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The intersectional identity work of entrepreneurs with disabilities: constructing difference through disability, gender, and entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing interest in intersectional entrepreneurship studies investigating the interplay of privileged and disadvantaged identities, people with disabilities still appear to be a ‘forgotten minority’ in that field. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 29 entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWD), this study examines how differences are constructed by EWD when performing intersectional identity work at the crossroads of disability, gender, and entrepreneurship. The results revealed four overlapping strategies in response to different sources of identity threats, such as disability and gender threats: bracketing, reconciling, adjusting, and neglecting. While the identity work of EWD was informed by challenging dominant entrepreneurial discourse impregnated by ableism and hegemonic masculinity, simultaneously, othering was also used in crafting positive identities, which instead reproduced power-laden social differences.

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intersectionality; minority entrepreneurship; disability; identity work; qualitative method

Introduction

Studies using an intersectionality approach investigate the co-existence, interplay, and mutual reproduction of different identity positions (Collins 2020; Crenshaw 1991; Hancock 2007). The focus has been on interweaving systems of suppression based on multiple disadvantaged identities, such as gender, age, class, sexual orientation, race, and how social relations exacerbate and reproduce social inequalities (Acker 2006; Özbilgin et al. 2011). However, scholars argue for an extended scope of scholarship to explore the multiplicity of identities, including the interlocking systems of privilege and power or the intersection of different advantaged and marginalised identity positions (Booyesen 2018; Weldon 2008). Regarding the intersection of entrepreneurship with other identity categories, studies have investigated, for example, its interplay with ethnicity (Adeeko and Treanor 2022; Barrett and Vershinina 2017), whiteness, and being a woman (Heizmann and Liu 2022). However, despite a growing number of studies with a multidimensional focus (Adeeko and

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Treanor 2022; Barrett and Vershinina 2017; Essers and Benschop 2009; Essers and Tedmanson 2014; Heizmann and Liu 2022), entrepreneurship literature is still dominated by a discourse on gender and entrepreneurial identity (Heizmann and Liu 2022), while extending the focus to categories such as disability, race, and class is long overdue (Williams and Patterson 2019; Dy and Agwunobi 2019).

This study aims to extend the scope of intersectional entrepreneurship studies to include disability as a highly marginalised category. People with disabilities (PWD) are largely ‘invisible’, a ‘forgotten minority’ (Cooney 2008) in entrepreneurship studies (Parker Harris, Renko, and Caldwell 2014; Williams and Patterson 2019), even though they are more likely than non-disabled people to be entrepreneurs or self-employed (Cooney 2008). Entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWD) are a large and heterogeneous group (Renko, Harris, and Caldwell 2016) whose diverse experiences and intersections with other minority categories need to be explored. However, disability as a social category is consistently absent from contemporary intersectional studies (Erevelles and Minear 2010; Hernández-Saca, Gutmann Kahn, and Cannon 2018) and remains underexplored in fields such as entrepreneurship (Williams and Patterson 2019).

This study responds to the broader sociological relationships between inequality and entrepreneurship (Martinez Dy 2020) by exploiting the potential of intersectionality within entrepreneurship research (Dy and Agwunobi 2019; Williams and Patterson 2019). Using a constructionist perspective (Hancock 2016) and intersectional identity work as a theoretical approach (Atewologun, Sealy, and Vinnicombe 2016), this study examines *how EWD navigate their identities at the crossroads of entrepreneurship, disability, and gender*. To answer this research question, the article reveals how differences and ‘others’ are constructed in the identity work of male and female EWD. The results elucidate the interplay of potentially privileged identity positions, such as being an entrepreneur and/or a man, and marginalised categories, such as being disabled and/or a woman.

Intersectionality, identity work, and othering

Intersectionality is defined as a theoretical lens and methodology (Booyesen 2018) and is an emerging research paradigm from critical social theory (Hancock 2007). It emphasises the importance of addressing the mutually constitutive relations of ‘categories of difference’ such as gender, class, race/ethnicity, disability, religion, age, sexuality or geography (Hancock 2007), which reflect ‘in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies’ (Calás, Smircich, and Holvino 2014, 27). Weldon (2008) claims that intersectionality should be applied both to marginalised groups and to understand the interlocking relations of privileges and disadvantages that impact us. Since people can simultaneously hold privileged and marginalised identities, future research should focus on intersections where marginalisation might outweigh privilegisation or vice versa (Booyesen 2018).

Booyesen (2018) argues that both identity work and intersectionality are focused on how individuals navigate themselves in their worlds and how they make sense of who they are in relation to others. The concept of identity work relies on a constructivist approach to identity, considering it as fluent, continuously produced, changed, shaped, and reshaped through symbolic interactions performed in specific sociocultural contexts (see for example 2002; Booyesen 2018). Identity work is an ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct, and positively valued’ (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008, 15). Multiple identities can conflict, compete, and be independent or interdependent, contradictory or temporary (Booyesen 2018). Combining identity work with intersectionality offers the opportunity to understand how individuals relate to interlocking systems of power structures through their identity formation (Adeeko and Treanor 2022).

Identity construction often relies on articulating differences through self-other talks and drawing symbolic boundaries between the self and others (Ybema et al. 2009). Othering ‘describes a process whereby the self is reflexively constructed though what it is not’ (O’Mahoney 2012, 729), by developing anti-identities or engaging in dis-identification (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008).

