

Intersectionality and Minority Entrepreneurship: At the Crossroad of Vulnerability and Power



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Abstract Intersectionality has been introduced into research on minority entrepreneurship relatively recently but has already managed to make a significant contribution into better understanding of the phenomenon. The analytical framework helps to describe in more detail a complex structure of opportunities and constraints that a minority entrepreneur is embedded into. However, extreme diversity in topics and focuses among relevant studies poses a challenge to identification of general tendencies within intersectional minority entrepreneurship. The current chapter intends to take on this challenge and to contribute to better understanding of the role intersectionality plays in minority entrepreneurship. The current overview of literature points at the factors that appear to unite all minority businesspersons across various axes of difference; intersectional identities of minority entrepreneurs lead to limited legitimacy in the business market. This limited legitimacy, on the one hand, constitutes an impediment to numerous lucrative industries dominated by mainstream entrepreneurs but, on the other hand, may become a source of competitive advantage in a few gendered, ethnicized, or other niche markets. To ensure that minority businesspersons are not restricted to low-income, labour-intensive sectors with limited potential for growth, deconstruction of the archetype of an entrepreneur through tailored support and diversity initiatives may present the first steps on the way to creation of a more inclusive business environment.

1 Introduction

Despite the extensive use of the term, a definition of minority entrepreneurship varies depending on a context. Generally, a minority business can be defined as “a self-employment enterprise run by a person who is not typical of the mainstream society and can therefore be described by the adjective minority” (Dana & Vorobeva, 2021, p. 17). As the term is tightly linked to mainstream or dominant

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entrepreneurship, the latter also needs a clarification of its meaning. Previous studies pointed at existence of the archetypical image of an entrepreneur who is supposed to be a heroic, rags-to-riches, young, white, male Calvinist (Aydin et al., 2019; Dana & Vorobeva, 2021; Dy & Agwunobi, 2019; Essers & Benschop, 2007, 2009; James et al., 2021; Martinez Dy, 2015; Martinez Dy et al., 2017). Thus, minority entrepreneurship introduces other than above-mentioned, non-dominant categories of class, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity into the discussion on business activities (Dana & Vorobeva, 2021). However, changes in composition of dominant population affect the notion of minority as well demonstrating relational and fluid nature of the phenomenon. Thus, groups defined as minorities are context- and time-dependent.

In recent years, minority entrepreneurship has attracted significant attention of both academics and policy-makers. It can be partly attributed to growing scale of the phenomenon: Fielden and Davidson (2012) maintained that the number of new ethnic minority enterprises alone grew from 32,000 to 50,000 in 2000 to 2005 in the UK. In the USA, 2.8 million businesses owned by ethnic minorities, immigrants, females, young people, veterans, native populations, and other minority groups had an impressive payroll of 2.6 trillion dollars in 2018 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In fact, it was widely recognized that minority entrepreneurs have great potential to contribute to local economies: Barr (2015) mentions that in America, gross receipts of minority enterprises grow faster than those of dominant population businesses. Moreover, minority enterprises introduce new products and services, reduce unemployment, establish transnational business links, and act as crucial agents in spreading equality and fighting discrimination (Dana & Morris, 2007). Therefore, numerous national and supranational initiatives were created in order to support minority entrepreneurship; for instance, in Europe, under the Small Business Act (SBA) and the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan, seniors, unemployed individuals, disabled people, migrant females, and young migrants were empowered through various projects such as “Entrepreneurship Without Borders” (EntryWay) and “Kaleidoscope: Supporting Female Migrant Entrepreneurs” (Vorobeva, 2019).

Female, ethnic, and migrant types of entrepreneurship have received extensive academic attention (Dana & Vorobeva, 2021). In fact, minority entrepreneurship, even with one category of difference such as gender or ethnicity, has been looked at through the lens of intersectionality; Barrett and Verzhinina (2017) explore intersection of ethnic and entrepreneurial identities in lives of Polish businesspersons in the UK. Nevertheless, recent studies shifted their focus from single-axis minority entrepreneurship (e.g. ethnic or female entrepreneurship) to multiple, overlapping minority identities of entrepreneurs (e.g. female migrants, black poor, Muslim female immigrants) (Dy & Agwunobi, 2019). Exploring more nuances in construction of minority identities, intersectionality helped to deepen our understanding of complexity in minority entrepreneurship as well as of diverse experiences of privilege and vulnerability.

