Review of Managerial Science (2021) 15:1683–1706
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11846-020-00395-z

ORIGINAL PAPER

Senior entrepreneurship following unemployment: a social identity theory perspective

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Received: 24 August 2019 / Accepted: 15 May 2020 / Published online: 21 May 2020

Abstract

This article applies social identity theory to examine how identification with social groups shapes the entrepreneurial endeavours of individuals aged 50 or over who start businesses when unemployed or under threat of redundancy. Understanding what drives older individuals to start a business as an alternative to unemployment has important policy implications: governments are interested in promoting self-employment to reduce benefits dependence among older individuals for whom finding employment in the traditional labour market can be difficult. Our exploratory analysis is based on data collected in 21 personal interviews with senior entrepreneurs in the UK who received support from an organisation dedicated to foster enterprising activity among older unemployed people. Our findings suggest that income levels beyond making ends meet is not an important motive for starting a business among this demographic group. Instead, our data highlight the relevance of non-monetary self-rewards—such as pursuit of autonomy, self-realisation, and wanting to feel active, useful and valuable—for senior entrepreneurs who start businesses under adverse conditions. This finding resonates with the European Commission's policy of promoting 'active ageing'. Our analysis indicates non-monetary objectives should be included in any conceptualisation of self-interest in an entrepreneurial context.

Keywords Entrepreneurship · Ageing · Social identity · Qualitative methods · Senior entrepreneurship · Unemployment

JEL Classification M13

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1 Introduction

Recent policy discourses draw attention to senior entrepreneurship—starting a business when aged 50 or older (OECD 2012)—as a means of extending ageing individuals' working careers and, through that, generating savings in public pensions and other welfare entitlements (Engelhardt 2012; Kulik et al. 2014; Parker and Rougier 2007). A particular policy focus is older individuals who are unemployed or facing redundancy (Kautonen et al. 2008; OECD 2012). The age discrimination inherent in traditional labour markets means older unemployed individuals struggle to find employment and therefore pose a risk to the state of adding to the numbers of people with long-term benefits dependence (Carlsson and Eriksson 2019; Harris et al. 2018; Platman 2004; Stypinska and Turek 2017). The high level of policy relevance has sparked a growing stream of scholarly research on senior entrepreneurship (Harms et al. 2014; Kautonen et al. 2017; Maalaoui et al. 2013; Martin and Omrani 2019; Martin and Welsch 2019), some of which has paid specific attention to starting a business from a position of unemployment (Figueiredo and Paiva 2019; Kautonen et al. 2008).

Although categorising entrepreneurs based on their chronological age or labour market status prior to becoming involved in a start-up is convenient for statistical purposes, such crude groupings ignore the heterogeneity of the antecedents, outcomes and contexts surrounding new business creation even within narrowly defined demographic groups (Ferreira et al. 2019; Kautonen et al. 2014). Furthering our understanding of the diversity of senior entrepreneurship following unemployment not only advances academic knowledge of entrepreneurship across the life course (Jayawarna et al. 2013) and entrepreneurship from unemployment (Caliendo and Kritikos 2010; Caliendo et al. 2015; Figueiredo and Paiva 2019), but it also has important implications for policy designed to support senior entrepreneurship (e.g., what type of policy suits facilitating what type of entrepreneurial activity) as well as for the practice of providing support for (aspiring) older entrepreneurs (e.g., the support needs vary depending on the motivations behind and the desired outcomes of starting a business).

This study advances our understanding of senior entrepreneurship following on from unemployment by applying social identity theory, which deals with how social group memberships influence individuals' understanding of who they are—their values, emotions and self-esteem—and how striving for congruence with the resulting identities shapes their behaviour (Tajfel 1972; see e.g. Fauchart and Gruber 2011 and Lin 2019 for recent applications in entrepreneurship and management). The social identity perspective adds to our understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour by acknowledging a concern for others, in addition to self-interest, as a social motivation driving new venture creation (Berbegal-Mirabent et al. 2019; Blanka 2019; Gruber and MacMillan 2017; Kraus et al. 2014).

While prior work on senior entrepreneurship assumes that starting a business late in a person's career is a desirable option because the individual either gains benefits (e.g., improvements in work-life balance or pursuit of self-realisation) or avoids losses (e.g., unemployment or lack of career development opportunities)

(Kautonen et al. 2014; Singh and DeNoble 2003), the social identity perspective recognises the additional motives of helping people in particular communities ('known others') or society at large ('unknown others') (Fauchart and Gruber 2011; Gruber and MacMillan 2017). In fact, prior studies suggest that socially motivated entrepreneurship can become more prevalent when individuals' life goals change as they age (Hatak et al. 2015; Sieger et al. 2016).

Given the limited research conducted on the social identity of senior entrepreneurs, this study adopts a qualitative approach to its theory elaboration. We follow the guidelines set by Lee et al. (1999) on combining deductive and inductive analysis for theory development. This involves identifying ideas from prior literature and extending them through empirically grounded findings (Jennings et al. 2015). Our analysis is based on 21 personal interviews with individuals who started a business aged 50 or older in London, England, and received support from the Prince's Initiative for Mature Enterprise (PRIME). The PRIME initiative is dedicated to support enterprising activity of older individuals who are unemployed or under threat of redundancy.

