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Original Citation

Refai, Deema, Haloub, Radi and Lever, John (2018) Contextualizing entrepreneurial identity amongst Syrian refugees in Jordan: the emergence of a destabilized habitus? *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*. ISSN 1465-7503

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Contextualizing entrepreneurial identity amongst Syrian refugees in Jordan: the emergence of a destabilized habitus?

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Abstract:

This paper aims to contextualise the entrepreneurial identity of Syrian refugees living outside refugee camps in Jordan. The research adopts a social lens to consider the situation Syrians find themselves in by drawing on the work of Bourdieu. A qualitative design is applied to explore the different experiences and perceptions that pervade refugee stories and the work of refugee aid agencies. By contextualising entrepreneurial identity in the Jordanian context, the paper reveals how a destabilized refugee habitus based on an embodied disposition of survivability is emerging. The paper makes an empirical and conceptual contribution by highlighting how the entrepreneurial activities of Syrian refugees are driven by their experiences of the harsh social conditions they find themselves in.

Introduction

Despite the fact that engaging refugees in entrepreneurial activities can be a useful way of supporting their embeddedness within a society (Kloosterman and Van Der Leun, 1999), a study of the barriers to refugee entrepreneurship in Belgium found that refugees are subject to more barriers than migrants (Wauters and Lambrecht, 2008). The study highlighted three main challenges; i) market opportunities and access to entrepreneurship; ii) human capital and social networks, and; iii) the institutional and societal environment. Pécoud (2003) also highlights problems of being discriminated against in the marketplace, and those related to poor market knowledge and skills. Such barriers might explain why, at least to some extent, many refugees do not engage in entrepreneurship (Werker, 2007). In addition to this, Wauters and Lambrecht (2006) suggest that only a limited number of refugees engage in formal entrepreneurial activities, and that these activities only bring in modest revenues compared to other entrepreneurs.

Bernard (1976) highlights forced immigration as a main characteristic that distinguishes refugees from immigrants. Yet, the UNHCR (2017a) draws a difference between refugees and forced immigrants as the former refers, in particular, to those who cross borders and leave their home countries due to persecution and conflict, as opposed to the latter who are forcibly displaced whether inside or outside their home countries. Today, an unprecedented 56.6 million people are forcibly displaced globally, among which are 22.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2017a). The growing number of refugees and their distinct needs, challenges and characteristics, thus, requires a greater focus on refugee entrepreneurship as a distinct entity in its own right. This is particularly necessary when it comes to embedding refugees into society, which can be challenging for both refugees and host communities. In this context, Zahra and Wright (2011) suggest that our understanding of entrepreneurs, who are mobile across contexts, is still fragmented and mostly confined to immigrant groups (Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990; Beckers and Blumberg, 2013).

For instance, Barnes and Cox (2007) explore enablers of migrant entrepreneurship, including motivation and determination, ability and experience, as well as resources, and Levent-Baycan and Nijkamp (2009) investigate characteristics of migrant entrepreneurship and provide a systematic classification of it. Kloosterman and Rath (2001) and Pécoud (2003) also examine entrepreneurship of ethnic groups, while others like Billore (2011) examine female immigrant entrepreneurship. Furthermore, previous research has investigated diaspora entrepreneurship; for example, with an international and transnational focus (e.g. Riddle et al., 2010; Kotabe et al., 2013; Riddle and Brinkerhoff, 2011 and Rana and Elo, 2017), in Uzbekistani context (e.g. Elo, 2016), and in relation to African entrepreneurs (e.g. Ojo, 2012; Ojo et al., 2013). However, so far, there has been limited focus on refugees as an entity in entrepreneurship research: some exceptions are [Bizri \(2017\) research on refugee entrepreneurship from a social capital perspective](#), Gold's (1988, 1992) work on Soviet Jews and Vietnamese refugees, and Wauters and Lambrecht's (2006, 2008) work on refugee entrepreneurship in Belgium.

Contextualisation of entrepreneurship has received growing interest in the past few years. Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) contend that contextualisation is a useful approach to understand minority entrepreneurship, while Lassalle and McElwee (2016) support a contextualised approach in their investigation of the opportunity structures of ethnic minority entrepreneurs. Previous work investigates contextualisation of entrepreneurial

behaviour (e.g. Sarason et al., 2006; Welter et al., 2011; Welter and Smallbone, 2011; Zahra et al., 2014) and enhances our understanding of how context impacts entrepreneurship. Alvesson et al. (2008) contend that contextualisation of identity, as opposed to behaviour, can offer a new approach to investigate various organisation and management aspects. Only a limited amount of research investigating **Entrepreneurial Identity (EI)** has been identified (e.g. Du Gay, 1991; Ritchie, 1991; Du gay and Salaman, 1992; Foss, 2004; Cohen and Musson, 2000; Fletcher, 2003; Downing, 2005; Hytti, 2005; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). There is even less research on the EI of refugees and the ways in which it impacts and is impacted by context.