The current chapter intends to systematically and critically review the existing studies devoted to the role of intersectionality in entrepreneurial activities of minorities in order to better understand how intersectional identities affect business

experiences of non-dominant social groups. Such overview may help identify factors that unite minority enterprises across various axes of difference as well as point at new directions for research and policy-making. The existent study is built on a systematic review of articles, discussion papers, theses, and book chapters devoted to intersectional identities of entrepreneurs acquired through a thorough search in Google Scholar and Web of Science. During the search, articles were considered suitable for the analysis if they meaningfully link the key words “intersectionality”/ “intersection” and “entrepreneurship”/“entrepreneurs”/“business” in their titles and abstracts. At a later stage, ancestry search approach has been used which consisted of exploring bibliography of the selected articles with the purpose to identify relevant studies that were missed in the initial search (Malki et al., 2020). In the end, 28 articles have been chosen for the review. Further on, the studies were coded in NVivo software using a data-driven qualitative content analysis. After that, the meta-synthesis approach has been applied in order to integrate insights from various studies (Dingwall et al., 1998).

The remainder of the chapter is structured in the following way: in the section “Intersectionality in Minority Entrepreneurship” major contributions of intersectionality to knowledge on minority entrepreneurship and characteristics of the relevant studies are discussed; in the section “Vulnerability and Power in Intersectional Entrepreneurial Identities” main advantages and disadvantages of intersectional minority entrepreneurship are debated; finally, conclusions and recommendations for practitioners and future research are provided in “Concluding Remarks”.

2 Intersectionality in Minority Entrepreneurship

Described by McCall (2005, p. 1171) as “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, have made so far”, intersectionality as an analytical lens has entered the discussion on entrepreneurship relatively recently (Dy & Agwunobi, 2019; Granados & Rosli, 2018). Previously, focus on entrepreneurs’ identities has not been very popular unlike forms of capital or personal traits of businesspersons. Distinct from former approaches, intersectionality pays special attention to complexity of enterprising individuals’ identities; the latter can consist of multiple categories of difference overlapping and, therefore, defining position of a person in power structure. As Lassalle and Shaw (2021, p. 2–3) notice, this framework “enabled scholars to acquire a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the combination, rather than the sum, of multiple, inseparable and simultaneously experienced oppressions and identities and of the influence of oppressive structures on individual agency”. Originally coined to describe an interconnection between race and gender in lives of black women, later on, intersectionality acknowledged other dimensions such as class, ethnicity, migration, sexual orientation, age, and disability as crucial in forming life experiences of individuals (Lassalle & Shaw, 2021; Romero & Valdez, 2016; Werbner, 2013).

However, Werbner (2013) underlines exaggerated focus of intersectionality on structures of oppression and discrimination called by Hill-Collins (1991) a “matrix of domination”. Therefore, the scholar calls for distinguishing between intersectionality, on the one hand, and multiple identities research, on the other hand, which focuses on positive aspects of multiple identities (Werbner, 2013). Although the call is well justified, in recent studies, intersectionality seems to be redefined; scholars highlighted positive outcomes of multiple social groups' membership such as contextual legitimacy (Tao et al., 2020), personal empowerment (Croce, 2020; James et al., 2021), access to niche markets (Essers & Benschop, 2009) and to resources from several cultural contexts (Essers & Benschop, 2007), unique social capital, and strong in-group solidarity (Harvey, 2005; James et al., 2021; Wingfield & Taylor, 2016). Thus, intersectionality framework does not anymore exclusively focus on structures of oppression but also on structures of opportunities enabled by multiple groups' membership.

Importantly, even if overlapping minority identities are present, it does not always imply that they affect entrepreneurial activities; Barrett and Vershinina (2017) mention that not all ethnic or immigrant entrepreneurs utilize their ethnic identities in business conduct. To avoid overemphasizing intersectional identities, Anthias (2009) suggests focusing on situational intersecting processes defining positions of individuals in power structure in each given moment. Supporting the idea, Tao et al. (2020) also propose to study when and how multiple identities matter in entrepreneurship rather than approaching them as given, unquestionably relevant facts.