Within this context, we find two social identity types that are driven by self-interest. Unlike in prior entrepreneurship research (Fauchart and Gruber 2011), the self-interest is mostly based on non-monetary rather than monetary objectives. *Autonomy Seekers* start businesses primarily to gain control over their lives, whereas the principal social motivation driving *Active Agers* is pursuit of dignity by feeling useful and valuable in the community. In both cases, money is a motive only to the point of achieving financial independence. We also find evidence of other-oriented motives as primary drivers of enterprising behaviour. Because the target groups in all those cases are specific ('known others'), we adopted the label *Communitarians* from Fauchart and Gruber (2011) to describe those individuals. Unlike Fauchart and Gruber (2011), we do not find evidence of social identity types whose enterprising efforts are directed at society as a whole ('unknown others'). This is likely due to our empirical context: the primary objective for senior individuals who are unemployed or under threat of redundancy is to take care of themselves and their immediate stakeholder groups, before they can direct their efforts to helping society at large.

This article generates two principal contributions to entrepreneurship research. First, it extends prior self-interest-based typologies of senior entrepreneurs (Kautonen et al. 2014; Singh and DeNoble 2003) with a perspective that explicitly accounts for concern for others as a motivation behind entrepreneurial behaviour. It also highlights different manifestations of self-interest in senior entrepreneurs. Second, it adds to prior research on entrepreneurial social identity types (Alsos et al. 2016; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Sieger et al. 2016) by pointing out the need to consider non-monetary self-interest in addition to financial self-interest as a basic social motivation driving entrepreneurial behaviour.

2 Theoretical background

Social identity theory explains human behaviour by considering the individual's concept of their self in relation to others in the social space (Abrams and Hogg 1990; Stets and Burke 2000; Tajfel 1972). The sense of self develops over the course

of social interactions in which the individual learns with which social groups they want to be associated (Gioia 1998). The resulting social identity is the individual's knowledge that they belong to certain social groups together with the emotional and value significance that these memberships convey (Hogg 2001; Hogg et al. 1995). Social identification with particular groups provides individuals with a system of social orientation: a frame of reference for self-evaluation and for the evaluation of others who are not members of the group (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Hogg et al. 1995; Terry et al. 1999). Social identity influences behaviour because individuals interpret situations through the cognitive frame of their identity and strive for actions that are consistent with their identity (Hogg 2001; Hogg and Smith 2007; Turner 1985).

Social identity theory further distinguishes between different levels of inclusiveness in the social groups to which individuals categorise themselves (Hogg et al. 2012; Pan et al. 2019). At the narrowest end of the spectrum is the category of self as a unique entity, which implies that the individual acts upon their personal goals and ambitions without regard for other people. At the broadest end of the spectrum the individual sees themselves as part of humanity in general and acts out of concern for people that they do not know personally or through specific group affiliations. Between these extremes are hybrid forms that mix self-interest with concern for either known or unknown others in the social space.

Brewer and Gardner (1996) distinguish three principal dimensions of social identity: (i) the basic social motivation for founding the firm (i.e., the main reasons why people start a business); (ii) the basis of self-evaluation (i.e., the elements from which founders derive self-worth based on their judgements of themselves or perceptions of how others judge them); and (iii) the frame of reference (i.e., how the entrepreneur derives self-worth and in relation to whom).

Basic social motivations shape individuals' behaviours and actions when they engage in reciprocal relationships (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Social identity theory distinguishes among different levels of inclusiveness in people's social motivations (Harb and Smith 2008), which might be either derived from personal self-interest, or from the individuals' concern for others' interest (Brewer and Gardner 1996). The second formative dimension refers to individuals' tendency to compare, self-evaluate, and self-define in relation to larger collectives and others with which they interact. At the lowest level of self-categorisation, these self-evaluations involve personal traits and individual characteristics as a basis of comparison to relevant others (Pelham 1995). By contrast, self-worth at the relational level is derived from appropriate role behaviour (Markus and Kitayama 1991), whereas at the collective level, it draws from the status of the individual's in-group in intergroup comparisons (Turner et al. 1987). The third dimension refers to individuals deriving their self-worth with reference to others, who become their relevant comparison groups in the social space. Hence, membership in social categories or groups (their in-groups) provides individuals with a frame of reference for self-evaluation and for the evaluation of others who do not belong to the group (their out-group) (Brewer and Gardner 1996).

Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) seminal study of social identity in entrepreneurship applies these three dimensions to develop a typology of entrepreneurial social identity. Based on an exploratory study of 49 founders of sports equipment firms

in France, Germany, and Switzerland, the authors identified three primary types of social identity. Darwinians are driven by economic self-interest and aspire to establish firms that are profitable and successful. Communitarians serve a particular community that they are personally embedded in and their business is driven by the pursuit of authenticity: being able to offer products that not only meet real needs but demonstrate the entrepreneur's intimate knowledge of and care for the community. In contrast to the Communitarians' focus on a particular, well-defined social group ('known others'), the social frame of reference for Missionaries is society at large ('unknown others'). The basic social motivation driving Missionary entrepreneurs is supporting their political vision or advancing a social or environmental cause through their enterprising activity. The three primary social identity types exist to varying degrees in a single individual such that one of them can be dominant, or any two or even all three can define the entrepreneur's hybrid social identity.

Prior literature on senior entrepreneurship has viewed the motivations driving senior entrepreneurship primarily through the lens of an economic rationale of pull and push factors. Starting and running a business can be more attractive than salaried work for older workers because it allows a better work-life balance by giving more flexibility in terms of when and where to work (Curran and Blackburn 2001). Alternatively, starting a business can provide an opportunity for the pursuit for self-realisation: older workers might have harboured the idea of starting a firm for a long time but have not realised it until now because of perceived liquidity and family constraints in their early and mid-careers (Sing and DeNoble 2003). In contrast, previous studies also draw attention to older entrepreneurs who elect self-employment not because it is their preferred choice, but because there are no suitable employment opportunities in their environment (Kautonen et al. 2008) or because opportunities for career development in waged work are limited by (however subtle) age discriminatory practices in promotion and training (Platman 2004). However, prior research on senior entrepreneurship has not systematically addressed types of entrepreneurial behaviour that in addition to self-rewards are driven by concern for others. In order to systematically analyse the role of other-oriented motivations in driving senior entrepreneurship, we apply Brewer and Gardner's (1996) three dimensions of social identity as a lens for an exploratory analysis of the social identities of 21 senior entrepreneurs based in London, England.