Various groups can be 'othered' based on appearance, behaviour, or other social characteristics, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, or even being overweight (Mik-Meyer 2016). For example, PWD are often defined by othering, as they are labelled and sometimes even stigmatised as outsiders, not fitting within the norms of non-disabled people as a social group (Mik-Meyer 2016). However, othering can also be a source of resistance, supporting the development of counter-narratives against hegemonic discourses (O'Mahoney 2012) like ableism or masculinity.

Intersecting identities in entrepreneurship research

Mainstream entrepreneurial literature considers different minority positions as contextual factors, while an intersectional approach to entrepreneurship provides a more nuanced understanding of how multiple identities shape economic action (Romero and Valdez 2016), and how multiple dimensions of identity interplay to condition entrepreneurial outcomes. Intersectional entrepreneurship studies including gender as a diversity category (Heizmann and Liu 2022; Ahl and Marlow 2012; Erogul, Rod, and Barragan 2019) widely acknowledged that 'the notion of entrepreneurship is ideologically skewed towards masculine ideology' (Smith 2010, 27). Managers and leaders can exhibit various organisational masculinities (Collinson and Hearn 2003), such as the 'entrepreneurial masculinity', which implies a 'visionary leader, who has boundless energy, takes risks and engages in significant business development' (Byrne et al. 2021, 132). Entrepreneurs not fitting the dominant picture of the white male able-bodied hero (Ogbor 2000) need to gain legitimacy in alternative ways and craft identities through which they compensate for their detriments however, still embrace a certain form of masculinity prevailing in business life. The various strategies to perform minority entrepreneurial identity work – be it women or PWD – may encompass conforming and 'embracing the masculine' and 'attenuating the feminine' (Swail and Marlow 2018); developing positive alternative identities through negotiating conflicting identity categories via personal and business-related strategies, or resisting hegemonic pressures altogether (Waling 2019).

While research on the identity work of EWD is still lacking (but see Jammaers and Zanoni 2020), there is an abundance of literature on the intersecting identities of female entrepreneurs. Essers and Benschop (2007) explored the complex processes of organisational identity construction at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship. Being a woman, Turkish or Moroccan, and an entrepreneur simultaneously requires various strategies to negotiate identities with different constituencies. While providing a situated contribution to the deconstruction of the entrepreneurial archetype of the white male hero, the authors also further the understanding of the micropolitics of identity work in organisations in relation to the relevant social categories. Considering the strategies developed for intersecting identities in entrepreneurship, Essers and Tedmanson (2014) found that the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and religion produced three key narrative themes: (i) being othered; (ii) responding to those perceived to be the mainstream 'others'; and (iii) constructing alternative, 'hybrid' identities. In their studies, entrepreneurs experienced different forms and sources of discrimination because they were women, Turkish, and Muslim. They were 'otherised' and consequently, they also othered themselves from 'old-fashioned' Turks or women non-entrepreneurs. Consequently, they could construct transnational and hybrid identities.

When focusing on the interplay of identity categories traditionally considered privileged (e.g. entrepreneurship, high social status, being a man) and disadvantaged (e.g. religious minority, disability, being a woman), studies have found that these identity categories were enacted in various combinations with certain dynamics between them. Harvey (2005) found that the intersection of race and being a working-class woman has a significant impact on the entrepreneurial motivation of black women: their economic needs intersect with gender-based needs to meet familial responsibilities, while racial solidarity also influences their entrepreneurial behaviour. Essers and Benschop (2009) indicated that intersecting minority identities does not necessarily mean a disadvantage; Islamic identification is compatible with gender, entrepreneurial, and ethnic identities, even though this sometimes requires creative identity work.

Studies on immigrant Polish entrepreneurs have indicated that ethnic identities might serve as a resource for boosting enterprises by building networks and partnerships (Barrett and Vershinina 2017). Adeeko and Treanor (2022) highlighted the ambiguous interplay of multiple identities by suggesting that refugee women entrepreneurs face challenging stigmas through entrepreneurship that is potentially liberating, however, having a refugee background worsens the structural challenges of female entrepreneurship. Apart from the implications for venture potential, this also affects fragile entrepreneurial identities. Heizmann and Liu (2022, 6) focused on the interlocking system of privileges of elite women entrepreneurs, how they 'navigate between the interlocking axes of gender disadvantage and racial, class, heterosexual and able-bodied advantage'. They found that women made serious efforts to avoid the gender threat, which does not fit the male hero entrepreneur prototype (Ahl and Marlow 2012), through their discursive identity formation; however, they reproduced white supremacy, capitalism, heteronormativity, and ableism (Heizmann and Liu 2022).

Williams and Patterson (2019), in their theoretical article, urge feminist entrepreneurship research to be reflexive, accord privilege to variation over homogeneity, and provide space for the different experiences of disabled women entrepreneurs. Although Heizmann and Liu (2022) involved able-bodiedness in their analysis, empirical research on the intersection of disability, gender, and entrepreneurship is especially rare. In a study exploring women EWD from an intersectional perspective, Zheng, Pei, and Gao (2020) has revealed that in the cyber workforce in China, female EWD perform an ongoing identity work by constantly re-defining their disability identities considering different circumstances by oscillating between 'normalcy' and 'specialness' in the social media to avoid the stigma of disability. Jammaers and Zanoni (2020) reveal that self-directed identity positioning and agency in identity construction are crucial in crafting entrepreneurial identities for EWD, instead of using dominant, normative discourses of entrepreneurship in the form of self-other talks.

