

The lived experience of freedom among entrepreneurs with disabilities

The lived experience of freedom among EWD

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Abstract

Purpose – While it is argued that entrepreneurship provides considerable freedom, it is also underlined that it might have the potential for exclusion and oppression. The study contributes to this debate and aims to investigate how entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWD) ascribe meaning to freedom in a contested terrain informed by entrepreneurial autonomy as well as constraints due to impairments and an ableist social environment.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses a qualitative approach and builds upon the critical concepts of negative, positive and social freedom as a theoretical lens for the in-depth analysis of the twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with EWD in Hungary.

Findings – Findings indicate that EWD experiences freedom in ambivalent ways. Engaging in the discourse of entrepreneurship offers a subversive discursive toolkit to debunk the constraints established by ableism, enabling both negative and positive freedom. However, individualism being at the heart of entrepreneurship results in othering and undermines social freedom. Thus, while entrepreneurship offers greater individual freedom in both a negative and a positive sense for people with disabilities (PWD), it nevertheless fails to promote collective social change.

Originality/value – Contributing to the critical disability literature, findings contrast the view that having an impairment only reduces a person's abilities and highlight that it also affects the very nature of liberty. Contributing to critical studies on entrepreneurship, the case of EWD provides empirical evidence for understanding the simultaneous emancipatory and oppressive character of entrepreneurship through the interplay of the subjective experience of freedom related to disability and entrepreneurship.

Keywords Entrepreneurship, Disability, Freedom, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

An increasing body of research has revealed the various ways in which people with disabilities (PWD) experience discrimination, marginalisation and systematic exclusion in the labour market (Jammaers *et al.*, 2021). In contemporary neoliberal societies, ableist hegemonic discourse depicts PWD as vulnerable, pitiable and worthless, the antithesis of the desirable, ideal, productive worker not having crucial entrepreneurial, self-management competencies (Cooney, 2008; Lloret and Bañon, 2019; López-Felipe and Durán Valera, 2019). It conceptualises disability as having lower productivity (Jammaers *et al.*, 2016) and holds able-bodiedness as a normative value thus limiting the freedom of PWD through normalisation. Albeit neoliberal attitudes regarding entrepreneurship assume that everyone can (and should) be an entrepreneur (Da Costa and Saraiva, 2012) this mostly excludes PWD. The image of the entrepreneur is that of a strong, brave, free and most of all “able” individual, an independent (white male) hero attaining outstanding accomplishments (Ogbor, 2000; Williams and Patterson, 2019), inhibiting “*the spirit of entrepreneurship among particular social groups*”, such as women, ethnic minorities (Ogbor, 2000, p. 630) or PWD (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020). At the same time, statistics have shown that becoming an entrepreneur is a notable employment option for PWD (Pagán, 2009).

According to mainstream literature, entrepreneurship provides considerable freedom for the individual (Aulet and Murray, 2013; Croson and Minniti, 2012; Gerber, 1986; Van Gelderen, 2016), yet critical scholars also underline the potential for oppression and emancipation (Verduijn *et al.*, 2014). While entrepreneurship might have a role in overcoming extant relations of exploitation and domination, offering a more liberating form of existence, it also has dark sides (Tedmanson *et al.*, 2012; Verduijn *et al.*, 2014). The article contributes to this debate and aims to reveal the liberating and oppressive potential of entrepreneurship for PWD. While material and discursive barriers in entrepreneurship are discussed regarding PWD (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020), the study considers potential opportunities as well and investigates the lived experience of freedom among entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWD) using the critical theory of freedom (Honneth, 2014) as a lens for analysis.

Negative, positive and social freedom

Negative freedom is defined as the *freedom from* something, and positive freedom as the *freedom to* (Berlin, 1969; Fromm, 1941). Negative freedom addresses the question of autonomy: “*what is the area within which the subject is or should be left to do or be what he (or she) is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?*” (Berlin, 1969, p. 369). It represents freedom from any interference from others beyond a certain border defined by law. From the perspective of social psychology, Fromm (1941) interprets negative freedom as being free from the influence of one’s basic instincts and primary ties that had determined people’s actions before individuation. Primary ties provide the individual with security and orientation for human behaviour while constraining freedom at the same time (Fromm, 1941). Both Fromm and Berlin consider the negative form of freedom as a quantitative concept: “*The wider the area of non-interference, the wider my freedom.*” (Berlin, 1969, p. 370)

Positive freedom as *freedom to* something is about “*the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do or be this rather than that*” (Berlin, 1969, p. 369). Seeking positive freedom is nurtured by the wish that one’s life depends on oneself, and “*not on external forces of whatever kind*” (Berlin, 1969, p. 373). It refers to the qualitative aspect of freedom (Fromm, 1941) and relates to the concepts of self-realisation and authenticity (Honneth, 2014), being able to follow one’s own goals from one’s own free will, that can be realised through spontaneous activities (Fromm, 1941). Being conscious of opportunities and capabilities requires self-recognition (Fromm, 1941), which is why positive freedom is referred to by Honneth (2014) as *reflexive freedom*. Henceforth, positive and reflexive freedom is used as synonyms.

According to Honneth (2014), neither the negative nor the positive concept of freedom provides a satisfactory explanation as to why people feel free in intimate relationships or by being involved in democratic will formation when they do not follow purely their own individualistic goals. As a solution, he suggests introducing social freedom, as a third form of freedom in contrast to the individualistic terms of negative and positive freedom. Social freedom (Honneth, 2014) emphasises the we-perspective, the intersubjective and cooperative nature of liberty when the participants mutually recognise each other's goals as legitimate and expect to act according to an agreed scheme of cooperation. An important element of social freedom is the right to have a voice in a given situation. The value of solidarity can only be assessed by adhering to the notion of social freedom (Honneth, 2014).