3 Methods

3.1 Sampling and data

The data for this study were collected as part of an open-ended, inductive, and exploratory examination of senior entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom. The research participants were selected from a database maintained by PRIME, a charity organisation founded in 1999 to support senior individuals (aged 50 or over) facing unemployment or threat of redundancy. Following the definition of a young business in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (Bosma and Kelley 2018), we chose entrepreneurs who were running businesses less than 42 months old for the study. At this

stage, senior entrepreneurs are in the midst of attempting to survive and potentially expand their business (Kibler et al. 2015), and they have already developed an initial social identity as firm founders.

Our convenience sample comprised 21 individuals with diverse characteristics: gender (12 women and nine men), age (15 individuals aged 50-59 and six aged 60 or older), educational attainment (13 with higher education degrees) and the industry in which the business was active (four in wholesale and retail trade, the remainder in services). All of them were based in London. The participants were purposefully selected in order to elicit a series of diverse narratives about the motivations of senior firm founders to start their business, as well as their life experiences, skills, and interactions with their social reference groups.

We developed an interview protocol that allowed us to cover similar issues in all interviews, thus facilitating analytical comparability between the 21 interviews. The interviews ranged in length from 45 to 120 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and to capture the full narratives of the individuals' experiences.

3.2 Analysis

Our study adopts Lee et al.'s (1999) qualitative approach consisting of a combination of both deductive and inductive theorising for its theory elaboration. The deductive element is based on extant theory, such that we draw key constructs from the social identity literature, in particular Brewer and Gardner (1996). The inductive component is based on the use of original data and the grounded theory approach to explore the heterogeneity of firm founders in the senior entrepreneurship context. This approach is suitable for research streams in early stages of development, such as the social identities of senior entrepreneurs, and particularly useful for exploring processes in which actors construct meaning out of their subjective experiences (Jennings et al. 2015).

To facilitate text analysis, we used the software package NVivo 12 and followed well-established methods for analysing qualitative field research (Corbin and Strauss 2014; Gioia et al. 2013). In the first step, the first author read all interview transcripts thoroughly and subsequently conducted an open-coding process to identify the motivation behind the individuals' decisions to start a business. The next step involved detecting text passages in which the interviewees referred to their skills, backgrounds, and life experiences. Finally, the coding process focused on identifying the meanings that the interviewees associated with being an entrepreneur, and the groups of people in the social space that they recognised as relevant for their entrepreneurial activity.

Once the raw data were processed into first-order codes, the second author was consulted on the coding decisions. We then combined the first-order codes into second-order themes. To this end, we engaged in axial coding in which we searched for relationships among the first-order codes. In this step, we utilised the literature review reported above in order to interpret and make sense of the data and findings. Lastly, we combined the second-order themes into a set of aggregate dimensions

(categories and sub-categories); for example, the first-order codes 'being independent', 'being my own boss', and 'taking control of my life' were sorted into the second-order theme 'Autonomy', which was added to the sub-category of 'non-economic self-interest' nested in the category 'basic social motivation'. Idiosyncratic or low-frequency categories were dropped from the analysis (Gioia et al. 2013). Table 1 presents a summary of the first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions identified in our analysis.

As our analysis progressed, we identified different motives offered by individuals as their reasons for becoming entrepreneurs; diverse characteristics that they value in themselves as their professional or work-related strengths; and specific groups of people that they consider important for their entrepreneurial endeavours and decisions. Drawing on these notions, we paid careful attention to similarities and differences both within and across the interview transcripts. The case-by-case comparisons led to the detection of three different social identity types for the senior entrepreneurs in our sample. Consistent with prior theorising, our analysis generated empirical support for the core pre-existing constructs identified as formative dimensions of the social identity in firm founders (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Fauchart and Gruber 2011).

4 Findings

4.1 Dimensions of social identity

We begin the presentation of our findings by briefly describing the various meanings that our interviewees associated with being an entrepreneur and that were captured by the second-order themes in our analysis of the interview transcripts. We cover the themes for each of the three dimensions of social identity in turn (Table 2).

4.1.1 Basic social motivation

Our analysis of basic social motivation resulted in five second-order themes that in turn were grouped under three sub-categories (Corbin and Strauss 2014). The first three were subsumed in the sub-category of *non-economic self-interest*: they all pertain to something that the individual wants to achieve for their own benefit. The first two themes, *autonomy* and *achievement*, represent typical motives for starting a business at any age (Parker 2018). Autonomy refers to the freedom for people to be their own boss and more generally, being able to take control of their lives (Hyde et al. 2003). Achievement in this case pertains to motives such as using one's skills to accomplish something noteworthy or being able to pursue one's own interests such as turning a hobby into a business (Singh and DeNoble 2003). The third theme, maintaining *dignity*, emerged as a motivation that is perhaps specific to senior entrepreneurs. Dignity refers to a sense of self-worth, self-respect, and appreciation of the respect of others (Hodson 2001). In our analysis, dignity was manifest in older individuals wanting to feel they were active and/or useful and valuable members of the community as opposed to sitting idle at home. This reflects the concept of