Thus, there is growing interest in extending the scope of analysis to multiple identities and scrutinising the interplay of privileged and disadvantaged identity categories in the identity work of entrepreneurs. Williams and Patterson (2019, 1720) suggest conducting empirical research on women EWD and focusing on topics such as how the 'anomalous body' (bodily variation vs. 'perfect' body), 'multiplicity and simultaneity of care' (providing and receiving care simultaneously) and 'scrutinised body' (beauty and sexuality) relate to the lived experience of being an entrepreneur. Simultaneously, they remark that there remains a scarcity of intersectional studies that incorporate disability as an identity category, both in critical entrepreneurship studies and minority entrepreneurship literature. Approaching the identity work of EWD through an intersectionality lens can allow us to understand how they challenge the dominant, normative, exclusionary 'able white male' representation of entrepreneurs and to capture the diverse lived experience of female and male EWD as an ignored and forgotten minority.

Methodology

Our study employs a qualitative research method, which is appropriate for investigating social phenomena such as disability and identity (Cooper and Emory 1995; Jammaers, Zanoni, and Williams 2021). A snowball sample selection strategy (Salamzadeh and Kawamorita Kesim 2017; Silverman 2008) was followed in two phases, between 2018 and 2020, and 29 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. Participants were invited if they were EWD having experience of at least three years and at least three employees. Interviewees were selected based on the diversity of the sample regarding gender, type of disability, onset of disability, and field of entrepreneurship. Despite our efforts to build a diverse sample, eight entrepreneurs were female, one had hearing loss, one had psychological disability, and the remaining had either physical or vision impairments. The dominance of people with sight loss and physical disabilities among entrepreneurs has already been addressed in the literature based on the US and UK statistics (Ashley and Graf 2018). Although there are no available statistics for Hungarian EWD, we suppose that our sample might reflect

Table 1. Respondents of the study.

Pseudo-nym	Gender	Onset of the disability	Age (at the time of the interview)	Education	Type of disability	Field of business, activity	Starting year of business
Ottó	M	consequence of accident, 2002	41	college/university	physical (para)	medical industry (wheelchairs)	2007
Viktor	M	born with the impairment, gradual deterioration, in the last 15 years blind	56	vocational	Blind	construction industry, project management	1989
Bence	M	consequence of accident, 2002	42	college/university	physical (tetra)	ICT, cross fit room and sport event organising	2004
Róbert	M	consequence of accident, 2005	33	college/university	physical (tetra)	catering, sales	2004
Roland	M	born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	42	college/university	sight loss	ICT services, software development	2004
Rebeka	F	born with the impairment	36	college/university	Blind	sales	2008
Richárd	M	consequence of accident, 1994	60	vocational	physical	accounting services, clothing industry	1989
Antal	M	born with the impairment	26	college/university	Blind	ICT industry	2016
Tamás	M	consequence of accident, 2004	40	college/university	physical	car sales, agriculture, construction industry	2014 (2000)
Ágoston	M	consequence of accident, 1978	70	college/university	physical (para)	architecture, construction, advertising	1999
Ábel	M	acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	47	college/university	Blind	legal services, sport instructor	1997 (2019)
Vince	M	consequence of accident, 2007	50	college/university	physical	teacher, dance instructor, motivational speaker	2001
Maja	F	born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	29	vocational	sight loss	masseur	2013
Levente	M	consequence of accident, 2006	42	secondary school	physical	sales (electronic devices)	2016
Marcell	M	consequence of accident, 2001	55	college/university	physical	film director	2003
Lilla	F	born with the impairment	49	college/university	Blind	masseur	2007
Adél	F	acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	51	secondary school	physical, chronic illness	clothing industry	2018
Bea	F	acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	64	college/university	Blind	teacher, language school	2001
Jakab	M	consequence of childhood illness	64	secondary school	physical (para)	cleaning industry	1987
Rita	F	acquired by illness at the age of 16	50	college/university	Blind	OD consultant	2010
Detre	M	born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	40	college/university	physical (para)	accessibility consultant	1989
Milán	M	born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	43	college/university	sight loss	ICT services	2005

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Pseudo-nym	Gender	Onset of the disability	Age (at the time of the interview)	Education	Type of disability	Field of business, activity	Starting year of business
Emma	F	acquired by illness at the age of 12	41	college/university	Blind	blogger, trainer (awareness-raising), publishing	2010
Valter	M	consequence of childhood illness	40	college/university	Blind	attorney, legal services	2004
Gréta	F	acquired by illness, gradual deterioration	50	vocational	physical	medical industry (sales of wheelchairs)	2012
Vendel	M	consequence of accident, 1993	50	college/university	physical (tetra)	sales, pizza restaurant, sport event organising	2002
László	M	born with the impairment, gradual deterioration	55	vocational	Deaf	ICT industry	2016
Miklós	M	consequence of accident, 2007	45	secondary school	physical	baker, sales (wheelchairs)	2000
Dominik	M	consequence of medical malpractice, 2007	67	college/university	Blind	coach	2015

similar tendencies in the Hungarian EWD population. The participants were located nationwide in Hungary and had worked in different fields (Table 1).