Entrepreneurship and freedom

Freedom is a central element of the discourse on entrepreneurship. While mainstream literature rather emphasises economic (Kuckertz *et al.*, 2016) and individual freedom (Van Gelderen, 2016), or speculates about the possibility of achieving positive freedom in terms of self-organisation (Shir and Ryff, 2021), while critical studies on entrepreneurship rather ponder over the oppressive and liberating potentials of entrepreneurship (Da Costa and Saraiva, 2012; Ogbor, 2000; Verduijn *et al.*, 2014). This article presents the three different forms (negative, reflexive and social) of entrepreneurial freedom, and discusses the ambiguities of entrepreneurial existence in terms of freedom.

Entrepreneurship and negative freedom

From a macro perspective, entrepreneurial freedom is discussed as being dependent on the level of economic freedom that measures the degree to which an economy is a market economy (Kuckertz *et al.*, 2016). Economic freedom relies on the negative concept of freedom, which, since it is a quantitative concept, can be measured and concentrates on the extent of the territory in which the entrepreneur can act freely. Higher economic freedom is associated with superior performance according to criteria of human well-being as income levels, income growth, unemployment rates and human development (Grubel, 1998), thus supposing higher economic freedom leading to greater social good.

From the micro-perspective, mainstream literature on entrepreneurial freedom is largely concerned with autonomy. Van Gelderen *et al.* (2020, p. 110) claim that autonomy is associated with independence, freedom, influence, responsibility, flexibility and control. Being independent of a supervisor and “*slipping the surly bonds*” (Croson and Minniti, 2012, p. 355) of the formal employment relationship was identified as one of the main motivators for entrepreneurs (Aulet and Murray, 2013). However, in the case of necessity-driven entrepreneurs, becoming an entrepreneur is not a matter of free choice, but a result of economic constraint, that limits negative freedom. Being “*pushed into entrepreneurship because other options for work are absent or unsatisfactory*” (Williams, 2008, p. 157) is often the only employment option available for PWD (Csillag *et al.*, 2019; Yamamoto *et al.*, 2012).

Entrepreneurship and reflexive freedom

In the guise of considering entrepreneurship as a source of liberty, authors point to self-direction (Schwartz, 1992 in Licht and Siegel, 2006) associated with control over “*decision rights over what work is done, when it is done, and how it is done*” (Van Gelderen, 2016, p. 542). Entrepreneurial freedom is considered as an instrument for achieving other needs, such as having choices of task and career (Croson and Minniti, 2012), controlling one's lifestyle (Foley *et al.*, 2018) and transforming the process of wage-earning into a more meaningful pursuit that can fulfil their inherent growth tendencies (Shir *et al.*, 2019). Entrepreneurship provides the

opportunity for free joy of creating and achieving new goals (Schumpeter, 1934 in Licht and Siegel, 2006) contributing to individual self-actualisation (Foley *et al.*, 2018; Segal *et al.*, 2005), self-expression (Van Gelderen and Jansen, 2006) and acting on one's dreams, "staying true to one's values, beliefs and mission" (Van Gelderen *et al.*, 2020, p. 25). Albeit rarely mentioning Fromm or Berlin (but see Shir and Ryff, 2021; Van Gelderen *et al.*, 2020), those works argue that being an entrepreneur might contribute to individual reflexive freedom as far as entrepreneurs pursue their own goals in line with their own moral standards.

However, the romanticised view of entrepreneurship (Verduijn *et al.*, 2014) regarding positive freedom has been questioned even by mainstream scholars as they pointed out that burdens related to taking responsibility, bearing risk or the possibility of upsetting one's work-life balance may limit entrepreneurial freedom (Gerber, 1986; Van Gelderen, 2016). While the bulk of the studies suppose that autonomy is an automatic result of ownership, and is inherent to entrepreneurship, autonomy is challenged and must be achieved every day (Van Gelderen, 2016). For example, balancing between different actors, such as key stakeholders, customers, suppliers, competitors, governmental authorities and employees involves the self-determined limitation of the freedom of decision-making and accepting interdependences (Van Gelderen *et al.*, 2020). Thus, it inhibits negative freedom by reducing the entrepreneur's room for manoeuvre, as well as affecting positive freedom by imposing the necessity to conform to other economic agents and forsake or modify one's own goals.

Critical entrepreneurship scholars advance this argumentation emphasising and depict entrepreneurship as an ideological discourse (Da Costa and Saraiva, 2012) the oppressive potential of the new work ethic inscribed into the neoliberal social character of the entrepreneur (Foster, 2017), which comprises "autonomy, responsibility and the freedom/obligation" to make choices (Du Gay, 2000, p. 166). Fromm (1941) describes this individualistic work ethic as a compulsive desire to work, a passion for saving money and a willingness to subordinate one's needs and desires to rational control (Foster, 2017) that results in isolation, alienation and conformism. Scholars criticise entrepreneurship for being "justified in terms of its appeal to a free market system" and for its utopian promise of economic freedom (Ogbor, 2000, p. 614), while also for governing the entrepreneurial self along with neoliberal values using the language of autonomy and choice as illusive (Foster, 2017). Reducing the individual to an economic subject subjugated to the market logic of capitalism (Gaulejac, 2005 in Da Costa and Saraiva, 2012) constrains entrepreneurial goal-setting to imperceptible conformity, making reflexive freedom hardly achievable (Foster, 2017).

Entrepreneurship and social freedom

Mainstream entrepreneurial literature on freedom (Shir *et al.*, 2019; Van Gelderen, 2016) displays an individualistic work ethic and is salient in forms of social freedom. Rosenfield (2018) argues that self-entrepreneurship as an expansive form of employment even undermines forms of cooperation and interdependence that are central elements of social freedom. Although social entrepreneurship might contrast individualistic work ethic by aiming to create social value, critiques have suggested that social entrepreneurs are also exposed to the ideology of neoliberal governmentality and the normative pressure to act as prototypical individualistic entrepreneurs (Dey and Steyaert, 2016). Still, they also tend to engage in discursive practices of freedom that emphasise equality and relationality as central values of their everyday business practices (Dey and Steyaert, 2016), which raise hope for social freedom.