Table 1 Data structure for theory building

Category	Sub-category	Second-order themes	First-order codes
Basic social motivations	Non-economic self-interest	Autonomy	Being independent, free Being my own boss Taking control of my life
		Achievement	Self-actualisation Leaving a mark, transcend Being recognised
		Dignity	Being active Feeling appreciated Avoiding depression
	Economic self-interest	Monetary rewards	Make money Make ends meet Have financial freedom
	Other-oriented interest	Support and advance a community	Helping others Bring something valuable for a group To care for people in the community
Basis of self-evaluation	Background and soft/hard skills	Professionalism	Being responsible Being self-disciplined Business skills Education and work experience
		Soft skills	'Easy-going' 'Empathetic'
		Confidence	Self-sufficiency Self-efficacy
	Innate skills	Authenticity	Life experience Personal condition

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Sub-category	Second-order themes	First-order codes
Frame of reference	Customers	Empathy	Trust building Adaptation to customer demands
		Originality	Personal relationships Differentiation from competitors
	Role models	Entrepreneurial role models	Other entrepreneurs Independent workers Senior advisers
	Senior cohort	Older workers	Age discrimination Negative stereotypes
		Older achievers	'The new trend' Positive ageing
	Community	'Known others' and social group	'People like me' Community members

Table 2 Senior founders' social identity dimensions

Identity dimensions	Variance in meanings		
	Active Ager	Autonomy-Seker	Communitarian
Basic social motivation	*Self-interest* driven by *dignity* and *achievement*. Firm creation enables senior individuals to be active and feel useful and valued (making use of own abilities, gaining social recognition, leaving a legacy). Monetary rewards beyond earning a living are not important	*Self-interest* driven by *autonomy* and *monetary rewards*. Firm creation allows senior individuals to be independent and in control of their lives. Monetary rewards are important especially for enabling financial security and sometimes for improving standard of living	*Other-orientation*. Business activity is aimed to *support* a particular community
Basis of self-evaluation	*Professionalism* and *soft skills* derived from professional background. High-quality work performance based on qualifications, work experience and soft skills (communication, commitment, getting along with different people) as basis of self-evaluation	*Professionalism* and *confidence*. Self-worth derived from professional background and sometimes updated skills that allow the individual to run the business in a self-sufficient way. Confidence in being able to run a business and succeed	*Authenticity*. Having experienced the same situation/condition (e.g., loss of a loved one, weight issues) as the customers makes the business activity aimed to serve them legitimate and empathetic
Frame of reference	*Customers* and *older workers*. Differentiate product/service from competition by focussing on close customer relationships. Feeling empathetic towards other older workers and wanting to prove the negative stereotypes surrounding them wrong by succeeding in self-employment	*Customers, entrepreneurial role models* and *older achievers*. Focus on attracting and retaining customers through trust building and adaptation to customer demands. Identification with entrepreneurial role models as sources of guidance, inspiration, and learning. Seeing ageing positively by identifying with 'older achievers' who prolong their working careers, working even in retirement	*Community*. Services and products are intended to support and help people in a community defined by a particular situation or condition

active ageing promoted by the European Commission (2019) that involves promoting an extension of activity among ageing individuals including contributing to the economy and society.

Furthermore, we identified the second-order theme of *monetary rewards*, belonging to the sub-category of *economic self-interest*, as playing a role as the basic social motivation behind the decision to start a business. However, in contrast to prior research (Fauchart and Gruber 2011), where self-interest was associated with the objectives of making money, generating personal wealth and ensuring posterity (developing a business with the aim of passing it on to the next generation; see Maalaoui et al. 2019), the financial motive in our study was typically limited to achieving a comfortable financial situation ('making ends meet'). This is not surprising based on prior research that suggests non-monetary motives play a dominant role for senior firm founders and that group generally not having a strong financial incentive to invest in and grow a business (Kautonen et al. 2017; Lévesque and Minniti 2006; Mallett and Wapshott 2015).

The fifth theme that emerged in the analysis was labelled *support and advance the community*. It reflects the sub-category of other-oriented interest behind the start-up, such as wanting to help people or being useful in the community one lives into advance the community's wellbeing (rather than one's own dignity, for instance).

4.1.2 Basis of self-evaluation

The analysis of how the interviewees evaluate themselves as entrepreneurs resulted in four second-order themes and two sub-categories. The first sub-category refers to the individual's *background and hard/soft skills* and it comprises three specific themes. *Professionalism* refers to individuals deriving their self-worth from having a suitable professional background and qualifications for the current self-employment. Moreover, this can include the will to update skills or acquire additional ones with the aim of being self-sufficient in their business. This is similar to Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) study, which identified professionalism as one of the bases of self-evaluation. *Soft skills* emerged as a theme reflecting traits, values, and attitudes, which our interviewees considered to be characteristic of their age cohort such that these qualities distinguish senior entrepreneurs from younger ones. An additional source of self-worth brought up by our interviewees is *confidence* in their own ability to succeed in self-employment which they deemed a prerequisite for taking the step to starting a business. This was often described as an age issue, such that advanced age helped gain the necessary confidence to embark on self-employment.

The other sub-category refers to *innate skills*, among which we identified *authenticity* as a specific second-order theme. Similar to authenticity as a basis for self-evaluation in Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) study, our interviewees spoke about the importance of producing something truly useful for the community based on an understanding of the community members' needs. However, the age perspective was also evident in that this added value comes from the extensive life experience of senior entrepreneurs. Thus, for senior entrepreneurs, authenticity means life experience that distinguishes their contribution from that of younger entrepreneurs. An

emphasis on life experience as a distinguishing feature of senior entrepreneurs has been reported in prior research as well (e.g., Kautonen et al. 2008).