Intersectionality framework has been applied in multiple case studies on minority entrepreneurship. Countries covered by research include Poland (Andrejuk, 2018), the USA (Banerjee, 2019; Harvey, 2005; Valdez, 2016; Vallejo & Canizales, 2016; Wingfield & Taylor, 2016), the UK (Barrett & Vershinina, 2017; Fielden & Davidson, 2012; James et al., 2021; Lassalle & Shaw, 2021; Martinez Dy, 2015; Martinez Dy et al., 2017), Canada (Chiang et al., 2013), Australia (Chiang et al., 2013), the Netherlands (Essers & Benschop, 2007, 2009; Pijpers & Maas, 2014; Tao et al., 2020), Colombia (Granados & Rosli, 2018), and Taiwan (Wing-Fai, 2016). Following the original focus of the framework, intersection of gender with class (e.g. Harvey, 2005), race (e.g. Wingfield & Taylor, 2016), immigrant background (e.g. Chiang et al., 2013), and ethnicity (e.g. Andrejuk, 2018) proved to be one of the most popular focuses of intersectionality investigation. However, new categories of difference such as age (Aydin et al., 2019), religion (Essers & Benschop, 2009), informality (Granados & Rosli, 2018), sexuality (Pijpers & Maas, 2014), location of business operation (Martinez Dy, 2015), and generation of immigrants (Tao et al., 2020) proved to affect business experiences of minorities as well. Finally, all studies applied qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews (e.g. Andrejuk, 2018), biographical narratives (e.g. Essers & Benschop, 2007), life-story narratives (e.g. Essers & Benschop, 2009), overview of existing studies (e.g. Croce, 2020), and analysis of longitudinal data consisting of archival sources on events (Granados & Rosli, 2018). Noticing the absence of quantitative methods in intersectionality research, Dy and Agwunobi (2019, p. 1735) proposed to apply sequential

mix-methods approach “to obtain more accurate and nuanced pictures of the phenomena under investigation”.

Research on minority entrepreneurship significantly benefited from application of intersectionality; the approach assisted in better understanding of barriers to resources, networks, and clientele stemming from memberships in multiple minority groups (Romero & Valdez, 2016). Ram et al. (2017, p. 8) state that “accounting for ethnic relations, racism and discrimination is not sufficient to explain the ways in which migrant entrepreneurs find their way in the markets of the countries of destination. Its intersection with gender and class is central to these experiences”. In this respect, intersectional identities of minority entrepreneurs were linked to “survivalist entrepreneurship” based “on the classed, gendered, and racialized experiences of minorities who seek self-employment as a result of discrimination encountered in the labour market” (Romero & Valdez, 2016, p. 1559).

Moreover, together with traditional for intersectionality scholarship categories of race, class, and gender, minority entrepreneurship pointed at new dimensions that matter in business activities of non-dominant groups such as generation of immigrants (Tao et al., 2020), religion (Essers & Benschop, 2009), sexuality (Pijpers & Maas, 2014), age (Aydin et al., 2019), and a business sector (Martinez Dy, 2015). For example, justifying introduction of generation as a significant category of difference, Tao et al. (2020) mention different motivations that first-generation and second-generation immigrants have to engage with entrepreneurship; the former are more motivated by financial reasons while the latter is inspired by status and ambition. Age also proved to be a significant factor while intersecting with gender; with age, women have less labour opportunities, suffer more from career discontinuity, and acquire fewer experience that may help to succeed in entrepreneurship such as management skills (Aydin et al., 2019). However, importance of a sector where a minority enterprise operates can be considered one of the most significant insights enabled by introduction of intersectionality into minority entrepreneurship. Minorities proved to be better received by wide public when they act as representatives of their communities. In other words, they are seen as legitimate when own gendered, ethnicized, or age-specific businesses, for example, a Chinese who runs a tea house (Tao et al., 2020) or a woman who manages a beauty salon (Harvey, 2005). Nevertheless, once they enter predominantly young, white, male business spaces such as Information Technologies, business consulting, or innovative sectors, they struggle to acquire necessary legitimacy (Vorobeva & Dana, 2021). For example, Dy (2015, p. 3) beautifully describes how, despite the general perception of the Internet space as “neutral and meritocratic ‘great equalizer’”, women remain not accepted as equal economic actors in technology sector. Vorobeva and Dana (2021) demonstrate how stereotypes about Africa as poor, underdeveloped, and backward region makes work of African business consultants in Finland extremely challenging. Thus, the existing prejudice in many ways defines choice of industries among minority entrepreneurs directing them towards low-entry, low-income, and labour-intensive sectors (Harvey, 2005).