Disability and freedom

While some authors claim that there is a need to rethink freedom in the context of disability (Bostad and Hanisch, 2016), disability literature is less than elaborate on the topic. Moreover,

regarding the various obstacles that hinder the lives of PWD, the nature of these restraints and their effect on freedom are also disputed. Disability is mainly connected to questions of social justice as the primary theoretical concept, largely due to the work of John Rawls (Hirschmann, 2013). Even if capabilities were considered, these only become concerns of distribution, allocation, entitlement and adequacy of resources or, at best, equality, rather than addressing the nature of freedom (Hartley, 2011; James, 2008; Nussbaum, 2009). Nevertheless, as freedom is one of the most crucial concepts underlying justice, Rawls's theory of social justice can also be understood as a way of compensating for the unequal distribution of freedom resulting from unequal measures of capabilities (Hirschmann, 2013).

The concept of ableism as an ideology, a hegemonic discourse (Davis, 1999), and an analytical tool for understanding the preferences of "normalcy" and the systematic oppression of PWD (Jammaers *et al.*, 2016) emerged from the disability rights movement in the United States and Great Britain. Ableism can operate both on an individual level, affecting self-perception, interpersonal interaction and intergroup relations (Nario-Redmond, 2020), as well as in an institutionalised form perpetuating subordination through social-political discrimination, influencing positive, negative and social forms of freedom.

Disability and negative freedom

According to the definition of negative freedom, interfering obstacles have to be external (Miller, 1991), so any form of physical or mental impairment coming from within the body and causing disability may only reduce a person's ability, not their freedom. Hull (2009, p. 39) argues, however, that both natural and social contingencies are among the constraints that are "definitive of liberty" rather than merely affecting its worth. Considering impairments as limiting only positive freedom would obscure social injustice, constituting disability as a source of "unfreedom" (Bostad and Hanisch, 2016). It would perpetuate the ableist idea that non-disabled people – the "special-typical individual citizen" – are more entitled to certain freedoms: the freedom of movement, self-direction, opportunity in employment and education as well as social participation (Campbell, 2009). Ableism, not concerned with obstacles resulting from physical or mental impairment, claiming them to be "natural", fails to acknowledge important forms of constraints that limit the negative freedom of PWD.

Ableist societies limit the negative freedom of PWD in three main ways: physical and digital inaccessibility, economic inequality and social-political discrimination. Ableism creates spatial barriers to environments in a cultural and material sense (Soldatic *et al.*, 2014) and "invalidates the physical capital of disabled people in a complex and multifaceted way, including the construction of architectural barriers and the lack of tolerance of bodily difference" (Loja *et al.*, 2013, p. 197, p. 197). It also fails to recognise the need for an accessible environment, personal assistance or support as a form of compensation for reduced or missing abilities caused by impairments. Studies also show that PWD are discursively produced as less capable, productive and "valuable for/or employable by organisations" (Jammaers *et al.*, 2016, p. 2), unfit for jobs requiring multi-tasking, teamwork and inter-changeability (Foster and Wass, 2013). Ableism systematically restricts participation in society and economy and violates the rights of PWD through institutionalisation, guardianship and physical abuse among others (Mégret, 2008) leading to social-political discrimination reducing social and economic freedom.

Disability and reflexive freedom

The distinction between positive and negative freedom in relation to disability is contested, claiming that these are logically linked (Feinberg, 1973). Other authors stress that traditional concepts of freedom are "insensitive to difference within humanity" (Bostad and Hanisch, 2016, p. 371) and that freedom should include the notion of vulnerability and be conceptualised not only as independence and interdependence but also as dependence (Kristeva, 2010). This paper

nevertheless claims that understanding the dynamics between the various forms of freedom regarding disability within an ableist environment adds to the understanding of social injustice and discrimination.

Internalising ableism, that is, seeing oneself in a subordinate position and regarding disability as a problem to deny, hide or overcome (Campbell, 2009; Dunn, 2019), may be the greatest danger to the integrity and freedom of PWD. It undermines self-confidence and realistic self-esteem as well as equal participation in mainstream society. It might even cause a form of self-hatred and self-destruction (Shakespeare, 1996), which is a hotbed for self-suppression and “unfreedom” in a positive sense (Fromm, 1941). Self-realisation through meaningful work might become unavailable from outside the labour market, hindering the experience of this form of positive freedom as well. Goodley (2014, p. 98) suggests that the hidden ideology of ableism and neoliberalism reinforce each other, referring to *neoliberal ableism*, based on the “*myth of the autonomous subject*” (Hughes, 2007, p. 647) who is both ready to produce and to consume. However, he argues, neoliberal ableism excludes PWD, depicting them as the antithesis of the independent, autonomous and productive worker (Goodley, 2014), which undermines not only economic freedom, but reflexive freedom as well, limiting any discursive room for PWD to manoeuvre in constructing themselves as autonomous, self-directed individuals having an agency.

Disability and social freedom

Social movements, such as the independent living movement, might provide PWD with the we-perspective essential to experiencing social freedom. The group identity or communal attachment developed from common engagement among PWD is a major result of the struggle to overcome the oppressive powers of ableism (Swain and French, 2000). The personal affirmation of disability and the feeling of inclusion in society at the same time is a way of counteracting ableism and emphasises the importance of letting disability become an important part of one’s identity and working in solidarity with peers (Campbell, 2009; Dunn, 2019).