4.1.3 Frame of reference

Our analysis of the interview transcripts identified four sub-categories, or groups of people that senior entrepreneurs regard as being relevant for the process of setting up and running their firms. Within these sub-categories, we identified six second-order themes. The first two reference groups are not surprising, as they are well known from prior entrepreneurship studies (e.g., Swail et al. 2013; Van Auken et al. 2006). *Customers* are the immediate recipients of the founder's products or services. Founders identify with them through *empathy*, by means of trust building and adaptation to their demands. They also strive for *originality* through the establishment of close personal relationships that differentiate themselves from competitors. *Entrepreneurial role models* are well-known practising entrepreneurs in the UK whose attitudes and ways of working some of our interviewees appreciate to the extent that they even identify themselves with those entrepreneurs' values and standards (see also Palmer et al. 2019).

The next two reference groups, subsumed in the sub-category of *senior cohort*, are age specific. Some of the interviewees made reference to *older workers* as victims of age discrimination in society (Ainsworth and Hardy 2008). However, they strongly juxtaposed themselves with this negative stereotype, and, as one respondent put it, wanted to show society that 'oldies can make it' in self-employment. In contrast, some interviewees referred to *older achievers*; senior individuals who regard ageing in a positive way, identifying themselves with those who work after retirement and accepting it as the new trend in society.

The final frame of reference and sub-category in our analysis is *community*, which may refer to the geographic area in which the individual lives, or another relevant community such as a disadvantaged group with which the entrepreneur identifies, having a shared experience either personally or vicariously.

4.2 Three social identity types of senior entrepreneurs

4.2.1 Active Agers

The primary social motivation for Active Agers (seven individuals in our sample) is non-economic self-interest driven by dignity: the individual wants to feel active, valuable and useful in spite of their age. For these individuals, running a business is something that allows them to 'keep going' and gives meaning to their lives. Monetary rewards are a secondary concern for these entrepreneurs, or perhaps do not even register for them.

> *You know I didn't want to be on unemployment benefits.… I want to do something productive…Prolonging working life permits you to do something. As a human being you need to do something.* John, 60–64 years, professional, scientific and technical activities

At the end of 14 years, they decided my eyesight was not good enough to do the job properly, which is fair enough, it was actually the local council. So, I then got retired out with a pension, which was adequate, but decided I wasn't sitting around and watching daytime TV for the rest of my life. So, I had a choice of either sitting down and doing nothing or organising myself with the knowledge I've got from nursing, social work and working for [xxxx], and founding my own agency. David, 50–54, Human health and social work activities

In addition to feeling active and useful, Active Agers look for a feeling of achievement and social recognition.

I was tired of the atmosphere there [previous employer], and I was enticed, and it was nice having my ability to communicate, my ability to stand up for myself, my ability to make things happen recognised and valued because it wasn't valued where I was before. Christine, 55–59, human health and social work activities

So, this is achievement, rather than… Yeah, rather than money. Yeah. I mean mine's very clear-cut. I have some great talent and I want to utilise it in something different and that is my motivation rather than anything else. Roger, 55–59, wholesale and retail trade

Individuals belonging to the social identity type of Active Agers derive their self-worth from professionalism. A core asset for their pursuit of dignity and achievement is being properly qualified for the work they do and excelling at job performance. This is evident in the emphasis these individuals place on their background, qualifications and work experience.

I started off by making sure that I was qualified – I don't want to start anything until I am qualified enough in doing so. So, I went on to different academies to do some diplomas and so on. Edward, 50–55, human health and social work activities

First of all, I checked all things I have done before, what qualifications I have, I got to know the market in the UK, and I found my niche.… I set up my business, I did my research. I took advantage of my previous experience and education. John, 60–64 years, professional, scientific and technical activities

Interestingly, while these individuals emphasise the level of professionalism in the work they do, they often described themselves as lacking entrepreneurial skills.

The education, knowledge, training and work experience in nursing and social work. But in developing a business I had no training whatsoever. I hadn't got a clue how to set up a business. David, 50–54, human health and social work activities

In addition to professionalism, Active Agers highlighted their soft skills (e.g., commitment, empathy, communication skills) as important facets of their work performance and credibility as self-employed workers.

I think it will be my coaching, interpersonal and communication skills that will be the most useful. … I am a good communicator, have good emotional intelligence, a good listener.…I am enduring, have conviction and commitment. Richard, 60–64, human health and social work activities

I can adapt to many different situations; I can deal with many different people. So, I would say adaptable, flexible, reasonably good at communicating and getting ideas and understanding of people, who also have poor English. I am able to adjust my English according to the other persons' level. Edward, 50–55, human health and social work activities

The frame of reference for Active Ager founders consists of their customers and older workers in general. These individuals seek to differentiate their business from the competition by paying particular attention to maintaining close and caring customer relationships leveraging the aforementioned soft skills. Thus, they are offering not only a product or service but also a relational experience. Entrepreneurs associated with this social identity type also identify with other workers in their age cohort. They are appalled by the age discrimination that they have experienced either directly or vicariously. Consequently, they want to prove the negative stereotypes of older workers wrong by showing that they can succeed in self-employment. Although self-conscious about their age, and the stereotypes surrounding older workers, these individuals mostly regard themselves as young and cheerful (Greco and Swayne 1992; Kautonen and Minniti 2014).

You know when I talked with my supervisor at the Jobcentre Plus I felt that they were dubious about my decision to become self-employed because considering my age, they were not sure if it would be successful. But still it was not going to change anything at all.… Age is a state of mind. It has not to be a fact that you are 50 or 60 and you should be depressed and so on. John, 60–64, Professional, scientific and technical activities

I can see the benefit in helping people over 50. Age shouldn't matter. It's up to the ability, the skills and the drive people have to start and run their business. Edward, 50–55, Human health and social work activities

4.2.2 Autonomy Seekers

The primary social motivation for Autonomy Seekers (11 individuals in our sample) is non-economic self-interest driven by the pursuit of autonomy at work and more generally taking control of their life. While a desire to be one's own boss is one of the most typical reasons for starting a business (Parker 2018), increasing wellbeing by taking control over one's work-life balance is particularly highlighted in the senior entrepreneurship context (Curran and Blackburn 2001; Kautonen et al. 2017).