The interviews lasted between one to three hours, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, few interviews were conducted online. The first, unstructured half of the interview comprised the entrepreneur's life story, whereas, the second part comprised open-ended questions on self-realisation, autonomy, and identity. Other questions addressed relationships with other entrepreneurs and PWD, including potential cooperation or activism, to obtain insight into the lived experience of EWD in the disability community. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

NVivo™ software was used for data analysis. In the first phase, we selected interview fragments related to identity. Theory-driven codes were used: identity according to disability, gender, professional/entrepreneurial identity, age, and others. After sample coding, a double-coding protocol was followed: each interview was coded by at least two persons from the research group to support the validity of the coding process (Creswell 2003). In the second phase a cross-table matrix coding was generated to identify texts on overlapping identities that referred to complex identity work. Thereafter, we searched for typical stories and interconnections representing complex intersectional identity work forming certain patterns. Emerging sub-themes were identified, and contradictions and ambiguities were revealed and cleared through several group discussions. Anonymity of the participants was ensured by using pseudonyms. Informed consent was obtained from the interviewees.

Results

Bracketing disability: entrepreneurial identity as a master identity

Using a bracketing identity formation strategy, interviewees claimed to have an entrepreneurial master identity and considered their disability as insignificant in defining them. They performed intense identity work to bracket their disability as an identity category.

Although EWD accept the constraints caused by their impairments, they emphasise their identity work on what they are capable of and project their entrepreneurial identity. 'I've always followed my own path (...) so, my personality hasn't changed because I'm in a wheelchair now, and what you buy, and sell [as an entrepreneur] is just a matter of being open-minded about what you find'. (Ottó)

Detre draws a parallel with playing the piano and doing business, claiming that the performance is the same; only the situation might be special.

I read an article about a blind pianist. They asked him, what was it like to be disabled? He told them he was not disabled. "What would make me disabled? Just because I'm blind, I live my life the same way. I come and go, have a wife, play music. Not being able to see is just a situation". I thought about how well he put it (...) that I'm not disabled either, simply many things happen differently in my life. (Detre)

Both Ottó and Detre focus on their businesses, which is also the centre and defining feature of their identities. Although the question of identifying with an identity arises, it is mostly considered as a form of human difference and diversity; they mainly treat their disability and entrepreneurial identity separately. They reject identification with the dominant, overriding image of disability as a reaction to the general attitude in society associating PWD immediately with their impairments, neglecting any other part of their identities. In response to the ableist discourse supposing that disability should be a master identity, they consciously ignore disability in their identity work and opt to be primarily entrepreneurs. In their narratives, they represent the classic entrepreneurial identity, with specific additional difficulties (i.e. impairment), in which they differ somewhat from other entrepreneurs.

Bracketing the disability identity is often underpinned by othering: contrasting the self with the negative image of other PWD also supports the formation of a mainly entrepreneurial identity.

For a long time I didn't like to be among people with special needs, such as with wheelchair users or blind or deaf people, because I often felt that, I had always seen and heard them complaining. It's just not me. (Detre)

The stereotypical image of the inactive PWD, who expect the State to provide for them, however, are unwilling or unable to act, is constructed in sharp contrast with the image of determined entrepreneurs actively managing their lives. They develop an instrumentalised attitude towards their experience of disability and use their insider knowledge as a resource to develop their entrepreneurial business while downplaying their disability identities as far as possible.

Reconciling conflicting identities: disability, gender, and entrepreneurship

Managing multiple identities is often challenging for EWD. Reconciliation as an identity formation strategy begins with positioning themselves as belonging to disadvantaged and advantaged identity categories, referring to tensions between different identities. This is particularly true for female EWD, experiencing both ableism and sexism. Interviewees stressed that being a female EWD is more difficult, highlighting the divergence from the ideal image of an able-bodied male entrepreneur.

As an entrepreneur it is even more pronounced that I am cumulatively disabled because I am wheelchair-bound, a woman, and have to be able to assert myself in the entrepreneurial market. (Gréta)

Gréta accepts both entrepreneurial and disability identities; however, constructs a conflicting relationship between the two, interpreting disability and femininity as cumulative disadvantages. Female and few male EWD in the sample shared this view. Marginalised identities, such as being disabled and a woman, were considered as potential threats in construing positive identities. Interviewees experienced various forms of conflict between different identity categories, and they experimented with various identity formations to reconcile them. In the first pattern of identity work, marginalised identity was reconstructed as a resource for entrepreneurship in various forms.

At the crossroad of disability and entrepreneurship, Gréta and László argued that they acquired special personal characteristics (e.g. being able to fight) because of the lived experience of disability, which is advancing successful entrepreneurial activities.

Because of my past I had to struggle tremendously, so, I believe I've developed more willpower than the average person, however, I'm sure that it required two or three times as much effort [to achieve something] as, a person who can hear well or a person who can communicate well. (László)

I got a lot of things from the wheelchair, the basic qualities that I had in me, it reinforced them tremendously, so, I know I'm a bulldog type and stubborn, which can be good and bad. (Gréta)

Gréta and László both emphasise that as PWD, they have learned to be stubborn, assertive, and persevering, which are important characteristics of a successful entrepreneur. The pride they feel in overcoming any disability obstacles makes their success greater and motivates them further; helps craft positive identities as entrepreneurs, and while disability provides them with certain advantages, overall it is viewed as a disadvantage. They reformulated their disadvantaged positions into advantages in their identity work.