This research aims to contextualise the EI of Syrian refugees living outside refugee camps in Jordan using a social lens. We define EI as the source of meaning, decision-making, inspiration, behaviour, commitment, devotion, stability and, also, as an ability to change (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). We agree with Smith (2010) that identity is formed with practical and social contexts. It is also a dynamic process (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001) that we contextualize in this paper through a qualitative study of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in Jordan. Our research addresses the following question:

- RQ: What role does context play in supporting and/or hindering the entrepreneurial activities and identity of Syrian refugees in Jordan?

To answer this question we draw on the work of Bourdieu (2000) to explore the factors that condition the identity and drive the entrepreneurial activity of refugees. Identity, in this context, we argue, refers to dispositional practices and situated subjectivity, as reflected in and through habitus (Bottero, 2010), where the latter will be explained under the theoretical framework of this paper.

The paper proceeds firstly by introducing the methodology adopted. We then discuss the theoretical framework of this research by addressing Bourdieu's (2000) notion of habitus. The paper then follows to identify definitions and components surrounding the contextualisation of entrepreneurship, discussing and placing EI within a social lens that considers agents and the contexts in which they operate. Next, the EI of Syrian refugees in Jordan is discussed through the findings of our research. By investigating the views of Syrian refugees and refugee aid agencies in Jordan, the research makes an empirical contribution by highlighting the factors that drive the entrepreneurial activities of refugees

and the role that context plays in supporting/ hindering such activities. The paper makes a conceptual contribution by proposing that the EI of refugees can be examined through a social lens. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (2000), we illustrate how a destabilized refugee habitus based on an embodied disposition of survivability is emerging amongst this group. While previous work has focused on the social construction of EI (e.g. Downing, 2005) and its institutional dimensions (e.g. Stenholm and Hytti, 2014), this study explores the different contextual dimensions that pervade refugee stories and how the issues involved can be understood through the dispositional practice of a ‘destabilized habitus’ (Bourdieu, 2000).

Methodology and data collection

This research applies a qualitative approach in line with the work of Drakopoulou-Dodd et al. (2014) who advocate qualitative investigation in entrepreneurship research to allow for the exploration of multiple and contextualized elements. Shane and Venkataraman (2001) also support qualitative approaches and argue that quantitative measures undermine investigations of the context of entrepreneurial activities, while Whetten (1989) adds that quantitative measures can withhold theory building and meaningful empirical testing. Rodgers (2004) also calls for ‘hanging out’ with forced migrants using informal and interpersonal encounters to investigate the structural dimensions of their context, whilst highlights possible limitations of quantitative measures in addressing underlying causes of the problems they face. We adopt an interpretative method of data analysis to allow for an exploration of the subjective meanings and dispositions attached that emerge in the Jordanian context. An inductive approach is applied using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process, which includes becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing them, defining and naming them, and producing a report.

The study was conducted in Jordan in 2016. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with aid agencies and focus groups with refugees. The use of these methods supported the consideration of different views and contextual elements relevant to the investigation, with the focus groups providing a way of examining refugee stories within the group. Initially, seven aid agencies in Jordan were contacted by email; three replied with approval to participate. The first agency is a local NGO that supports refugees outside camps, while the second and third are international agencies that support refugees inside

camps. Seven interviews with representatives of these three refugee aid agencies were conducted (five from the first, one from the second, and one from the third). Interviews with participants lasted up to twenty five minutes and were conducted by one of the authors of this article. The first aid agency also supported the research by arranging two focus groups with Syrian refugees; these focus groups were conducted at their premises, and each lasted about 50 minutes and included ten refugees from those listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of refugees

Gender		Age			Education			Business Owner	
Male	Female	15-30	31-45	45+	Primary/ High School	Diploma/ Degree	PhD	In Syria	In Jordan
11	9	0	14	6	10	9	1	14	10

There were slightly more males (fifty-five percent) than females (forty-five percent) in our sample and approximately seventy percent were between the ages of 31-45 years of age; the remainder were older. A number of refugees already had family members in Jordan. While seventy per cent had previously run their own business in Syria, only fifty percent had engaged in entrepreneurship in Jordan, with the rest being forced to work in low paid employment in order to survive. Fifty per cent had completed primary/ high school, with forty-five percent completing a diploma or first degree; one had a PhD.