I like the small business idea where you can be an independent person, you know, without being employed because I don't think I'm a natural employee or I'm not a career person, you know, in a big organisation. So it seemed to be the easiest way to go, and the way to give me the freedom to do what I wanted to do. Ann, 55–59 years, administrative and support service activities

I just wanted to work for myself. I just couldn't be bothered to get up at six o'clock and deal with all the coming and going. I just wanted my independence and I just tried, and I didn't try to be rational about it, because I was already 60. I worked long enough in my life but feel too young to stay at home as a pensioner. So, I do something for myself, but in my own way. Margaret, 60–64 years, wholesale and retail trade

Economic self-interest plays a bigger role for Autonomy Seekers than for the other social identity types in our study. Often these individuals emphasised the need to have 'something to live on' but some also wanted to make money to improve their standard of living. However, wealth creation and building a business to be passed on to the next generation—features of the economic self-interest social motivation in Fauchart and Gruber (2011)—were absent in our study. This is not surprising: prior research shows that the firms created by older workers tend to be small, often just sole proprietorships, with no or only very modest growth ambitions (de Kok et al. 2010; Kautonen et al. 2014).

I'm happy with it. I am happy with it because I did investigate thoroughly before I started. The only thing I'm not happy with is the income. It's actually brought down my income very substantially, so I'm not able to do certain things that I'd like to do, which I should be able to do at this age, but I'm just waiting. [chuckling]. Anthony, 50–54, Financial and insurance activities.
Erm… to be honest with you, if I can make enough money, as soon as possible I want to enjoy life. I don't want… No. No, I don't want to work beyond. No! [laughing]. Jane, 50–54, human health and social work activities

Six of the total of 11 Autonomy Seekers in our sample also mentioned desire to feel active and useful as having driven the start-up decision. However, compared to the Active Agers, this was clearly a secondary motivation.

Similar to the Active Agers, individuals belonging to the social identity type of Autonomy-Seeker derive their self-worth from professionalism. However, in addition to mentioning their professional background as a source of professionalism, Autonomy Seekers reported a conscious effort to acquire business acumen and update their skills in order to be able to run the business in a self-sufficient way. This is closer to the meaning of professionalism as a 'business school' approach to running a business found in Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) study than the mere emphasis on being good at performing the work that forms the substance of the business, as in the case of Active Agers.

I became aware of PRIME and did approach them to ask whether they could help me with a particular thing, I think it was about marketing issues or some such. Because there are two main issues, one is to get customers and to widen my base, and the second issue is to improve skills and knowledge, so that I can offer more, and I can widen my range of service. James, 55–59, professional, scientific and technical activities
I did go to a few business seminars as well, hmmm. [Interviewer: Okay. So were these business networks or specific seminar training or was it a bit

of both?] Yeah, about how to run your own business. Yeah. Business Link. Erm… [xxxx] Business Network. I remember that. And then the Chamber of Commerce, uh-huh. Mostly during the start-up period, yeah, I did take advantage of some of their workshops. Jane, 50–54, human health and social work activities

Another basis of self-evaluation for Autonomy Seekers is the confidence they have built up to pursue an entrepreneurial career. Sometimes it took some trial and error to find enough confidence to keep working on the business. The interviewees also made a connection between age and confidence, often mentioning lack of confidence as a reason why they had not started a business when younger.

A confidence thing, yeah. … It would have been nice to have done it before, but no, it's just evolved to the point where it's sort of ready to do it now. So, it was all in my head and yes, it was a confidence thing really because often I would just think "Oh, [xxxx] silly little pictures. I should just give up really." Joan, 50–54, arts, entertainment and recreation

I mean in 2007 I started some sort of projects, and it took about a year or so to experience things and to know I could deliver things and that it was working basically. I got good results and I proved to myself and to my clients that I can do it. And then a sort of second wave came through, and after that I had the confidence that my business could succeed. James, 55–59, professional, scientific and technical activities

Similarly to Active Agers, the primary frame of reference in the social space for our Autonomy Seekers are customers. These entrepreneurs aim to differentiate their businesses from competition by focussing on customer relationship building based on trust and adaptation to customer needs. Whereas Active Agers identify with older workers who struggle with age discrimination, Autonomy Seekers identify with older individuals who achieve things and keep on working after retirement ('older achievers'). They thus regard ageing in a positive way and see working longer as being something common and socially acceptable for ageing individuals.

No, I would say being older actually was a benefit because you know what's important and you very quickly learn in business what's important. You know, you make your mistakes, but you never go there again, you know. So, it's a fast learning curve. Barbara, 60–64, Arts, entertainment and recreation

I think it's increasingly becoming quite acceptable…. if you look at the sort of baby boom generation and, you know, what they are able to contribute to the economy, but also the realisation that there's an advantage in experience which comes with age and all that. So, perceptions are changing. You know, it's becoming more acceptable and more positive. Jane, 50–54, human health and social work activities

While for Active Agers running their own business is predominantly about the substance of the work they do, rather than having their own business per se, Autonomy Seekers commonly expressed admiration for entrepreneurship by recalling entrepreneurial role models as sources of guidance, orientation, inspiration, and learning.