Becoming an entrepreneur as a PWD is a complex social phenomena in terms freedom, as it can provide an opportunity to combat ableist, low-productivity discourse (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020), providing the freedom of self-governance and self-organisation (Shir and Ryff, 2021) for PWD, however, construing the neoliberal subject of the entrepreneur might also limit reflexivity (Foster, 2017) or solidarity (Rosenfield, 2018). Using the critical theory of freedom, this study explores how becoming and being an entrepreneur reflects in the lived experience of freedom among PWD.

Methodology

As for the context of this research, around 4.9% of the Hungarian population are officially classified as being disabled (Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO), 2012) while unfortunately there is no data on the ratio of self-employment or business ownership for PWD (Csillag *et al.*, 2019; Pagán, 2009). As the rate of self-employment is lower in Hungary than the European average, this would imply a lower rate of self-employment among PWD. Concerning disability affairs, Hungary follows the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020 (EU), while also being a state party of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). According to the latest concluding observations of the CRPD Committee (2012), although the legal background has been mostly secured, Hungary still lags in areas such as accessibility and reasonable accommodation or the integration of PWD into the open labour market and the education and professional training systems. In all, the general conditions for becoming an entrepreneur as a PWD are not favourable.

In this study, a qualitative research methodology has been employed, generally used for investigating complex and multifaceted social phenomena such as previous studies on EWD

(Ashley and Graf, 2018; Jammaers *et al.*, 2016, 2021). A snowball sample selection strategy (Silverman, 2008) was followed in two phases between 2018 and 2020, and twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted. This paper accepts the heterogeneity of the concept of entrepreneurship: it is not limited to certain innovation-driven enterprises (Aulet and Murray, 2013), it also includes everyday prosaic entrepreneurs (Steyaert, 2004) and traditional SMEs where people “*put things together in new ways*” (Cooney, 2008, p. 8). As Dodd *et al.* (2021, p. 20) state, “*entrepreneurship is about creativity, risk-taking, adaptation, flexibility, unorthodox perception, and, most of all, change*”. It can be done by different types of people for different aims, the essence is an adaptation to change, the recreation of value. Thus, the sample includes participants who claimed to be EWD, had at least three years of experience (Bagheri *et al.*, 2015), and/or had at least three employees (Parker Harris *et al.*, 2014).

In the first phase (2018/19), ten interviewees were involved based on the recommendations of various stakeholders (e.g. rehabilitation agencies, disability advocacy organisations, etc). In the second phase (2019/20), an EWD database was built based on recommendations, and interviewees were selected taking into consideration the diversity of the sample regarding gender, type of disability, onset of disability and field of entrepreneurship. Despite efforts to build a diverse sample, only eight of the twenty-nine entrepreneurs are female, and apart from one person with hearing loss and one with mental health issues, the sample follows international trends with the dominance of physical impairment and sight loss (Ashley and Graf, 2018; Bagheri *et al.*, 2015). While there are no available statistics, the sample of the recent study might reflect similar characteristics in the Hungarian EWD population: the participants were located nationwide in Hungary and their fields of activity included information technology services, sales, construction industry and architecture, event organising and catering, agriculture, advertising, accounting, the clothing industry, etc. Table 1 presents background information about the entrepreneurs and their fields of activity.

The length of the interviews was between one and three hours. Due to the COVID pandemic, in the second phase, some of the interviews were conducted online. The first, unstructured half of the interview concerned the life story of the entrepreneur, the second part contained open-ended questions about freedom, autonomy and constraints. Interviews also touched upon how EWD ascribed meaning to freedom. Further questions addressed relationships with other entrepreneurs and PWD, including potential cooperation or activism, to gain insight into social freedom. Interviews were recorded and transcribed word-for-word.

During the data analysis, NVivo software was applied. In the first phase, theory-driven codes were used: freedom/lack of freedom as entrepreneurs, freedom/lack of freedom as PWD, negative freedom/lack of negative freedom, positive freedom/lack of positive freedom, social freedom/lack of social freedom and ableism. After a sample coding (all five members of the research team coded the same interview, compared and discussed themes and the process of coding), a double coding protocol was followed. That is, each interview was coded by at least two persons from the research team to support the validity of the coding process (Creswell, 2003). Although codes overlapped in some cases, the process helped separate theoretically important issues. In the second phase, matrix coding was generated in NVivo: excerpts in the intersection of the codes were analysed, for example, extracts regarding the lived experience of negative freedom related to the role of the entrepreneur. Emerging sub-themes were identified, contradictions and ambiguities were revealed accompanied by several group discussions. A condensed text (Kvale, 2007) was produced about each intersection to explore typical patterns and interconnections.

Ethical issues were taken into consideration in line with the core values of disability studies. The anonymity of the participants was ensured by using pseudonyms. Informed consent was obtained before the interview as the respondents were informed of the aim of the study and the potential risks of participation (Kvale, 2007). Giving voice to EWD was supported by offering the chance to appear in the media coverage together with researchers (e.g. radio broadcasts, press

