly hegemonic standpoint, entrepreneurship is responsible for job creation, national economic growth and prosperity (Young, 2013) and offered up in place of a wasteful 'dependency culture' (MacDonald, 1996: 431). In the UK, for example, cross-party political consensus and a 'hegemonic obsession with "enterprise" and "entrepreneurship"' (Curran and Blackburn, 2001: 899-90) ensures that this is rarely questioned or challenged.

Political discourse exerts influence on other aspects of society and its institutions

(Dannreuther and Perren, 2013) and political interventions reflecting the enterprise culture are widespread, for example in education, reform of business regulation and welfare provision (Young, 2012). Discourse, in this context, can be defined as a 'connected set of statements, concepts, terms, expressions which constitute a way of talking or writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue' (Watson, 1994: 113). Enterprise discourse suggests that there are correct ways to be an entrepreneur and correct sources, the 'risk experts' (Beck, 1992), from whom to seek support and assistance and who reinforce the underlying, neoliberal assumptions, enacting a legitimisation of particular narratives of entrepreneurship and shaping expectations.

However, what actually constitutes entrepreneurship is changeable since the malleability of the term allows it to be bent to particular political purposes, creating a powerful societal discourse (Dannreuther and Perren, 2013), albeit one often at odds with the status of most members of society and small business owners as not being particularly entrepreneurial (Armstrong, 2005). It is important to understand the impacts and influence of these discourses on individual entrepreneurs and this article seeks to engage with a developing literature on entrepreneurship and identity.

Identity and entrepreneurial discourse

The ideology underlying enterprise culture is widely propagated and appears readily

available for individuals making sense of their identity in relation to entrepreneurial activity (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). For entrepreneurs, it is of value to explore this construction of a sense of self in relation to the consumption of entrepreneurial discourse in individual sensemaking (Goss, 2008). For example, an 'ideal type' of entrepreneur, legitimised through enterprise culture, represents individual agency and 'a set of characteristics, such as bravery, ambition, success, autonomy and self sufficiency' (Down and Warren, 2008: 6). However, only those who subscribe to the underlying ideology are a success, those who cannot or will not subscribe are failures (Dannreuther and Perren, 2013). Members of marginalised groups such as women or ethnic minorities may be excluded where they engage in forms of enterprise not readily captured by the discourse, and therefore by surveys or other measures of entrepreneurial activity (Hamilton, 2013). This leads some to conclude that 'the concept of entrepreneurship seems to be discriminatory, gender-biased, ethnocentrically determined and ideologically controlled' (Ogbor, 2000: 629).

However, there is ongoing debate over the degree to which entrepreneurial discourse dictates the identity of individuals and to what extent they can exert agency in their consumption of these discourses. The structural influence of enterprise culture is argued as shaping and inscribing particular identities on those who take up an identity position as entrepreneur (Du Gay, 1996). Cohen and Musson (2000) argue that even those entrepreneurs disaffected with or disengaged from entrepreneurial discourse reproduce

it, if only through their engagement with the activities it represents. They do not believe individuals are entirely constrained within such discourses, for example in terms of local, contextual differences, but that, ultimately, their resistance only serves to strengthen the hegemonic potential of enterprise culture.

In contrast, others argue that identities are pluralistic and cannot be reduced to simple conceptions of an entrepreneur (Fenwick, 2002). Entrepreneurship is a discursive resource drawn upon and negotiated as part of a broader sense of identity; it is one source that must be seen in the broader context of an individual's sense of who they are (Watson, 2009). Down and Warren (2008) argue that engagement with entrepreneurial discourse, especially in the form of clichés, need not occur in a deep, personal way but, considered as a narrative resource, can be empowering and bolster particular self-views while supporting the rejection of other, less congruous, elements.

The tensions involved in these contrasting approaches, a sense of individual agency and its relation to the consumption of socio-historical discourses and their potential for constraint, can be conceptualised in terms of narrative identity work.

Narrative identity work

This study focuses on how particular discourses are engaged with by individuals in making sense of their identity. Narrative identity work shapes self-reflections while negotiating the affirmation and acceptance of a sense of identity with others. It is these

dynamic, interpersonal processes through which we actively (re)create, maintain, adapt, repair, revise and present our sense of distinctive selfhood (Somers, 1994). While this process is ongoing (Ricoeur, 1991), provocations to identity work may arise from specific life events such as starting a family, approaching retirement, starting a new venture or facing the failure of an existing business (Downing, 2005). Resulting identity claims require recognition and acceptance from significant others (Lee and Lin, 2011) who are likely to draw on relevant socio-historical discourses and narrative expectations associated with such events.