But if somebody like Mary [Portas], for example, were to think about it… Because I've always thought whenever she does… I don't know if you watch 'Mary, Queen of Shops', or whatever she… Yeah, yeah, it's the most fantastic programme. You should watch it because it's all about how to make a business work and you can be any age – you know, you might as well be 50 and above – but she looks at it… Susan, 55–59, professional, scientific and technical activities

I received some support from an ex-colleague who was a kind of role model. He has been in the same situation. He is rather older than me. He was made redundant from a director post in a council, and he established a business, he established his own business model and consultancy. James, 55–59, professional, scientific and technical activities

4.2.3 Communitarians

The three Communitarians in our sample are similar to the Active Agers in that they want to feel active and useful. However, while the feeling of being active and useful pertains to the individuals themselves in the case of Active Agers, the basic social motivation of Communitarians is characterised by their other-orientation. These individuals run businesses expressly aiming to help people in a community, such as individuals in a certain geographic area or people dealing with weight issues. Involvement in the community outweighs monetary motives for Communitarian founders.

But the work I'm doing is social enterprise. It's to care for the people in the community. … If it is for the good of others rather than you want to do something to help yourself. Elizabeth, 70–74, administrative and support service activities

So, I decided to do it, and what I wanted to do is helping people like me, the people who spent the bigger portion of their life not being the person they wanted to be. Whether it was weight issues or self-confidence issues, being made redundant, being in relationships that fell apart, so those kinds of people or women. I felt I could work quite well with them. So that's what I wanted to do, set up an organisation that supported them. Mary, 55–59, human health and social work activities

In addition to being good at what they do (professionalism), an important and distinctive basis of self-evaluation for the Communitarians in our sample is the life experience of having been involved in similar situations (e.g., loss of a loved one) or experienced similar conditions (e.g., weight issues) as their customers. This lends their products and services authenticity. This is similar to the Communitarians in Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) study who prided themselves on the authenticity of their sports equipment that was designed with the needs of the community in mind.

I think had I stayed the weight I was, I would never have done it, because I think in all sorts of ways, we are all part of the weightiest society. So, I think age combined with being huge would have been a step too far. I think there

would have been so many people looking at me saying when you don't get your own life under control how you want to help us. I actually think had I not lost weight, had I not got control of that element of my life, I would not have gone to the next step. Because undoubtedly losing weight made a huge difference in my life, I am much more self-confident and much more credible in what I was doing. Mary, 55–59, human health and social work activities

Who ever, ever heard of prostate cancer, fibroids and all these things? You know, these are all new to us. So basically, you know, these are the things that I'm trying to get back to people through their daily food and even to teach. … I guess I never give up. I can turn my hand to anything, and I have a wealth of experience and I use this [enterprise] to share it with others in the community. Gillian, 60–64 years, wholesale and retail trade

The frame of reference for Communitarian founders is the community that their business serves and that in turn supports the business (Fauchart and Gruber 2011). In our sample, the community members might be people living in the same area as the entrepreneur or experiencing a particular life situation or condition, such as being overweight. Relationships with members of their focal community are a key element of the Communitarians' business and this is used as a differentiator in the market.

I've been there, having gone through the mill, so most of the problems my female clients have experienced, I have too. They are people who have problems and a lot of them come to me initially because of one of their problems, often they think that weight is their only or predominant problem and all of them finished by realising that they are very minor problems compared to other things going on or actually it isn't the problem at all. So, it's just what gives us the opening to get together and then work on anything else that is going on in their life. Mary, 55–59, human health and social work activities

I still do a lot in the community and I now do a radio show to try and bring issues and bring health to people. So, what I wanted to do, having done the radio show and so many people are so interested in what we do… because I used to teach also natural growing, natural fertiliser on allotments and so on in South London and they're calling me back again. We can get funding for all these things so, you know, that becomes like a community where we all sit down and have a birthday party on the allotment, everybody come together that grows the allotment and their families and have a little barbecue out there sometimes in summer. That's all therapeutic stuff, but it's bringing back the community and health together and they're growing their own source. Gillian, 60–64 years, wholesale and retail trade

5 Discussion

The preceding analysis examined the heterogeneity of individuals who start a business aged 50 or over when unemployed or under threat of redundancy. The analysis applied social identity theory and exploratory qualitative analysis of 21

interviews with senior firm founders who had sought support from PRIME in London, England. The principal rationale for applying social identity theory to further our understanding of senior entrepreneurship was that it explicitly and systematically accounts for motivations other than just economic self-interest in driving entrepreneurial behaviour (Fauchart and Gruber 2011). Our analysis complements prior typologies of senior entrepreneurs (Kautonen et al. 2014; Singh and DeNoble 2003) and our understanding of senior entrepreneurship in two important ways.

First, our study shows that although most senior entrepreneurs starting firms in adverse circumstances are motivated by the pursuit of self-rewards, there are also a few who are primarily driven by concern for others. In our study, those individuals are categorised as belonging to the Communitarian social identity type whose enterprising activities are driven by the desire to support and develop a particular community that they are familiar with (in contrast to aiming to develop society as a whole or solely pursuing self-rewards). The relative scarcity of Communitarians—and the complete absence of entrepreneurs with societal motives (Missionaries in Fauchart and Gruber's 2011 terminology)—in our study is most likely caused by the specific empirical context of senior individuals who are unemployed or threatened with redundancy. Other-oriented start-ups would most likely be more common among older individuals who have secured their basic subsistence from pensions or savings, as they can more easily afford to engage in enterprising activity that benefits their community or society at large without the pressure of having to generate income to make ends meet. Furthermore, compared to our setting of metropolitan London, Communitarian entrepreneurs could very well be more prominent in declining rural communities; where the age distribution is skewed towards older people because young adults have migrated to cities. The enterprising activity of Communitarians could be crucial for the wellbeing of such communities (Lang et al. 2014).