It should be noted that concerns over national security meant that it was not possible to conduct interviews with refugees inside camps, yet most refugees in the focus groups had previous experience of living inside camps, which was reflected during discussions. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper is on experiences and perspectives of refugees on life outside camps. In our analysis, quotes from aid agencies are denoted by (AA), while those from refugees are denoted by (R). Interviews and focus groups followed a semi-structured approach to allow for more comprehensive (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012) and flexible investigation (Jones, 1985, Patton, 2000); this was paramount to account for the life changing experiences of the refugees. Having said that, it should also be noted that all the necessary ethical approvals were sought, through the relevant business school's ethics committee, prior to data collection.

In line with Patton (2000), interviews and focus groups started with general descriptive questions about refugees and their living conditions in Jordan, as well as questions regarding their entrepreneurial skills. More in depth questions relating to views and feelings were then perused (Patton, 2000) to explore the extent to which refugees are capable of demonstrating

their entrepreneurial skills, and how they felt about this. Here, participants were encouraged to talk about their daily experiences and activities they engage in. The concluding stage explored personal perspectives in line with (Patton, 2000) to allow participants to reflect on the challenges they face, and whether these challenges are likely to be overcome and how. Interviews and focus groups were recorded with consent. All recordings were transcribed and translated (from Arabic to English) by the same researcher before a second round of proof translation was carried out by a second researcher in order to allow rich data analysis, support rigour and minimise bias (Silverman, 2000; Mason, 2002).

The theoretical framework

Bourdieu (1977: 78) defines ‘habitus’ as ‘a system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and action and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks.’ He refers to the social, political and cultural fields where agents operate and accumulate economic (money, resources and property), social (relationships), cultural (attributes and skills) and symbolic (status and prestige) forms of capital, the latter being presented by subjects and institutions as a way of giving them approval. Different forms of capital are measured according to the structure of a field, and it thus follows that individual subjects have attributes that are relevant in some fields and not in others (Howard and Lever, 2011).

In a discussion of situated meanings, Haynie et al. (2010) explore the notion of ‘habitus’ in this context through an exploration of the microfoundations of entrepreneurial action. They argue that opportunity recognition is not simply linked to the individual, but is dependent on the knowledge and information individuals have in a given context. Discussing the influence of cultural capital and embodied dispositions on entrepreneurial activity, Lee and Shaw (2016) argue similarly that non-professional entrepreneurs operating in deprived contexts – as opposed to professional entrepreneurs operating in a context characterized by economic growth – prioritize an embodied disposition based on survivability. What is particularly significant for the concerns of this paper is Bourdieu’s (2000: 161) acknowledgement that there can be ‘blips’ and ‘misfirings’ in habitus. This may lead, he suggests, to ‘discordances’ amongst those in contradictory social positions, thus generating a ‘destabilized habitus, torn by contradiction and internal division.’ He argues further that the troubled experiences of social context may lead to ‘suffering’ amongst the ‘occupants of precarious positions’, and

that in such a context, subjects are ‘constrained, in order to live or survive, to practice a kind of self-analysis, which often gives them access to the objective contradictions which have them in their grasp’ (Bourdieu, 1999, 511).

In contradistinction to what it means to feel that one fits in at a certain time and place, Bourdieu’s (2000) work thus also emphasizes what it feels like to be out of place in a given social and temporal context, and how habitus interruptions – what he refers to as a ‘cleft habitus’ – forces individual subjects who find themselves in new and unfamiliar spaces to think not only of what is novel, but also about where they came from, which arguably leads to a ‘destabilized habitus’ caught between two opposing fields (see Ingram and Abrahams, 2015). As Bourdieu (2000) states:

It is likely that those who are in ‘their right place’ in the social world can abandon or entrust themselves . . . to their dispositions . . . [more] than those who occupy awkward positions... the latter... [being] more likely to bring to consciousness that which for others is taken for granted, because they are forced to keep watch on themselves and consciously correct the ‘first movements’ of a habitus that generates inappropriate or misplaced behaviours (2000: 163)

As we demonstrate through the remainder of this paper, these insights are particularly relevant for our study of Syrian refugees in Jordan