For many of those seeking self-employment in response to unemployment, marginalisation or social exclusion, they are not running to enterprise but away from a lack of alternatives as a means of survival (MacDonald, 1996; see also Curran and Blackburn, 2001). For some entrepreneurs, such as those who may be non-normative, reluctant or 'accidental' entrepreneurs (Coulson, 2012; Lee and Lin, 2011), the consumption of enterprise discourse and the formulation of a coherent, legitimated sense of identity may therefore be problematic. They cannot readily engage with society's 'construction kits of biographical combination possibilities' (Beck, 1992: 135).

In response to these differences and difficulties, we propose sedimentation and innovation (Ricoeur, 1991) as useful concepts for understanding how individuals engage

in narrative identity work within the context of dominant discourses. It is through conventionalisation that identity work is conducted and reinforced, sedimented over time, through habitual engagement. For Ricoeur (1992), an individual's relatively stable sense of character is cumulative, derived from the sedimentation of acquired habits and identifications to establish paradigmatic 'rules' for one's self. Discourses, habitually drawn upon, erode any sense of where these rules, this sense of self or way of framing experience originated and become a deep-seated means by which an individual interprets their identity and the world around them (Downing, 2005; Ezzy, 1997).

Individuals innovate in their drawing on available narrative resources, as they seek to find a balance between complexity and coherence. Such innovation, drawing on the displacement and synthesis of meanings, represents a form of productive imagination (Ricoeur, 1984); individuals can attempt a 'creative reworking' (Cohen and Musson, 2000: 34) of socio-historical discourses. Individuals may resist normative models, for example in breaking the discursive rules of how to run a business (Fenwick, 2002), or borrowing from an anticipated future to bring congruence to present actions (Lee and Lin, 2011).

For Ricoeur (1984, 1992), sedimentation and innovation exist in a dialectic relationship that develops the ongoing, hermeneutic process of narrative identity work, innovation becoming sedimented and taken-for-granted but also containing the scope to reopen, to

narrativise what has been sedimented. However, innovation requires negotiation and legitimacy; individuals cannot freely innovate new discourses or narratives, not only because of the limits of individual creativity but because legitimacy requires acceptance in the eyes of others (Ezzy, 1997). Instead, individuals must develop, appropriate or adapt from existing discursive repertoires, experiencing anxiety when they struggle to do so (Somers, 1994).

We suggest that sedimentation and innovation can conceptualise the particular challenges for entrepreneurs in relating to an enterprise discourse that marginalises or excludes them. Olderpreneurs are an interesting case in which to explore such processes because ageing is predominantly portrayed as a process of decline, as anti-enterprise (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). Older people are largely excluded from ideological enterprise discourse, despite entrepreneurship presenting a potential escape from discrimination in the labour market (PRIME, 2010).

The particular case of olderpreneurs

In this article, the term 'olderpreneur' is adopted to refer to those who have founded a business aged 50 or over (PRIME, 2010), a group whose prospects have recently gained fresh attention among those concerned with the situation of older people in the labour market (Kibler et al., 2011; Riach and Loretto, 2009). Governments and charities have developed policies aimed at addressing social and economic exclusion through self-

employment and enterprise (PRIME, 2010), although the utility (MacDonald, 1996) and underlying ideology (Parker, 2001) of such approaches have been questioned.

Older people who stay in the workforce, whether as entrepreneurs or employees, are a contentious group in the context of, for example, high youth unemployment. However many older people face an equally serious need for work and an income given discrimination in the labour market (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Riach and Loretto, 2009), changes in employer-sponsored pension schemes and the declining value of personal savings (Curran and Blackburn, 2001; Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005). Entrepreneurship is therefore proposed as a way of extending working lives (PRIME, 2010), even though, in practice, entrepreneurship can become an experience of self-exploitation and struggle where many businesses fail (MacDonald, 1996). While rhetorically free to pursue enterprise opportunities, the individual also bears the real risks, assuming responsibility for business failure and its personal consequences (Beck, 1992; Dannreuther and Perren, 2013).