Gréta and László opted to use their disability-related experiences as a resource and build a business that provides tools and services specifically for PWD (e.g. selling wheelchairs or sound amplification equipment).

People have also seen my enthusiasm and dedication, which is additional. So, they didn't just get the goods, but also a package, a package that is me. (Gréta)

The reason why I disclosed it, to tell you honestly, is that it is part of the project, so that I take up this equal opportunity thing and to be credible, it had to be seen that I am acknowledging it, that this is who I am. Otherwise, I wouldn't have put it there either because it's an actual disadvantage in Hungary. (László)

Gréta and László treat their impairments as part of the business, which provides them credibility, authenticity and self-identity. Positioning themselves as insiders enables EWD to reconcile their two identity categories and craft a positive identity from an originally negative identity.

However, interviewees highlighted that the interaction between disability and entrepreneurial identity could be **multidirectional**. Vendel, who requires personal care daily, argues that his entrepreneurial experience and competencies allow him to better organise his private life, which he terms as 'enterprise':

I practically run a business in my private life, too (...) I run a Vendel Ltd. (...) You have to be especially aware of personal tasks, roles, and I had to learn to adapt myself to different situations and explain to other people what the role they play means to me. (...) I believe this is an absolutely entrepreneurial approach, because I have to run my life. (Vendel)

Here, we notice a strong identification with entrepreneurship, which contributes to a positive identity construction: the individual who sees himself/herself as a competent organiser can regain control over the obstacles to disability.

Identity work **at the crossroad of gender and disability intersects with the process of becoming an entrepreneur**. Emma believed that she was multiply disadvantaged: She often experienced being looked down upon: 'as a disabled person, I've often [felt] I was inferior for some reason', and as a blind woman and a wife, she was often made to feel lucky that someone married her and her husband was a 'hero' for 'carrying this burden'.

Everyone tells me, "Oh, good, then you have someone to help you", and I always tell them, no, we rely on each other, (...) oh, he's merciful, and they bow down before my husband as if he were a demigod, saying, wow, he married a blind woman and what a big deal this is... No, we have a perfectly normal marriage (...) he [the husband] always says he didn't see the blind woman in me, he saw the woman who by the way can't see. (Emma)

Emma personally felt that her visual impairment eroded her femininity and attractiveness. People with disabilities are often considered less attractive, less feminine/masculine, or even asexual (Lid-diard 2014). The husband's rejection of the stereotype of the 'poor helpless disabled woman' and his assertion of her sexual attractiveness as a woman are strong affirmations of Emma's femininity and self-esteem, which she later claimed as an important resource in becoming an entrepreneur.

Hence, Emma joined a group of female entrepreneurs who accepted her disability, and considered her 'exceptional' appreciating her proven femininity and motherhood:

The community of mothers, because I am a mother and here, I benefited from it, the truth is that this condition, because everybody was amazed, that being blind and whatnot (...). I believe that's really important, that it

wasn't condescending, not that—we don't know what to do with her—but that they wanted me to be there. It sounds so stupid that they lifted me up to themselves, no, they're not above me, but because I've experienced it several times as a disabled person that I'm inferior for some reason (...). (Emma)

Emma experienced both acceptance and inclusion, which set her on the path of questioning her identity as an 'inferior disabled person' dominated by the ableist social narrative. Becoming part of 'women's space' formed by businesswomen, her role as a PWD mother was appreciated and served as a resource in being accepted as a female entrepreneur by her 'sisters'. However, the reaction of the able-bodied female entrepreneurial community is contradictory: while affirming her business aspirations and acknowledging her 'exceptionality', they make her feel different, deviating from mainstream female entrepreneurship. Treating Emma as a 'supercrip' (Shakespeare 1996), they implicitly suggest that motherhood/womanhood, disability, and entrepreneurship are usually incompatible identity categories, thus doing benevolent othering.

Similarly, Bea claimed to be struggling to reconcile disability and femininity. As a young, blind woman, she doubted whether she would be able to have a family, internalising the presumptions of the ableist social environment towards women with disabilities. However, despite her doubts, she was never single, which she claimed provided her with self-confidence and social recognition. 'These were strangely mutually reinforcing things, having chosen my friends well, always having a boyfriend, it was a reaffirmation of status for me'. In the eighties, there was even an article published about her being blind and having a family:

The Nők Lapja (Women's Magazine) came here to us... and my son was a year old at that time. The article described how interesting it was that a blind person could have a family, and how (...) sensational it was. (Bea)

While disability and femininity appear as mutually exclusive identity categories for Bea, she strove to construct a positive identity and reconcile and combine both identity categories. The accounts of both Bea and Emma reveal that they felt empowered in their social status by becoming wives and mothers. The success of overcoming the threat of disability to their gender identity served as an emotional resource in terms of self-confidence to become successful entrepreneurs.