Pseudo- nym	Gender	Onset of the disability	Type of disability	Field of business, activity
Ottó	M	Consequence of accident	Physical (para)	Medical industry (wheelchairs)
Viktor	M	Born with the impairment, gradual deterioration, in the last 15 years blind	Blind	Construction industry, project management
Bence	M	Consequence of accident	Physical (tetra)	ICT, cross fit room and sport event organising
Róbert	M	Consequence of accident	Physical (tetra)	Catering, sales
Roland	M	Born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	Sight loss	ICT services, software development
Rebeka	F	Born with the impairment	Blind	Sales
Richárd	M	Consequence of accident	Physical	Accounting services, clothing industry
Antal	M	Born with the impairment	Blind	ICT industry
Tamás	M	Consequence of accident	Physical	Car sales, agriculture, construction industry
Ágoston	M	Consequence of accident	Physical (para)	Architecture, construction, advertising
Ábel	M	Acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	Blind	Legal services, sport instructor
Vince	M	Consequence of accident	Physical	Teacher, dance instructor, motivational speaker
Maja	F	Born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	Sight loss	Masseur
Levente	M	Consequence of accident	Physical	Sales (electronic devices)
Marcell	M	Consequence of accident	Physical	Film director
Lilla	F	Born with the impairment	Blind	Masseur
Adél	F	Acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	Physical, chronic illness	Clothing industry
Bea	F	Acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	Blind	Teacher, language school
Jakab	M	Consequence of childhood illness	Physical (para)	Cleaning industry
Rita	F	Acquired by illness at the age of 16	Blind	OD consultant
Detre	M	Born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	Physical (para)	Accessibility consultant
Milán	M	Born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	Sight loss	ICT services
Emma	F	Acquired by illness at the age of 12	Blind	Blogger, trainer (awareness-raising), publishing
Valter	M	Consequence of childhood illness	Blind	Attorney, legal services
Gréta	F	Acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	Physical	Medical industry (sales of wheelchairs)
Vendel	M	Consequence of accident	Physical (tetra)	Sales, pizza restaurant, sport event organising
László	M	born with the impairment, gradual Deterioration	Deaf	ICT industry
Miklós	M	Consequence of accident	Physical	Baker, sales (wheelchairs)
Dominik	M	Consequence of medical malpractice	Blind	Coach

Table 1.
Respondents of
the study

articles) as well as in a round table discussion on minority entrepreneurship along with academics and business developers organised alongside the research project. Policy recommendations on enhancing the socio-economic power of EWD are developed as well.

Findings

The lived experience of negative freedom

Impairment/dependency as an EWD. When talking about freedom, the interviewees first elaborated on how impairment limited their opportunities. Abel, a lawyer with sight loss, states that “*of course, I cannot be an airplane pilot, or a racing driver*”, interpreting it as a natural constraint. Vendel, a wheelchair-using entrepreneur, used to feel free when motorcycling, still:

(. . .) What I lost with the accident [is], not the motorcycling, I lost all my freedom. And my biggest problem is that I cannot do anything alone, and there is no way that I could claim to be free. (. . .) The fact that I am not self-supporting is the greatest tragedy.

For Vendel the unlimited negative freedom of motorcycling has been severely compromised, the area in which he can act without the interference of others has become very limited. Detre, an accessibility consultant with a physical disability, speaks about this:

I have a quasi-full-time and a part-time personal assistant. I must adjust to them, or rather we have to adjust to each other. So, I have a strict schedule that I can't stretch. Let's say I don't want to get up at half-past seven, only at half-past eight, that is not an option for me. That is just unimaginable. But I don't think of it as a limitation, or I don't experience it as a prison, in quotation marks. (. . .) But still, I'm always faced with the fact that I have to ask someone for help, I am dependent on someone. Well, this is not exactly fully-fledged freedom, this way.

Independent living outside an institution with a family can only be achieved with personal assistance, which creates an ambivalent sense of freedom: it broadens certain opportunities but creates new dependencies. The service of personal assistance is not provided by the public care system, thus funding is a serious financial challenge. Being able to afford it from the profit of the business is an advantage; however, this certainly raises the financial dependency on entrepreneurship.

Digitalisation and assistive technologies contribute to overcoming previous physical constraints, opening up new vistas even for starting one's own business. As Milan asserts,

If there was no IT, I have no idea how I could read the news, how I could read articles about what is happening in certain kinds of entrepreneurial issues, how to do my taxes, how to start it all.

EWD highlighted that the opportunity of managing personal and business affairs online from home is especially important in terms of entrepreneurial freedom. However, Milán also highlighted that technological development in an ableist social environment might still raise new types of barriers if PWD are not considered as possessing a solvent demand for global telecommunication companies.

Entrepreneurship as a source of financial independence. Financial independence is one of the most often mentioned forms of entrepreneurial freedom. EWD argued that pursuing their businesses expanded their range of consumer choices, which then raised their sense of freedom significantly. Gréta, a saleswoman with physical disabilities reports:

For me, it's also a kind of freedom that I can be financially independent, that I don't have to count the days till [disability] pension comes, but I can do what I want. So yeah, well, I feel this. . . [freedom] every day. For example, this entrepreneur friend of mine said something true, that when you get to the point where you could stop at any time, and you wouldn't have to work for the rest of your life, well, that is freedom.

In financial terms, EWD are usually dependent partly on state care, and partly on the market, both of which exert pressure on them. However, relying on two forms of resources at the same time is reassuring and negative freedom is increased by the fact that these dependencies work against each other. Nevertheless, this balance is precarious, as impairment is a constant risk: if one's health deteriorates, the enterprise might be compromised. Total freedom, as Gréta says, would entail stopping work and eliminating the dependency, both from the state and from the market.

Entrepreneurship as an anti-ableist opportunity or an ableist prison. Opportunity-driven EWD could scarcely imagine working under the supervision of someone else, claiming a personal need for autonomy. Having a business provides an external-constraint-free and flexible work environment, a free choice of working hours and place of work. Flexibility might be especially important for EWD to be able to adjust work arrangements to their bodily conditions. For those who have switched from employment to entrepreneurship, freedom from the constraints of being an employee is a particularly defining experience, like Roland, a software developer with sight loss, highlights:

Nowadays she [my wife] also works at home in the business . . . as we say, I took her out of the nursery.

The “*leaving the nursery*” metaphor denotes the process of growing up, becoming an independent adult, who no longer “plays around”, takes life more seriously and builds a career. Abel, a self-employed lawyer with sight loss, even contrasted freedom enabled by entrepreneurship with the limitations ascribed to disability.

Somehow, I always feel free, but of course, blindness always locks me out. Because, of course, I can't be an airplane pilot or a racing driver for that matter (. . .) I am not free in one way, but in other ways, I try to solve whatever I can and try to preserve my autonomy, my individuality.