Although presented as relatively unconstrained by, for example, family responsibilities or a lack of social capital (Curran and Blackburn, 2001), older people tend not to fit within the typical narratives of enterprise and can find it difficult to secure support such as investment or mentors (Kibler et al., 2011). Ainsworth and Hardy (2008: 402) argue that 'the enterprising self is an inherently aged construction and, therefore, not equally

accessible to all age groups'. Ageing beyond some vaguely supposed prime is undesirable, something to be denied, combated or hidden. Olderpreneurs therefore have to negotiate age-related discourses that cast them as deficient, irrespective of their individual mental or physical abilities.

Of course, olderpreneurs do not represent a homogeneous group (Curran and Blackburn, 2001). While our study contributes to the over-representation of white men in the entrepreneurship literature (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Hamilton, 2013), we suggest that studying olderpreneurs who are otherwise privileged in demographic terms provides a starker means by which to explore the relevance of enterprise culture and age-related discourses. Thus, we do not suggest the discounting of other social and demographic factors that have been considered in the broader literature on entrepreneurship or older workers such as gender, ethnicity and class (Ogbor, 2000; Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005). By moving away from treating olderpreneurs (or any sub-group we might construct) as a homogeneous group, we are seeking not to categorise but to characterise (Somers, 1994), to explore how these individuals construct a sense of identity in the context of socio-historical discourses.

Methodology

There is a need for in-depth empirical work on the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, and, in particular, of those such as olderpreneurs who are potentially discriminated

against, marginalised or excluded (Kibler et al., 2011). The limited attention paid to the diversity of voices of entrepreneurs themselves risks overlooking 'the very fabric of the entrepreneurial experience' (Morris et al., 2012: 12).

Generating empirical material

In adopting interviews, a semi-structured approach allowed us to follow emerging lines of interest and to be partially guided by the participants. In researching olderpreneurs' identity work, we are focused on exploring the constructions of meaning that occur in the interview setting. What is important is not how we define (older) entrepreneurship but how the participants define it and the nuanced ways in which they draw upon socio-historical discourses in constructing their accounts. However, we must acknowledge the social construction of these accounts within the context of interviews with researchers much younger than themselves (about a twenty-year age gap). Likewise we must recognise that interviews are inherently intersubjective, that no objective, impersonal record of their lived experience is accessible or liable to representation in an academic article (Essers and Benschop, 2007).

This article focuses on two entrepreneurs (Thomas and Edward) and the interpretive insights produced from this analysis are therefore limited in their generalisability or appropriateness for wider policy debates. However, in focusing in this way we can pay more attention to context, to the particular experiences of these individuals in more

depth and detail. Further, longitudinal approaches to studying entrepreneurs, with multiple points of contact through interviews, informal catch-ups, social events and visits to their workplaces, are important for accessing lived experience and understanding individual identities (Goss, 2008). Regular interactions, over seven years with Edward and 18 months with Thomas, helped us to get close to the ambiguities and uncertainties in their accounts, limiting the distance in post-hoc accounts and reducing the degree to which difficulties or contradictions may have been polished out.

Given the sensitive and highly personal nature of the accounts, we have created pseudonyms, anonymised their enterprises and kept other potentially identifying detail vague. Both Thomas and Edward are based in the UK, outside London. They were existing contacts who fitted definitions of an olderpreneur as someone starting a business when aged 50 or older (PRIME, 2010). Pre-existing relationships allowed us to join Edward and Thomas as they encountered various challenges, viewed as provocations to identity work.

Analysing accounts and generating understanding

Accounts of olderpreneurship generated over multiple encounters permitted thorough reviews of interview transcripts and other sources between encounters. Subsequently, more formally-structured analyses of Thomas and Edward's accounts were conducted adopting an inductive theme analysis. Rather than smoothing out any discrepancies, we

explored the context of the themes that emerged. This provided us with several fractured, overlapping and contradictory accounts. We undertook this analysis to aid our understanding of both cases by comparing how Thomas and Edward reported their experiences, rather than identifying simple similarities or differences (Gibbs, 2007).