For male entrepreneurs, strengthening their masculine identity supports their entrepreneurial identity, which conflicts with their disability identity. Ábel, a self-employed lawyer and Aikido master speaks about his credo as follows:

Then, as a blind person, I was attacked in the street, and I parried the attack with a karate kick I learned in my sighted years. From that moment on, I decided to learn to defend myself... As both an Aikido master and a lawyer, I am a strong man fighting to help the vulnerable. Well, that's my life, actually. Martial arts and law. So, it's a kind of advocacy.

Ábel represents both martial arts and legal business as a fight against the vulnerability and dependency of PWD.

There is a Japanese fairy tale hero, a legend, they call him Zatoichi. A blind demon which is born into the body of a blind man every century, fights for the fallen, goes away and returns (...). Yes, so there is something in this story, and one of my friends always says, "Ábel, there is an overlap with the legend!"

In his identity work, Ábel relies on the Japanese hero demon, which symbolises masculinity while embracing his disability, a reconciliation of previously conflicting identity categories.

Adjusting identities to the hegemonic ableist and masculine image of the entrepreneur

Analysing the accounts of EWD, we have observed a pattern that reflects striving to adjust identities to the dominant image of the ableist and masculine entrepreneur. Here, disadvantaged identity categories did not provide a resource but were represented as clear constraints. However, in contrast to bracketing, it did not include a claim of not being disabled, but to hide, subsume, or camouflage being disabled from others for a temporary period. At the crossroads of **disability and**

entrepreneurship, one of the identity formation strategies is to consciously create a non-disabled identity position in situations where one has to appear as a competent entrepreneur.

When I create a life in which I present myself as one who can see, society cannot fool around with me. (...) If I go to a meeting, I go there with a colleague who can see. (...) There we are in a negotiation situation where the manager forgets that I cannot see, because I can go in, (...) I can sit down on the chair because the colleague is there with me, she takes my hand and puts it on the coffee cup and I can take it, and that puts me in a position where the manager does not even notice that I cannot see. (Bea)

Paid personal assistance can add to developing a 'mainstream social identity', provides the necessary social status for being an equal partner in business, helping to ward off the identity threat coming from an ableist society, and to embrace the privileged identity of the entrepreneur. However, it is also a successful camouflage that does not challenge the ableist norms of business and reflects strive for subsuming disability identity to the entrepreneurial identity.

At the crossroads of **gender and entrepreneurship**, both male and female interviewees expressed the view that women are disadvantaged as entrepreneurs because they 'think with their hearts'.

The approach is very, very male-centric in Hungary. It's difficult for women to be recognised as capable. Yes, but women think with their hearts and not with their minds. That's where the problem starts. (Jakab)

My problem so far as an entrepreneur was that I always took pity on them all (employees) and they always took advantage of me. So, now I don't feel sorry for them, they've got their families, friends, they should feel sorry for them. I'm not there to feel sorry for them and I had always fallen into that trap, but I've learned that now. (Maja)

The interviewees assume an entrepreneurial-social environment in which masculine values are dominant and function as the norm. In this context, emotions, sensitivity, and solidarity are described as feminine values and are considered disadvantageous. An individualistic entrepreneurial identity is constructed differently from the solidaric female other. In doing so, EWD – both men and women – recreates a discourse of hegemonic masculinity closely linked to entrepreneurship: women can be entrepreneurs only if they overcome their disabilities as men do and are able to think and behave in a masculine way.

To overcome the threat of being a woman on entrepreneurial identity, few female interviewees opted to develop a non-traditional feminine identity to adjust to the image of the masculine hero entrepreneur.

I'm a masculine woman; my mindset is more of a masculine mental set, which means that I'm very good at finding my way around, for example, once I've been somewhere, I even know the streets ... (Bea)

Bea and Adél both highlighted the difficulties of achieving work-life balance and the importance of the husbands' support, emphasising the cumulative disadvantaged position of being a female EWD.

He [husband] was very family-oriented, and he gave up his whole life for me, (...) he did the shopping, he cooked, he cleaned, and by the time I got home at 8:30 pm, the kids were waiting in their pyjamas. (Bea)

If my husband wasn't so supportive, if he didn't do the housework, I would say it's either this or that [the business venture]. So, the two together are not possible on a daily basis anymore, that's for sure. So, as a disabled person or I believe for a healthy person too it's tremendous pressure. (Adél)

Adél argues that the family provides both physical assistance and a stable foundation for commencing a business and emotional support to perform multiple roles and cope with challenges. The disadvantages of disability are compensated for by the fact that the family follows a non-traditional model in gender roles. In adjusting identity formation strategies, disability and female identities do not serve as a resource, but something that has to be hidden to adapt to the ableist and masculine entrepreneurial archetype.

At the crossroads of **disability, gender, and entrepreneurship**, EWD emphasise that an entrepreneur has to be attractive, and more appealing. 'I think an entrepreneur has key to success. (...)

Therefore, to be attractive, I don't mean it to be specifically beautiful from birth, but to have radiation, an attitude that he/she can turn to others'. (Rita)

Both male and female entrepreneurs expressed a strong motivation to appear beautiful and well-groomed both to themselves and the outside world. This was framed as a need to compensate for stigma, imperfection, and 'ugliness' of disability.