Second, we find that few of our interviewees were primarily motivated by the earnings differential compared to their previous (un)employment, but instead were driven by self-rewards other than profit. Some of these, such as being one's own boss and pursuing self-realisation, are well known from entrepreneurship literature in general (Parker 2018) and already captured in Singh and DeNoble's (2003) typology of early retirees as entrepreneurs. The perhaps most age-specific motivation (and one not included in Singh and DeNoble (2003)) to emerge from our study is dignity: wanting to feel useful and valuable rather than sitting idle at home. This is certainly a motivation that policy makers are eager to promote, as manifest in policy objectives such as 'active ageing' (European Commission 2019). A related theme was evident when the individuals belonging to the social identity type Autonomy Seekers brought up the effect of ageing individuals that work beyond retirement serving as role models and described this practice as being the 'new normal'. However, the Active Agers raised negative societal stereotypes of older workers and saw themselves as fighting against them (see also Ainsworth and Hardy 2008).

6 Limitations and future research directions

The principal limitation of our study is its specific empirical context. By focussing on senior entrepreneurs who start their business in adverse situations, we generated knowledge on an important target group of social entrepreneurship policy; however, we cannot claim to capture the full heterogeneity of senior entrepreneurial social identities. Two out of the three social identity types we identified are different from those proposed by Fauchart and Gruber (2011) in their seminal study. We did not identify any individuals whose entrepreneurial activity would be primarily motivated by a desire to contribute to the development of society at large (Missionary social identity type in Fauchart and Gruber 2011) or to develop a business for generating economic profits, personal wealth, and to leave a legacy for the coming generations (Darwinian social identity type in Fauchart and Gruber 2011). We do not claim that there are no senior entrepreneurs belonging to the Darwinian or Missionary social identity types, but we did not find them in our specific empirical context.

Showing the context-specific nature of entrepreneurial social identity types is our study's first implication for future research. Our study not identifying the same three pure social identity types as Fauchart and Gruber (2011) demonstrates the context-dependency of their seminal work. This is not surprising given that their original typology was developed in a very specific industry context, and the authors themselves recognised this as an important limitation. It is also not unexpected that senior individuals who start businesses in the adverse context of being unemployed or facing redundancy are driven by different social motivations than entrepreneurs operating in the youthful sports equipment industry.

Our empirical context is a likely reason for the scarcity of economic self-interest as the basic social motivation driving the business and the resulting modest economic ambition level of the businesses we studied, with most entrepreneurs being happy with 'making ends meet'. Moreover, the context explains the absence of societal motives driving the start-ups: people founding a business as a way to avoid unemployment are primarily concerned with their own and their immediate stakeholders' wellbeing before they can afford to pay attention to unknown others.

Improving understanding of the social identities of both senior entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs more generally would require further studies examining different empirical contexts. That extension would also be a necessary first step before launching another large-scale quantitative study along the lines of the work done by Sieger et al. (2016). That last study featured a survey covering the three social identity types identified by Fauchart and Gruber (2011) but our study has demonstrated that there is more heterogeneity in entrepreneurial social identities than those three types cover.

The second implication of our study for the use of social identity theory in entrepreneurship research is that non-monetary self-rewards should be included among the basic social motivations for starting a business. Although the importance of non-monetary self-rewards may be more pronounced with senior

entrepreneurs than among other demographic groups, prior research points to motives such as autonomy and self-realisation being important general drivers of entrepreneurial behaviour (Douglas and Shepherd 2000; Parker 2018). Hence, even though to date the emphasis of applications of social identity theory in entrepreneurship has been on the integration into explanations of entrepreneurial behaviour of an other-orientation to complement economic self-interest, we propose that non-monetary aspects of self-interest be considered in future applications of social identity theory in the entrepreneurship domain.

Dignity as a non-monetary dimension of self-interest warrants further attention in the context of senior entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship more generally. While dignity has not yet been explored in entrepreneurship, prior management research has investigated dignity in the workplace; for example, Lucas et al. (2017) examined how members of organisations experience dignity and how dignity in turn influences organisational outcomes. They found that workplace dignity not only improves organisational performance by enhancing employees' engagement, but also by reducing counterproductive work behaviours. Furthermore, Bolton (2007) identified work conditions that foster dignity to include meaningful work tasks, respectful social relations, secure terms of employment, healthy work conditions, just rewards, and equality of opportunities.

However, given that entrepreneurs' work conditions differ from those of salaried employees (e.g., in terms of the absence of terms of employment, uncertain income and greater autonomy), the sources, dimensions and outcomes of dignity for entrepreneurs are likely to be different as well. The autonomy offered by working for oneself provides opportunities for self-fulfilment, skills development, and individual freedom, which are positively associated with dignity (Sen 1999). Especially for unemployed individuals, starting a business is not only a way to earn a living but also to enhance dignity by overcoming the shame associated with being unemployed (Peterie et al. 2019). For older workers starting a business following unemployment, our findings suggest that there is an additional age dimension to dignity: showing that seniors can still make valuable contributions to society and the economy.

Future entrepreneurship research could investigate the factors that nurture or undermine entrepreneurs' dignity, how entrepreneurs cope with violations of their dignity (Lucas 2015), how working for oneself contributes to feelings of dignity, and what outcome variables, such as different dimensions of wellbeing, dignity is associated with. One way to approach dignity theoretically is via humanistic management theory that analyses dignity and its consequences for wellbeing (Pirson 2019). Another approach would be to look into the differences in the antecedents and outcomes of inherent and earned dignity (Grover 2014; Sayer 2009). The former deals with generalised respect from stakeholders, whereas the latter refers to feelings of self-worth that come from skills development and being able to create value for stakeholders and also to contribute to society.

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