While we have attempted to privilege Edward and Thomas' voices, our framing and interpretation of this empirical material inevitably involves us in co-authoring the accounts. In selecting and presenting empirical material for this article, we have identified key areas of provocation for identity work both common to and differing between the entrepreneurs that suggest interesting forms of engagement with socio-historical discourses. It is in terms of these engagements between identity constructions within the interview setting and forms of discourse that we present our findings.

Findings

Before exploring the themes that emerged from Thomas and Edward's accounts, it is valuable to briefly outline their personal histories, giving a sense of their individual circumstances and a setting for their experiences. Both men's ventures have emerged within the (broadly conceived) professional services sector and they have drawn on their employment experience in establishing their businesses. However, given the nature of our study we focus more on their individual motivations and experiences than potential sectoral factors, though theses provide an important context for our findings.

Thomas

Thomas started his award-winning, UK-based career in the media industry. He spent about 15 years in media although, early on, he had some 'time out' while he considered following in the family retail business, eventually deciding that it was not for him. The next 20 years were spent in a variety of consultancy roles, both on his own and with organisations, including five years with a major professional services firm. His most recent role was with an international, boutique consultancy firm (BouCon) and, now in his mid-fifties, he was working on an occasional basis for this firm while looking for capital to buy out the area of the business in which he had been working and helped to build an established client list (NouCon).

Edward

Edward started ScirCo following a successful career at a major science company. He had progressed from being a sales representative to head up international recruitment for various business units before an organisational merger provided an opportunity to assess his life and career, prompting his decision to pursue voluntary redundancy and establish science-related recruitment business ScirCo. ScirCo's first and, following gradual business changes, now only client is a business unit sold off as part of the science company merger. Over the 11 years in operation, ScirCo has fluctuated in terms of

employee numbers, peaking at seven employees while, at the time of writing, there are two full-time employees. ScirCo has been profitable and now, well-able to afford a comfortable retirement, Edward is contemplating his role and the future of the business.

Being an entrepreneur

Both Thomas and Edward discussed entrepreneurship as an act of creation and as something positive to identify with.

> Thomas: There is kind of a part of me says actually what I would like to do is to watch something in its full cycle, from birth into kind of reasonable adolescence if not necessarily into maturity.

> Edward: I just really thought, you know, I could do another 10 years [with former employer], earning a good salary and a car and everything so or I could try and do something myself and build something.

However, these were not unproblematic positions and Edward challenged the term entrepreneur as describing him:

> I suppose you know if you have got a product, you know like a Dyson or something like or you know…I suppose you feel they are more entrepreneurs that have taken a concept and developed it and marketed it. With a service I suppose it is not quite the same. But then you know…I guess you can have

James Caan, made his millions in the recruitment business and you think well perhaps I should have made millions in the recruitment business. You know perhaps I should have branches and you know…you know, perhaps missed opportunities I suppose.

Edward enjoys the status afforded by running his own business and the benefits provided by ScirCo's profits, both in terms of his lifestyle but also 'with the offices and the staff and […] boardroom with a board table and meetings and all this sort of stuff.' While acknowledging the status afforded by employing staff, consistent with enterprise culture's focus on employment growth (Young, 2013), this had become a new point on which he felt a need to justify his legitimacy and on which he was insufficiently successful.

Edward also recognised that, beyond such symbols, he had a deep emotional engagement with his business. Contemplating what would happen should he choose to retire, Edward explained:

So I think that…you know money at the end of it for me or not I don't…it won't make much difference but it was you know having sort of something that you have sort of built up to a level, I guess whatever level that might be, just sort of being able to sort of…not just pull the plug and lock the door and give them the key back and that is the end of the business

At least in part, Thomas' decision to start his own venture related to his previous employment which he described as: 'the most prolonged difficult period of my career.' Thomas described moving away from his difficulties in terms of personal agency, newly identifying himself as a 'born entrepreneur' and explaining that being an entrepreneur was who 'I really am'. He drew on discursive resources to bolster his self-confidence, that both he and celebrated business-owners were all entrepreneurs of a similar type. In an apparent act of disidentification, of stating who he is not (Watson, 2009), he also clearly differentiated himself from unsatisfactory images:

> If I am blunt most of the Business Link and business service advice comes from people who are made redundant in mid-career, who are not at the top of their careers. So I have met a couple of very nice ex-bank managers who have probably got a reasonable salary or reasonable pension but you know have no idea of actually how to run a business themselves but they understand the theory and they understand what a business plan needs to look like. Or I have met failed business people giving advice to all these young entrepreneurs with a particular slant.