If you are disabled, it is visible, you have to be perfect in everything else, my mum used to say: always be neat, always be clean and dressed in nice clothes, always have your wheelchair clean, because I can't deny that I have a problem, (...) everything else should be well maintained. (Vendel)

So, I've never been seen out on the street, (...) with my hair matted, maybe I have to get up five hours earlier, but then yes, I should go out clean, not smelly, not looking like a homeless person, because I think that just because I'm sick now, I don't have to look like that. (Adél)

This attitude reflects an internalised form of ableism. EWD accept the ableist view that disability is a 'defect' that needs to be compensated for or covered up and expressed and adjusted to ableist beauty standards (Heizmann and Liu 2022). Conversely, it also amplifies the phenomenon of othering, as it distances oneself from PWD, who are unkempt. These findings suggest that disability is considered a threat to both traditional masculinity and femininity in terms of beauty standards, thus evoking identity work.

Neglecting entrepreneurial identities

Few interviewees – mostly necessity based EWD – claimed that they feel uncomfortable in entrepreneurship and became entrepreneurs owing to the scarcity of their disability benefit/pension or the lack of other employment opportunities.

(...) in our case, it is more to supplement our livelihood. I believe most disabled people have other income. I have other income because I have worked (...). Well, success is when someone applies for a course, they do it and I feel that I have given them something. (...) That's it for me. So, I'm not going to have successes like, oh, this is so good and I'm going to be a billionaire and whatnot. That's obviously not an achievable goal. (Milán)

Milán did not construct an entrepreneurial identity. Entrepreneurship involves taking a back seat in terms of livelihood and life goals. In his identity construction, Milán described the image of the classic ambitious entrepreneur striving for success as unattainable and impossible.

Emma similarly reports difficulties in setting up entrepreneurial goals:

It was very difficult in the beginning to desire something. I believe that as a disabled person, (...) I got used to the fact that what I have is enough for the minimum standard of living, for just lingering on, and not wanting more (...) and I realized that if I don't want anything, I won't succeed, because if I accept things as they are, I really won't be motivated to move forward. (Emma)

Emma's case highlights that a disability identity might be connected to a low level of aspiration in life. This is inconsistent with the image of a typical entrepreneur (e.g. depicted in business development training) that if exposed to it, it triggers the identity construction process: the need to articulate personal goals and aspirations. Although Emma and Milán share a low level of aspiration fuelled by ableism, while Milán accepts a fixed non-entrepreneurial identity in his narrative, Emma is open to change and possible future transformation.

Concluding discussion

This study investigated the intersections between privileged entrepreneurial and masculine, and the disadvantaged disability and female identity categories through the identity work of male and female EWD. This focus reflects the hiatus in the intersectional entrepreneurship literature integrating disability as an important identity category (Williams and Patterson 2019; Dy and Agwunobi 2019) and uses the intersectionality lens in researching EWD (Jammaers and Zanoni 2020), which

contributes to debunking the tendency of essentialisation of PWD (Erevelles and Minear 2010) within entrepreneurship research. Furthermore, this study broadens the scope suggested by Williams and Patterson (2019), as it investigates disabled male and female entrepreneurs and examines the interplay of femininity/masculinity, disability, and entrepreneurship. Tracking the interplay of privileged and disadvantaged identities, we were able to observe how EWD attempted to avoid various identity threats derived from a constraining social environment. Both male and female EWD face the double burden of ableism and sexism, such as the disability associated with lower productivity (Jammaers, Zanoni, and Hardonk 2016) and the expectation of hegemonic masculinity coded into the stereotypical image of the male hero entrepreneur (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Ogbor 2000). Their assumed asexuality owing to their disability (Shakespeare and Richardson 2018) also constructs a difference from the potent and able image of the entrepreneur.

These intersecting identity threats require creative identity work from the EWD. We identified four overlapping strategies that EWD deployed in their identity formation at the crossroads of entrepreneurship, disability, and gender. Interviewees tended to use only one particular strategy; however, examples of combining or changing identity strategies throughout their lifetime were also present.

First, while bracketing disability and relying more on the entrepreneurial identity, EWD established a similar identity position as the archetypical entrepreneur (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Ogbor 2000). We observed that this was accompanied by strong othering: EWD differentiated themselves from other non-entrepreneurial PWD, depicting them as passive, motiveless, and repining people. While it conforms to the findings of Jammaers and Zanoni (2020), this study extends the literature by highlighting that bracketing also reproduces ableist assumptions; thus, similar to the gender threat (Ahl and Marlow 2012), it indicates a so-called 'disability threat' for EWD. That is, to establish an entrepreneurial identity amidst ableist assumptions, 'they have to undertake particular forms of identity work to reflect the dominant norm which positions them as credible' (Ahl and Marlow 2012, 548). While the privileged entrepreneurial identity enabled them to reject the stigmatised minority label, as in the case of refugee entrepreneurs (Adeeko and Treanor 2022; Essers and Tedmanson 2014), it also reproduced ableist discursive barriers (Jammaers and Zanoni 2020) for other PWD.