3 Vulnerability and Power of Intersectional Entrepreneurial Identities

Originally, intersectionality has paid increased attention to systems of oppression (Werbner, 2013). Indeed, intersectional entrepreneurial identities may act as disempowering depending on a context and time. Vulnerability of minority entrepreneurs may be especially visible in times of crisis; for example, the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic proved to reinforce existing inequalities and disproportionately affect minority-owned enterprises putting them at risk of closure (Dua et al., 2020). As it was mentioned above, minorities struggle to acquire necessary legitimacy in their entrepreneurial roles; disassociated from the archetypical image of a white, young, male entrepreneur, minority businesspersons are not accepted as equal economic actors by fellow entrepreneurs, clientele, and authorities (Essers & Benschop, 2007; James et al., 2021; Martinez Dy, 2015; Vallejo & Canizales, 2016; Vorobeva & Dana, 2021). Moreover, as those identities disconnected from the archetype can overlap, it becomes even more difficult to acquire desired legitimacy (James et al., 2021). Essers and Benschop (2009) beautifully exemplify this with the case of Muslim female entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. Their role as entrepreneurs clashes with the general Orientalist discourse depicting Islam as primitive, backward, and violent, and Muslim women as submissive and uneducated, thus, incompatible with the image of open-minded, innovative entrepreneurship. This prejudice causes substantial legitimacy problems for Muslim women entrepreneurs.

Stemming from the above-mentioned exclusion, the main problem that minorities proved to encounter is an unequal access to resources, networks, and skills (Aydin et al., 2019; Fielden & Davidson, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Martinez Dy, 2015; Vallejo & Canizales, 2016). Indeed, all minority-owned enterprises experience barriers in access to loans, credit, and mainstream support; therefore, they have to rely on their families, partners, personal savings, or informal networks (Fielden & Davidson, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Vallejo & Canizales, 2016; Wing-Fai, 2016; Wingfield & Taylor, 2016). However, even within a family unit, women still seem to remain disadvantaged; Valdez (2016) mentions that wives more frequently offer their free labour to entrepreneurial husbands than the other way around. Moreover, due to various constraints, generation of human capital for minority entrepreneurs is hampered; for instance, female, migrant, and senior entrepreneurs and especially female migrant senior entrepreneurs appear to be limited in acquiring business and management skills due to overlapping types of discrimination, gendered and cultural norms (Aydin et al., 2019). The overlap of various forms of discrimination has been grasped with the terms “gendered agism” (Aydin et al., 2019) and “gendered racism” (Harvey, 2005) that represent intersectional phenomena in their nature. Indeed, sexism, racism, agism, and other forms of discrimination are parts of entrepreneurial experiences of minorities as noticed by Chiang et al. (2013). Racism in entrepreneurship leads to emergence of peculiar coping strategies; for example, Martinez Dy (2015) mentions that Black and Asian entrepreneurs often implement the so-called

whitewashing, hiding their real ethnic or racial identity from consumers in order to comply with the ideal entrepreneurial type and appeal to wider clientele. Thus, ethnicity in entrepreneurship can act as disempowering as it may signal that products belong to a niche market, to the category of gendered, racialized, or ethnized produce (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Martinez Dy et al., 2017).

However, pointing at diversity of courses of constraints, Andrejuk (2018) mentions that barriers can originate not only from mainstream community but also from social groups an individual belongs to. Utilizing the example of indigenous women entrepreneurs, Croce (2020) highlights that these businesswomen experience violence not only from the wide public but also from their own community. Essers and Benschop (2007) also mention that when female immigrants westernize, they experience pressure from their ethnic fellows who do not see them as appropriate women anymore. In short, it appears to be true that multiple memberships entail a necessity to deal with multiple barriers, follow multiple norms, and comply with expectations from multiple social groups simultaneously which puts entrepreneurs with intersectional identities under increased pressure.