Both Thomas and Edward consistently demonstrated a deep engagement with entrepreneurship discourses, albeit in different ways and at different stages of their ventures. This depth of engagement with conceptions of enterprise mirrored their

emotional involvement with the businesses themselves which was repeatedly related to their stage of life.

Stage of life

A clear provocation to identity work for both participants was their stage of life, principally in approaching the age of 60 but also in having grandchildren and beginning to plan for retirement. On one occasion Thomas talked in subdued terms about his experience at his last employer where he felt marginalised and was, as he saw it, 'set up to fail'. He felt ostracised from his employer due to his relatively advanced age within the firm and had the impression that 'the world no longer sees me as the 40-year-old who is going places [b]ut as the 50-something-year-old who is making up the numbers'.

Thomas elaborated:

> … again a touch of the age thing. There was a couple of occasions, particularly from younger women, before I had even opened my mouth an assumption that they knew what I was going to say and that I was kind of old school. You know 'would you like to make the coffee little girl' kind of stuff and that is so far from where I have led most of my career.

In setting up his new venture, Thomas described a need to prove something, that it was his 'last chance of really pulling it all together and doing something significant' and this

appeared to be, in part, a reaction to his perceived failures. However, he was also clear on his financial need and 'a real desire to make some serious dosh', echoing a common financial predicament (Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005).

Despite Edward's relative financial security, his exaggerated reference points, such as superstar-entrepreneurs-cum-investors from reality television's 'Dragons Den', meant that he struggled to identify productively with entrepreneurship discourse. In the context of his future retirement, he even played out an imaginary scene with the Dragons to offer an unflattering assessment of his business:

> …the actual service doesn't immediately 'scale up', using Dragons' terms, to a big business. It is more…'what we are selling here [researcher] is a lifestyle *business and you know…I will let you know where I am…I am out'* [the catchphrase indicating a Dragon's refusal to invest]. You know what I mean. It is a lifestyle business really because the business is me. If you take me away there isn't a business really.

In this context, it was apparent that the drivers for running his enterprise had altered with the prospect of reaching the state retirement age, which supports a sense of there being an 'appropriate' age to retire (Riach and Loretto, 2009). This raised new questions around the venture's future:

> I guess my view has sort of changed as we have gone through…initially it was

you know providing me with a reasonable income, fine. And then I got to the stage where…when we had all the staff and everything what I wanted to try and do was to build the business so that when I do retire someone else could run it. Or I could sell. And what you tend to find is that while you have this sort of passion and commitment and all that sort of stuff, staff generally don't…You know now I don't really want all that hassle and aggravation that staff give you really.

Edward could identify with terms such as passion that are regularly associated with enterprise discourse but, in the 'plodding' reality of entrepreneurship (MacDonald, 1996), he struggled to positively draw upon the day-to-day realities of running a business.

Negotiating legitimacy

Family loomed large in Thomas and Edward's accounts in the form of fraternal tensions, provoking identity work in terms of negotiating a legitimate sense of identity with their siblings. Thomas seemed driven to demonstrate achievement to his successful brothers who he presented as not appreciating his position or the need for his venture to be profitable:

So there is a kind of financial driver which you know some of…my brothers who are both…went through the public sector for years have got fantastic

pensions. And they are protected and all the rest. And it is like they just don't get the fact that I am staring at…you know a [significant] hole in [former employer's] pension fund, that isn't going to get filled.

Edward related how, as he had grown out of his older brother's shadow, their relationship had changed:

The relationship we have is a sort of a funny relationship I suppose. If I asked him a question about the business I would always be a bit sceptical as to the answer that I would get…in terms of I don't know whether it is him or his wife or the combination of the two but I always think that they are perhaps jealous of what I have achieved.

Yet, Edward's brother still seemed to exercise some influence over his willingness to pursue new ventures and his view of himself:

You know we had our Investors in People re-accreditation. The guy that did that said he had never seen anything like it. You know for a business that size we were like a corporate in terms of policies and procedures and everything that we have got. [...] But then I sort of speak to my brother who was sort of most of his life worked for small, medium organisations and, [he thought] I probably wouldn't be very well received…

Both men spoke about unease around how they appeared to others, such as potential clients. Thomas described how, in reflecting on our research project, he felt that what was particularly relevant was understanding the relationship between himself and his (much) younger colleagues. He suggested that these colleagues did not understand what he had to offer and that they expected him to prove himself in areas which he felt unnecessary. These tensions around legitimacy were heightened in relation to the potential for failure.