While Ábel acknowledges that his impairment excludes him from certain jobs or activities, he also emphasises the importance of searching for other options of freedom. This requires self-reflexivity and the ability to accept bodily limitations as well as oneself. Vendel, a wheelchair-using entrepreneur, speaks as follows:

[Due to] the fact that I am independent and don't have a boss, I experience every day as [one of] happiness. I think this contributes significantly to the fact that I don't want to get out of this game yet, because I've artificially created this source of joy for myself, and there's no other way to experience this kind of freedom.

Vendel claims to have consciously created entrepreneurial autonomy to compensate for the lived experiences of dependence due to his impairment. He indicates that the reflexive and negative forms of freedom might intersect: although impairment might reduce negative freedom, the induced reflexive work begets reflexive freedom, becoming more conscious of one's own needs, desires and social relations. In that sense, entrepreneurship contributes to emancipation providing the sense of freedom that is crucial for living a meaningful life, while managing both life and business, making decisions on work and finances broadens negative freedom as well.

At the same time, need-driven EWD feel that being an employee would be much more in line with their personalities. They have only become entrepreneurs due to the lack of more suitable jobs in the labour market. Rebeka, a saleswoman with sight loss, does not perceive entrepreneurship as freedom:

I was still at the stage that I would rather have a normal job. So, I don't go for this excessive freedom, I need a boss, and I felt that I would not find my place in the outside world anyway. So, I need a place where I have a little space of my own and that's where I'm okay. And it didn't come. Such a space.

Entrepreneurship for EWD thus might also be a testimony of exclusion, a prison created by the ableist social environment, which represents oppression. As Rebeka claims, entrepreneurial autonomy might also be a kind of “forced empowerment”, one is not prepared for either emotionally nor cognitively, which then undermines any feeling of freedom, creating uncertainties and a wish for external guidance. Negative and reflexive freedom interplay here: if one is constrained in following their dreams, the otherwise positively rated entrepreneurial autonomy may become a prison.

The lived experience of reflexive freedom

Struggling with ableist discourses while becoming an entrepreneur. The social construction of disability through an ableist discourse supposing lower productivity (Jammaers *et al.*, 2016) affects the inner world of EWD. Marcell, a film director with physical impairments, speaks about his first disabling experience after his accident:

I just came out of the hospital a week before and thought I'd visit the TV [workplace], and then a young cameraman comes to me and says - I was 36 years old then - he asks me: "Why are you working, you're retired, why don't you just rest?" And I was like "F... you, I'm not tired. (. . .) So, it's the attitude: if you're impaired, you're out of the game.

Ableist norms equate impairment with being out of the "game", being unable to work, lacking or giving up ambitions. This is further strengthened by becoming eligible for disability pension, a form of benefit suggesting a kind of passive existence due to impairment.

Internalised ableism as the belief of being entitled to less freedom in movement, self-determination and labour market opportunities might present a serious challenge for EWD. Interpreting impairment and limitations properly is a crucial first step in developing an independent entrepreneurial identity, as Richárd, an accountant with physical disabilities, emphasises:

Well, to start a business you need to be like the others. Okay, the outward appearance shows otherwise, but I'm still as valuable as a non-disabled person.

Accepting one's body differences (especially in case of an acquired disability) may be a long, painful process. Developing or maintaining a positive self-identity requires self-acceptance, self-reflection and being able to deconstruct and resist ableist discourse. Rita, a consultant with sight loss, claims:

Everyone has to take responsibility for their own lives, and there isn't a way out. (. . .) No one is going to do it for you. No one is going to pull you up.

Inner work cannot be replaced by outside help. Many EWD argue that considering themselves as equal members of society is crucial, which often differentiates them from other PWD. Gréta, a saleswoman with a physical disability, says that she has arrived at the state where she can allow herself not to tolerate disabling environments anymore.

By now I feel that if there are three or four stairs somewhere, I can say that okay I don't think you want me, let's just leave the whole thing. Then you don't need my money, you don't need my expertise, (. . .) I wouldn't say it is below me, but it's just not how these things should work in 2020.

Resisting the ableist environment is a continuous struggle, supported by the freedom of choice and by the awareness that refusing business opportunities for the sake of one's dignity is possible.

Freedom of self-direction and self-realisation. EWD share a lived experience of freedom to set their own goals, make career plans and have a say regarding their future and the progress they wish to make. Dominik, a blind coach connects purpose with freedom:

I have my goals, there are premises that keep this kind of progress in check. You can develop, you can have a better life, you can have a more meaningful life. So, if I do not set a goal, I'll have no idea of freedom, it would make no sense.

Dominik argues that freedom to do something, following one's objectives, is the true sense of freedom: without having independent goals, negative freedom becomes meaningless. This also resonates with the long-wished goals of the independent living movement, that PWD should have control over their own lives, making real choices and decisions, as the daily demonstration of human rights-based disability policies. EWD also mentioned how

important it is for them to experience freedom in doing what they love. Detre emphasises the importance of creativity:

I feel that this kind of freedom strengthens the creative vein of a person much more, or rather it leaves room for creation. (. . .) The entrepreneur creates something for and around himself.

Entrepreneurship provides an opportunity to expand skills and competencies in general and for EWD to see themselves as self-fulfilling and powerful actors with an agency. Exploiting one's abilities is an experience that markedly counteracts limitations faced daily, as Adél, a dressmaker with chronic illness, explains:

And I see that what I do is good, and they love what I do and, and it's not that I'm just doing it half-heartedly, I really make an effort. And I don't feel, like a few years ago, that I'm sick and I'm good for nothing and I'm not needed anywhere, and everyone just wants me to die, and not have any problems with me anymore, but I feel that what I do is good, and they love what I do, and they love me too and it's such a damn good feeling.

Adél gives an account of how becoming an entrepreneur helped her to free herself from the oppression of internalised ableist discourse that renders PWD invisible and good-for-nothing. By providing a framework for learning and an alternative way back into the labour market, entrepreneurship contributes to restoring self-esteem and proves the strength and human potential of EWD.