At the same time, intersectional identities can also result in empowerment. Indeed, recent studies explored positive outcomes of intersectional identities for minority entrepreneurship. This contribution is significant; it helps to move away from focus on oppression towards more balanced and nuanced understanding of intersectionality in lives of women, migrants, seniors, and other minority groups. First of all, intersectional identities allow understanding of needs of specific social groups, and, therefore, result in recognizing niche markets. For instance, Essers and Benschop (2009) show that Muslim female entrepreneurs are aware of reluctance of Muslim women to receive certain services from males such as driving lessons, which creates business opportunities for Muslim female entrepreneurs. Croce (2020) noticed that entrepreneurship allowed indigenous females achieve better gender equality, financial independence, and personal empowerment. Essers and Benschop (2007) maintain that multiple belonging makes entrepreneurs enjoy benefits embedded in two or several cultural contexts. Finally, shared experiences of marginalization helped minorities to create special solidarity that can be used as substantial social capital (Harvey, 2005; James et al., 2021; Wingfield & Taylor, 2016). In addition, through its uniqueness, intersectional identity can be used as a source of confidence, empowerment, or niche legitimacy; the latter is exemplified by Tao et al. (2020) with the case of Chinese entrepreneurs selling tea in the Netherlands (James et al., 2021).

Along with providing financial well-being and autonomy, entrepreneurship also appears to serve as a place for resistance to discrimination, a platform for social negotiations, or subversion against dependence on a state (Banerjee, 2019; James et al., 2021). Indeed, tightly linked to power, control, progress, and wealth in the public narrative, entrepreneurship has attracted many minorities who long for a more positive self-image, want to acquire legitimacy, bring positive change to their communities or fight negative stereotypes. Essers and Benschop (2007, p. 66) notice that “entrepreneurship may be regarded as an empowerment tool that attributes agency and honour to otherwise marginalized individuals”.

Moreover, power minorities acquire through entrepreneurial activities may trickle down to their communities. In fact, bringing positive change or helping others are popular pull factors among minority entrepreneurs; through their businesses they aim at helping members of their communities to escape poverty (Croce, 2020; Vallejo & Canizales, 2016), to earn a living through self-employment (Harvey, 2005), to access education (Wingfield & Taylor, 2016), and to overcome discrimination and inequality (Vallejo & Canizales, 2016; Wingfield & Taylor, 2016). In formation of solidarity, intersections of gender, race, and class proved to play a crucial role; Harvey (2005, p. 801) mentions that “this willingness to help is based on shared experience of racial and gender discrimination but is also characterized by the willingness to reach across class lines to help those less economically privileged”. Thus, minority entrepreneurship empowers not only enterprising individuals but also their communities through positive role models, spread of information, and tailored products. Finally, minorities transform existing business environments. They try to deconstruct the myth about a heroic, white, young, male entrepreneur with their own examples of business success (Essers & Benschop, 2007).

4 Concluding Remarks

Applied in numerous empirical studies across the globe, intersectionality made a significant contribution into the discussion on minority entrepreneurship; it provided a more nuanced and complex picture of opportunities and constraints associated with multiple social membership. Intersectional enterprising identities which include non-dominant categories of gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, class, and a business sector prove to lead to limited legitimacy of minorities in the market. The dissociation from the archetype of a young, white, male entrepreneur results in refusal to accept minority entrepreneurs as equal economic actors demonstrated not only by mainstream society but also, in some cases, by very members of minority communities. In fact, minority businesspersons often experience intersectional discrimination in the forms of gendered agism or gendered racism which hampers their access to funding, information, networks, and other valuable resources. However, some minority entrepreneurs manage to turn their multiple social membership into a competitive advantage by presenting it as a source of uniqueness and authenticity or by appealing to solidarity with other members of marginalized groups.

Insights from previous studies concerning how intersectional identities function in practice suggest future research to focus on relational and fluid intersecting processes. Special attention should be paid to the questions of when and why combinations of certain axes of difference result in increased empowerment, in one case, or increased vulnerability, in the other. However, what was made clear by previous research is the fact that entrepreneurs with intersectional identities can make not only feasible contributions into economies but also act as crucial agents of positive social change. Thus, support provided to them by relevant authorities may

assist in solving both economic and social issues and deserves being considered as an effective tool in spreading well-being, social cohesion, and equality. Therefore, policy-makers should design tailored support mechanisms for individuals located at the most disempowering intersections of gender, class, and race. Furthermore, minority businesspersons should be encouraged to enter innovative highly profitable industries with the potential for future growth to remove from them the stigma of small niche entrepreneurs. Finally, creation of an inclusive business environment appears to be impossible without deconstruction of the archetypical image of an entrepreneur which requires more complex, systemic, and creative practical solutions.

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