Negotiating perceptions of failure

The notions of individualism, self-sufficiency and risk embedded in the enterprise culture create a context in which failures become attributed to personal short-comings or poor decision-making rather than events beyond one's control (Beck, 1992; Fenwick, 2002). Edward is not a failure in terms of the financial viability of his business but, in making sense of his position, he presented himself as a failure and frequently discussed the risks of failure. The recent contraction in his business and the number of employees loomed large and he placed this into context by telling the story of a job applicant he had interviewed:

> … she said well I will be perfectly honest with you we rented a shop in [location] and signed a 10 year lease on it or something silly like that, might not have been 10 years. She said and it all went belly up after six months. […] They

wouldn't sublet it or anything and I just go out to work and all that does is pay this lease every month. So you just think well I never want to be in that situation where you know…it is bad enough walking away from it with nothing but to actually be in debt

The risks associated with outright business failure were persistent concerns. Nearing his planned retirement, Edward deliberately avoided exposure to financial liabilities that could not be easily covered if the business had to close while, at the same time, admonishing himself for electing to run a small business profitably rather than pursuing significant growth.

Thomas also needed to make sense of the potential for failure. In some interviews and informal discussions his mood was low and he appeared tired and overworked. He described the prospective business as floundering and himself as feeling unmotivated, especially in the ongoing work he conducted for his previous employer where he had made no recent sales. In response, he had begun to rethink what it was he 'really wanted to do'. He explained how, 'the way I described it to the guys at [BouCon] is I felt that there was a taxi ordered and I was half way out of the office and there was a series of false starts.'

In the next interview, and in a more positive mood, Thomas was able to present these problems in an account drawing more clearly on his past experiences and maintaining a

clear sense of agency:

> … one of the things that I have done is taken quite a lot of risks in my career so I have walked away from you know a glittering career in [media] and then walked back into it and then walked away again. And you know walked into a blue chip Big Four company and walked out of it. So it is kind of…but most of those have been accompanied by assorted…either crises of one sort or another or the need for more pay or whatever it was. There was kind of…whereas this is…this has been more of a choice I think. I felt…I have always felt I had choices but this has been much more of a…I deliberately stayed on with [BouCon] longer than was probably good for anybody because I was looking at this thing emerging. So it was kind of…part of me was quite satisfied that I have helped to bring this thing to birth.

As Thomas failed to secure a financing deal for his venture he withdrew from the research process. While it is not for us to speculate on his reasons, a potential problem with this type of longitudinal research is the creation of an implied demand for participants to present a consistent account over a long period of time, even while experiencing changing circumstances and relationships.

Discussion

It is the mythic nature of enterprise culture (Ogbor, 2000; Parker, 2001), and its role in

achieving political ends such as economic growth or opposing a 'dependency culture' that generate multiple provocations for identity work, where '[b]iography itself is acquiring a reflexive project' (Beck, 1992: 90). These reflexive accounts require narrative resources that may be derived from experience, from significant others, from fictional and non-fictional sources but will often be shaped by the pervasive enterprise culture. Discourses frame our perceptions and sense-making and prescribe, describe and potentially prohibit the directions identity work may take as an individual attempts to develop a plausible, externally-acceptable sense of self. Our empirical material, drawn from longitudinal research with two olderpreneurs, suggests that one way to conceptualise the resultant tension between discourse and agency in identity work is in terms of sedimentation and innovation (Ricoeur, 1991).

Through gradual sedimentation, particular discourses such as those around enterprise or age, drawn upon over a prolonged period of time, erode any sense of where this sense of self or way of framing experience has come from (Ezzy, 1997). One of Edward's central and repeated themes during the interviews was how he differed from the superstar entrepreneurs featured on television and sought by governments to front various policy initiatives. In doing so, Edward distanced himself from the dominant discursive repertoire of the entrepreneur while embracing its underlying ideology to measure his (lack of) achievement.