In addition, by creating products valued both by the market and PWD, EWD can connect with the community; they are empowered by emotional feedback and reassurance, as well as the feeling of having something to offer. Many of the interviewees regard their activities as a service to the community (both mainstream and of their peers), which gives further meaning to their entrepreneurial activities. However, self-definition based on business and work alone may pose the danger of developing an instrumentalized self-identity that might call the achieved reflexive freedom into question.

Self-realisation versus self-exploitation. Many of the EWD point out the ambiguity of self-fulfilling work: the line between the love of one's work or flow experience and work-addiction or self-exploitation is very thin. As Valter, an attorney with sight loss explains:

I do not feel totally free as an entrepreneur (. . .) on the one hand, entrepreneurship is good (. . .) on the other, all kinds of entrepreneurship are the best tools for self-exploitation.

This danger is especially grave when the activity is part of creation, self-realisation, which is one of the most important benefits of conducting business in terms of positive freedom. Marcell, an artist talks expressively on how self-realisation may become self-subordination:

I always feel free because my job is about freedom. (. . .) If we are shooting a film, it is exactly 12 hours of work a day. And it's one of the greatest drugs when one gets to shoot the film, and there are no breaks. There is no holiday, nothing. But you have to work like a dog. And then on the last day of the performance, you die, you realise how tired you are, but it's good stress. So, it's good.

Referring to work as a "drug", and to "working like a dog", suggests a state of total self-subordination with no thinking, and a complete lack of reflexive freedom, the price one voluntarily pays for the sake of work. Although Marcell claims that the letting of control is a conscious and temporary decision, many of the entrepreneurs reported that work and business sometimes take total charge of their lives. However, these reports mostly point to some solutions in the form of resistance, as well.

To maintain control over their lives, as an important element of positive freedom, EWD have developed various resistance techniques. For example, Levente, a salesman with a physical disability, speaks about his coping strategy as follows:

A long time ago I went somewhat overboard, and I didn't know exactly where the limits should have been, or the amount of time that could still be healthily spent working. Then I realised that it is not necessary to set any such limits but to live your everyday life in a way that is not burdensome and not overstressed. (...) So, it's not the goal that matters, because there are relatively few of them, and once we achieve them, we don't know what to do. However, the road to the goal is a very long one and filled with a lot of struggles. And if we enjoy the way, we will feel better and enjoy our lives more.

The highly conscious solution in making positive freedom an everyday experience can be achieved by focusing on the process rather than the result, as suggested by [Fromm \(1941\)](#). It is important in evoking resistance to the taken-for-granted growth imperative. The refusal to accept the exclusionary practices of ableist society and the pressures of neoliberal business norms are both important to reach reflexive freedom. However, financial independence as a pre-condition for ensuring a minimum of negative freedom is crucial.

The lived experience of social freedom

Activism and legal advocacy were mentioned particularly concerning discrimination and accessibility. In addition to setting a personal example, some entrepreneurs tend to act and stand up for the rights of PWD in everyday situations, against institutions, employers or service providers. However, except for a few examples, activism occurs as an individual experience without allies and broader support, as [Ottó](#), a salesman with physical disabilities, explains:

I was a hero here, at home, I was a hero who went to the war alone without any backup.

The interviewees blamed institutions and civil organisations for the low level of community advocacy, while many of them tend to distance themselves from other PWD. As [Rebeka](#), a blind saleswoman says:

We can't stand up for ourselves, and we can't stand up for each other. So, we can't say that we'll join together, and this is what we want. But we just go in different directions, everyone wants something else, everyone wants to do it differently.

Many interviewees claimed not to have friends with a disability or be a member of any disability community. A distanced position from PWD, in general, may be the result of internalised ableism, denying any resemblance with non-productive, passive "others". General views were that PWD have no goals in life, are always complaining, consider work only as a pastime, they turn inwards, are unable to assert themselves, they are selfish, envious and demanding, and that they are difficult to work with. EWD emphasised that they are different and have little to do with this community. While supporting their position and status, "othering" undermines the solidarity of EWD with peers and prevents them from experiencing social freedom.

Discussion

The article provided empirical insights into the ambiguities regarding freedom as a lived experience for EWD through the lens of the critical theory of freedom. There is a relative scarcity both in disability and entrepreneurship studies that address negative/positive freedom (but see [Hull, 2009](#); [Shir and Ryff, 2021](#); [Van Gelderen et al., 2020](#)). As a contribution to the critical disability literature, findings contrast the general view that having impairment only reduces a person's abilities ([Miller, 1991](#)) and highlight that it also affects personal experiences of the very nature of liberty. Results underline that both social and natural contingencies have to be taken into consideration ([Hull, 2009](#)), furthermore, EWD differentiated between constraints posed by impairment and those of an ableist society claiming that both reduce their sense of negative freedom. Through becoming an entrepreneur, EWD have learned to accept the former and reject or reformulate the latter,

which contributed to raising their reflexive freedom and counteracting the direct and indirect constraints posed by the ableist physical and social environment.

By giving voice to EWD (Tedmanson *et al.*, 2012), this study also broadens the understanding of freedom and entrepreneurship by highlighting how entrepreneurship can be emancipatory and oppressive (Verduijn *et al.*, 2014) for a disadvantaged group at the same time. Usually, studies on entrepreneurship address only one “face” of entrepreneurship and are either examples of a heterotopian/utopian or paratopian/dystopian view (Verduijn *et al.*, 2014). EWD provides empirical evidence for understanding both sides of entrepreneurship through the interplay of the subjective experience of freedom related to disability and entrepreneurship.