Second, EWD striving to reconcile different identity categories used different strategies. Embracing disability allowed them to use disability as a resource for crafting entrepreneurial identity and provides credibility for disability-related business activities. These findings support previous studies claiming that stigmatised identities, such as being a refugee (Adeeko and Treanor 2022) or belonging to an ethnic minority (Barrett and Vershinina 2017) might be reconfigured as a resource in entrepreneurship. However, our research adds to this literature by observing a reversed type of reconciliation, that is, using entrepreneurial skills to overcome everyday obstacles as PWD. This reversed effect has previously not been reported to be related to any other marginalised identity. As both in bracketing and reconciling identity strategies, we found strong identification with business and blurring of the boundary between venture identity and entrepreneurial identity (Mmbaga et al. 2020), future research might address this type of intersection and its relation to minority identity categories through a critical lens because it might reflect instrumentalised self-identification.

As a further contribution, this study adds to the extant literature on intersecting identities and identity conflicts in entrepreneurship studies (Essers and Benschop 2007; Essers and Benschop 2009; Stirzaker and Sitko 2019; Adeeko and Treanor 2022; Zheng, Pei, and Gao 2020) by developing an understanding on how gender and disability threats intersect in the identity work of EWD. EWD reported a conflict between disability identity and both feminine (Zheng, Pei, and Gao 2020) and masculine (Ostrander 2008) identities. As a reconciliation strategy, we have discovered that few women EWD presented a sequential account of how to overcome different identity threats: becoming a mother/wife with disabilities represents in itself a higher status since it is already considered as an 'achievement' in contrast to ableist assumptions. Thus, fulfilling traditional gender roles functioned as a symbolic resource in achieving social recognition as entrepreneurs. Thus, becoming a non-normative entrepreneur (Dy and Agwunobi 2019) in terms of disability might add to debunking

the discursive barriers related to gender in becoming an entrepreneur. While in the case of refugee women, where gendered maternal identity was in tension with entrepreneurial identity (Adeeko and Treanor 2022), this study highlights that in the case of disadvantaged identity categories considered incompatible, such as gender and disability, successful reconciliation might release this tension. Moreover, it supports the crafting of positive entrepreneurial identity and resistance to ableist norms. These findings provide further empirical evidence to underscore that intersecting marginalised identities might not necessarily produce a double-disadvantaged position (Booyesen 2018; Weldon 2008), however, they might be creatively combined and compatible with entrepreneurial identity (Essers and Benschop 2009), extending this literature with the mitigative interplay of disability and gender threats.

Third, adjustment as a strategy of identity work, underlines that gender threat did not disappear from the experiences of EWD. We found that gender stereotypes assuming women entrepreneurs to be emotional, emphatic to employees, and solidaric to others were present in both female and male narratives as something that hampers becoming a successful entrepreneur, not just presenting women as incomplete (male) entrepreneurs (Ahl and Marlow 2012), but also advocating an individualistic image of the entrepreneur (Williams and Patterson 2019). Thus, these findings provide less hope for the evolution of disability- or gender-based solidarity among EWD, in contrast to the racial solidarity of black women entrepreneurs observed by Harvey (2005). Instead, we found that women opted to follow the tactics of adjusting their identities to the dominant discourse on entrepreneurship impregnated by hegemonic masculinity (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Essers and Benschop 2007) and ableism (Williams and Patterson 2019). This included building an identity contrary to the image of the traditional housewife or claiming to have a masculine mindset while hiding their disability.

Findings on adjusting identity strategies also advance our understanding of how entrepreneurship and disability relate to ableist beauty standards. In previous studies, beauty has been thematised only in relation to female entrepreneurs. Williams and Patterson (2019, 1719) supposed that 'disabled women's appearance in terms of beauty and sexuality' might impact entrepreneurial identity construction and is thus worth investigating, while Heizmann and Liu (2022) evidenced that beauty is an important aspect of constituting female entrepreneurial identity along with able-bodied beauty standards. Our results underscore the relevance of this issue in the case of EWD; however, we found that both women and men with EWD internalised the ableist pressure to compensate for their disability in terms of appearing well-groomed. We argue that this is another facet of disability threat in performing the idealised feminine or masculine identity prescribed in the hegemonic discourses of patriarchy and ableism, which is construed as a precondition for becoming an attractive and successful entrepreneur.

Fourth, the possibility of developing an entrepreneurial identity was discovered. These narratives constructed a different marginalised identity compared with other 'real entrepreneurs', reflecting both internalised ableism and sexism. This resulted in a reduction in aspirational levels, and the privilege of entrepreneurial identity was not exploited for crafting new, positive identities. This pattern reinforces previous findings on necessity-driven EWD in terms of refuting investment in entrepreneurial identity work (Jammaers and Zanoni 2020; Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017), while Emma's case indicates that this might be a fluid position.

Thus, the findings revealed that the intersectional identity work of EWD in response to disability and gender threat was informed by the challenging dominant entrepreneurial discourse impregnated by ableism and hegemonic masculinity. However, simultaneously, othering was deployed in crafting positive identities, which emphasised differences among certain social categories and reproduced the underlying power structures of inequalities.

Regarding limitations, the relatively low number of respondents, especially women, may restrict the overall generalisation potential of the research findings, along with the fact that the types of disabilities covered were also rather narrow and excluded invisible disabilities. While our research group comprises practitioners and academics from the field of disability studies, management, and

entrepreneurship, as there was no disabled researcher among us, our understanding of the experience of entrepreneurs may also be considered restrained. Future research plans should include the involvement of more women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs with other types of disabilities, both visible and invisible. Furthermore, the invitation of a participatory researcher with a lived experience of disability would also advance reflective and in-depth analysis.

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