This discomfort with the 'entrepreneur' label is not a liberating proactive choice but, rather, a denial that he is worthy of the label; as if not matching the vast wealth and business empires of entrepreneurs on television somehow excludes him from identifying himself in this way. The Dragons have become a means for Edward to privately test his business against the hegemonic public discourse of what constitutes a legitimate enterprise and come to anticipate that any claims he makes to being an entrepreneur do not pass a plausibility test within this discourse. To this extent, Edward accepts a narrowly ideological entrepreneurial discourse even if it is one he is not a part of, this understanding becoming deeply sedimented into a stable sense of his identity, repeated throughout his interviews.

In contrast to this sedimentation of exclusionary discourses and threats to Edward's sense of legitimacy, individual agency can be conceptualised as attempts to innovate in identity work, in the consumption of available discursive repertoires (Du Gay, 1996). Thomas' interviews lacked Edward's stability and, instead, represented a series of different, innovated positions, demonstrating a form of productive imagination (Ricoeur, 1984). In our first meeting Thomas, buoyed by the prospect of securing funding for his nascent venture, was keen to present himself as a legitimate entrepreneur, passionate about his new enterprise and with clear plans for business expansion.

In the shifting context of this venture's fortunes and in relation to his persistent claims

to being an entrepreneur, Thomas displayed significant innovation in his identity work to re-interpret his career to-date and maintain a sense of legitimacy. No longer was he an entrepreneur seeking to establish a venture after a largely conventional career as an employee, rather he was a 'born entrepreneur' who had 'taken quite a lot of risks'. This allows Thomas to reposition himself in terms of personal responsibility (Beck, 1992), accessing the esteem and successes of his career to-date re-imagined as evidence of a successful, risk-taking progression. As a born entrepreneur, he can claim a wider range of experiences throughout his life as being entrepreneurial and building towards his 'real self', productively accessing the entrepreneurial discourse.

In contrast with more playful engagements elsewhere in the literature (Down and Warren, 2008), both men were strongly attached to the enterprise culture. Thomas identified with the 'born entrepreneur', and the agency this implies, and Edward with the commitment and identification in his role as owner-manager and employer, lamenting that staff did not share his passion. They suggest the ways in which the nature of entrepreneurship requires a commitment, attachment and identification to be tenable in negotiating legitimacy. This was heightened in response to the constant struggle (MacDonald, 1996) and inevitable ups and downs that self-employment entails and that threaten such identity positions. Inherent in the enterprise culture is an ideology that legitimises, maintains and reproduces a narrow, exclusionary sense of entrepreneurship (Dannreuther and Perren, 2013; Ogbor, 2000). The nature of self-employment and

enterprising activity demand a way of being that can be difficult to sustain or reconcile and, as such, requires flexibility, risk-taking and therefore provides many provocations for identity work, while limiting the scope for viable identity positions.

Individuals must draw on or adapt existing discursive repertoires, appropriating resources to their ends and within their own context and pressures of personal responsibility and individualisation (Beck, 1992). This may be particularly challenging for entrepreneurs who lie outside the normative enterprise culture (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). Innovative accounts are not solely for personal reflection but must be produced and negotiated externally, requiring a perception of plausibility. In assessing plausibility, others are likely to draw on socio-historical discourses, constraining the scope for innovation that contradicts or revises such discourses. Thomas and Edward felt this in terms of their age, both in relation to the socially-constructed conception of retirement and in how they assumed others viewed them and their ventures. The strength of such discourses therefore constrains and potentially distorts the negotiation of legitimacy and any attempts to develop new ways of conceiving an entrepreneurial career.

It is not possible to innovate new discursive interpretations or narratives freely, not only because of the limits of individual creativity and experience but because legitimacy requires acceptance in the eyes of others (Ezzy, 1997). In the present context, the

interviewers took up the role of such others, an audience provoking the construction of identities from our participants. When funding and his business opportunity fell through, Thomas was stripped of the legitimating evidence in support of his identity claims. He sought instead to support these claims by emphasising what he was not (Watson, 2009), those non-entrepreneurial 'very nice ex-bank managers' acting as Business Link advisers. In the absence of ready-made examples of others who are respected for trying to start a venture in their fifties, Thomas was keen to pre-empt any assumptions that, with an organisational career behind him, greying hair, dark suit and tie, he somehow resembled a Business Link advisor at odds with the enterprise culture.