From a heterotopian perspective, entrepreneurship has a liberating effect on PWD, providing new means of coping – entrepreneurial skills, self-organisation and -reflection (Shir and Ryff, 2021) – to overcome material and discursive barriers (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020). The level of economic freedom is balanced by the dynamics of mutually extinguishing financial dependencies from the state and the business in line with the recent work of Jackman *et al.* (2021). However, findings add a further layer extending the literature on entrepreneurial autonomy (Aulet and Murray, 2013; Croson and Minniti, 2012; Van Gelderen, 2016) by highlighting that the negative freedom achievable through entrepreneurship contributes to living an independent life in a double sense: being able to afford personal assistance and assistive technologies provides independence both from families or partners and from the constraints of standard employment relationships. For EWD, becoming independent has an additional symbolic resource in the psychological process of becoming a true adult in the eye of society and family as well (Hall and Wilton, 2011). In particular, self-actualisation as well as profitable and meaningful work, helps in shattering the myth of low productivity (Jammaers *et al.*, 2016). The perspective of the free and productive entrepreneur offers an opportunity for EWD to detach their goal settings and wishes from the oppressive discourse of ableism, which supports reflexive freedom.

However, from a paratopian perspective, reflexive freedom of EWD is still threatened by ableist norms along with the growth imperative of business (Du Gay, 2000). Findings have revealed that EWD face self-exploitation and overwork, and, in some cases, may internalise the primacy of work over their personal lives or develop an instrumentalised self (Costa and Saraiva, 2012) by identifying themselves with their enterprises and fully embracing the neoliberal social character of the prototypical entrepreneur (Dey and Steyaert, 2016; Foster, 2017; Tedmanson *et al.*, 2012). However, counter-narratives have also been developed against this pressure, explaining the meaning of “real” freedom, distinguishing between goals and means, as well as developing independent self-definition. In these cases, reflexivity evoked by resisting ableist discourse, also fuels resistance to the growth imperative of business and consumerism. This interplay of the ableist and entrepreneurial hegemonic discourses extinguishing each other develops the understanding of the dynamics of resistance toward oppressive ideologies (Da Costa and Saraiva, 2012). Furthermore, the case of EWD warns that the relationship between entrepreneurship as a self-organised act and psychological well-being is more ambiguous than supposed in the literature (Shir *et al.*, 2019; Shir and Ryff, 2021) if ideological constraints are taken into consideration.

Understanding the dynamics of ableism and entrepreneurialism through the case of EWD advances knowledge on the paradoxes of social freedom (Rosenfield, 2018) in contemporary capitalist societies. Results have shown that by freeing oneself from the ableist discourse, EWD also distance themselves from the disability community and a “disabled social identity”. Proving their difference from other PWD seems especially important in positioning their achievements and maintaining self-esteem, while at the same time it perpetuates disability stereotypes and undermines reflexivity. Othering is destructive (Procknow *et al.*, 2017) and as the case of EWD highlights, it prevents solidarity, activism and the experience of

social freedom. Albeit some EWD conducted disability-related business, none of them was a social entrepreneur, which could have provided an opportunity to break with individualistic work ethic (Dey and Steyaert, 2016) and support the emancipation of PWD as a community.

In contrast to the critical literature on entrepreneurship (Da Costa and Saraiva, 2012; Kenny and Scriver, 2012; Ogbor, 2000), EWD have found ways to resist the hegemonic discourse of entrepreneurship regarding instrumentality, although at the same time individualism and exceptionalism (Cooney, 2008), as promulgated by entrepreneurial discourse (Ogbor, 2000), was present. This lack of cooperation advances the critiques of the utopian promise of economic freedom (Ogbor, 2000) as it underlines that theorising freedom as an individual term both in the literature of entrepreneurship (Cooney, 2008) and that of disability (Parker Harris *et al.*, 2014) is highly problematic since it not only fails to acknowledge structural constraints (Williams and Patterson, 2019) but also undermines social freedom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, three main contributions are put forward. First, the study gives voice to a relatively underrepresented group in entrepreneurship research and extends knowledge on the lived experience of freedom among EWD. Second, the article highlights both the emancipatory and oppressive nature of entrepreneurship through the eyes of EWD in terms of freedom, providing empirical evidence for the interplay of negative and reflexive freedom in transforming material barriers to resources for independence and in being exposed but also resisting the oppressive discourses of ableism and entrepreneurialism. Third, this research warns about the fact that without experiences of social freedom, the individual emancipation of EWD would not transfer into collective social change.

Findings evidenced that entrepreneurship encompasses several positive outcomes and an extended experience of freedom among PWD. The implications for policy and practice include the importance of representing entrepreneurial life as a viable and achievable non-standard form of labour market participation for PWD in special vocational education, career guidance, vocational rehabilitation, mentoring and incubation possibilities. To reduce negative outcomes, education and training programs informed by critical pedagogy could support children and youth with disabilities to reach their full potential and develop skills of critical self-reflection and elaborate on micro-tactics of resistance against ideological pressures. Challenging traditional, ableist forms of employment may pave the way for a meaningful career and an extended experience of positive freedom. Strengthening the connection and knowledge transfer between successful EWD and the disability community and advocating social entrepreneurship among EWD is crucial in supporting collective social change and enhancing social freedom.

The study has limitations. The research team does not include any PWD, however, for future research, using an insider and/or participatory method in the investigation might be insightful for revealing reasons behind othering, as well as the lack of activism and low level of social freedom within the EWD community. Bringing stakeholders such as EWD, PWD, actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, actors in the rehabilitation institutional system together under the umbrella of the research project and providing a safe space for advocating reflective, domination-free dialogue might contribute to deconstruct normalised ways of entrepreneuring and advance the emancipation of PWD. EWD are not a uniform social group, their experiences regarding freedom may vary based on the type of disability and other intersecting social belongings, such as gender, ethnicity or age, thus an intersectional approach may warrant further research. Also, future research on different, socio-historically situated forms of ableism among EWD (e.g. ableism in postsocialist or postcolonial countries) may further deepen or understanding on the paradoxes of social freedom.

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