Studying people over time can reveal how transient accounts can be, highlighting the ongoing, processual nature of identity work and the struggle of maintaining desired identity positions when deprived of appropriate narrative resources. Olderpreneurs can lack suitable discursive repertoires to support their identity claims and the narrative resources with which to innovate plausible, externally-acceptable accounts. Non-normative, marginalised or excluded individuals may lack the resources to convincingly adopt or reconcile their identity claims with the reality of day-to-day entrepreneurial existence and the struggles involved in self-employment (MacDonald, 1996). What we therefore term narrative resource poverty leads to a difficulty in overcoming discriminating or constraining discourses, such as those related to enterprise and age, and in escaping the sedimented assumptions that can accompany them. Rather than

having access to ready-made shorthand examples to establish support for their identity claims, both Edward and Thomas engaged with a narrowly ideological entrepreneurial discourse from which they are largely excluded.

Viewed in terms of sedimentation and innovation, the exclusionary effects of the hegemony surrounding enterprise can be conceptualised as varying in their impact as people try to exert agency and overcome this narrative resource poverty. Our initial, exploratory findings suggest an urgent need to support such efforts through the shared innovation of new, counter-hegemonic narratives to overcome the 'silence' experienced by some excluded groups or individuals (Somers, 1994), such as olderpreneurs.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the apparent advantages that older people might have in starting their own business, this study presents olderpreneurship as a process of complexity, difficulty and intense personal engagement. Further, studying people over time reveals how transient accounts can be, highlighting the ongoing, processual nature of identity work and the struggle of maintaining desired identity positions. This was apparent both in the presentation of Thomas and Edward's respective ventures, their successes and failures, but also in their intersubjective and interpersonal engagement with significant others. While engaging with these tensions in different ways, they both lacked external support, problems that may be further multiplied for those from more marginalised and less

financially-resourced backgrounds. There are therefore implications for those who consider entrepreneurship a viable alternative to the problems older people face in the labour market, placing on the individual the responsibility for addressing the effects of wider social problems and the risks of failure (Beck, 1992; Dannreuther and Perren, 2013).

The interpretive insights from this longitudinal study contribute to the ongoing debate over the degree to which enterprise discourse dictates the identity of individuals and to what extent they can exert agency. While enterprise discourse represents an heroic sense of individual agency and autonomy, in practice it suggests that there are correct ways to be an entrepreneur, shaping expectations and enacting a legitimisation of particular narratives of entrepreneurship. Such discourses, when repeatedly engaged with and drawn upon, become sedimented and taken-for-granted. They become a deep-seated, restrictive means by which an individual interprets their identity and judges the identity claims of others.

In this context, individual agency can be conceptualised as an attempt to innovate in the consumption of socio-historical discourses. Identity work innovates in re-imagining discourses and narrative resources through the displacement and synthesis of meanings. However, the ability to innovate, or to playfully engage with only those elements of a discourse perceived positively (Down and Warren, 2008), is limited since innovation

requires the negotiation of legitimacy. In assessing this legitimacy and the plausibility of innovative identity claims, individuals and external others are likely to draw on available discourses and, where these are hegemonic and exclusionary, this constrains the scope for innovations that contradict or revise such discourses.

Importantly, therefore, non-normative, marginalised or excluded individuals may lack the resources to successfully negotiate legitimacy for their identity claims in relation to day-to-day entrepreneurial existence and the struggles involved in self-employment. Narrative resource poverty poses difficulties in overcoming discriminating or constraining discourses, such as those associated with enterprise and age, and in escaping the sedimented assumptions that can accompany them. This study highlights some of the ways in which marginalised and excluded individuals lack the (re)sources with which to find new ways of securing legitimacy, support and affirmation.

There is a need to support individual agency and claims for legitimacy through the development of new, counter-hegemonic narrative resources, for example in identifying role-models or mentors, to support olderpreneurs and members of other marginalised groups to free themselves from the constraints of discriminatory discourses. At present, government and charity policies risk reinforcing an enterprise culture that is exclusionary, constraining and damaging at the level of individual entrepreneurs. Without a sense of entrepreneurs' personal accounts of their individual experiences and

sense-making, policy formulations and discussions around the prospects for entrepreneurship to address the problems facing those marginalised and excluded from the labour market may struggle to move beyond general prescriptions that fail to lend support or legitimacy to a highly diverse range of potential entrepreneurs.

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