Contextualizing entrepreneurial identity

With the growth of the refugee community worldwide there exists a growing need to contextualize the EI of refugees. Contextualization is defined as ‘linking of observations to a set of relevant facts, events, or points of view that make possible research and theory that form part of a larger whole’ (Rousseau and Fried, 2001: 1) to facilitate better understanding of entrepreneurial action (Zahra and Wright, 2011). Watson (2009) elaborates that the need for identity becomes more evident in people facing crises or breakdown. In relation to refugee entrepreneurs in particular, who are the focus of this paper, Bizri (2017) argues the manifestation of social capital of refugees through a high level of responsibility and commitment due to feelings of being unable to return back to their home countries. Conversely, it is worth noting the views of House (1984) about ‘the community of the poor’ in his investigation of informal economic sectors, where a lack of motivation and economic

activity with growth potential amongst refugees is linked to subjects' views that their situation is a temporary phase. Rogerson (1996) adds to this analysis that 'survivalist enterprises' are set up by those unable to secure enough income or work in economic sectors they choose (Lever and Milbourne, 2014); while such enterprises can help refugees to become less poor (Rogerson, 1996) they are unlikely to lift them out of poverty (Grosh and Somolokae, 1996). In a similar vein, Tellegen (1997) highlights the distinction between 'necessity-driven' and 'opportunity-driven' entrepreneurs based on different motivations for business start-up, where the former are mainly driven by the motivation to fulfil basic daily-life needs. Such views become relevant to refugees particularly considering the traumatic life-changing circumstances they go through, making it important to consider the interactional relationship between the different internal and external elements if we are to understand EI.

Earlier work on EI has given much attention to the 'character of the entrepreneur' (Hall and du Gay, 1996: 181), but still does not consider it as 'the sole or exclusive model for forms of work based identification' (Hall and Du Gay, 1996: 278). Later work has given more attention to entrepreneur 'communities of practice' and the contexts where entrepreneurs operate; e.g. Cohen and Musson (2000), Warren (2004) and Watson (2008), with the former viewing identities as 'pluralistic accomplishments appropriated and used by people in a variety of ways depending on their position, circumstances and the economic, cultural and political worlds in which they live' (p.46). Many of the current EI studies also focus on the narrative and discursive practices in identity formation (Down, 2006; Watson, 2009). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Watson (2008) stress the significant role of language and discursive processes in identity formation, and how these are constructed by entrepreneurs to present their credibility in order to access business and market opportunities (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). Warren (2004) agrees with this and argues that identities are constructed within an entrepreneurial discourse, where entrepreneurs 'explore productive possibilities in particular generations and enactments of enterprising selfhood' (Fenwick, 2002: 718).

Zahra and Wright (2011) highlight the lack of research investigating the micro-foundations of entrepreneurship. These include the thought processes, positions, values and motivations of entrepreneurs that impact on macro structures and social economic activities (Abell et al., 2008) that are essential for understanding the role of agency in entrepreneurship

(Sarasvathy, 2008). These insights add more value to adopting a social lens in this research, as they allow for better understanding of the micro-foundations of refugee activity, as well as the macro structures in which they operate. Such understanding supports building relevant theory, and also contributes to policy by understanding how to motivate and guide entrepreneurs by understanding and helping them overcome challenges imposed by context (Zahra and Wright, 2011).

Syrian refugees in Jordan

As the Syrian crisis entered its 7th year, Syrian refugees were being displaced at numbers estimated to be as high as 13,000,000 inside and 4,957,907 outside Syria (UNHCR, 2017b). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2017b) defines a refugee as a person who:

'...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'.

Being one of the five neighbouring Syrian refugee host countries, Jordan currently has 656,170 Syrian refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in addition to 65,000 living in remote areas near the northern-east border with Syria. According to the UNICEF Syria Crisis Situation Report (UNHCR, February, 2017b), these include around 35% male and 65% female and child refugees.

About 78% of these refugees live in host communities of Jordan, while the remaining 22% are distributed across major camps in the country including Za'atari camp (hosting 79,737); Azraq camp (hosting 53,833); King Abdullah Park (hosting 332); and the Emirati-Jordanian Camp (hosting 7,438). Refugees in Jordan receive various forms of aid from national and international aid agencies, including, for example, the United Nations (UN), Red Cross, International Rescue Company (IRC), Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD) and the Japan Emergency NGO (JEN). The aid provided includes water, sanitation and hygiene, child protection, education, life skills for youth, social policy and basic needs, nutrition and health. However, despite various forms of aid, Syrian refugees

face many problems and obstacles to entrepreneurship in Jordan, and it is to these issues that we turn next.

Research Findings

This section brings forward the four main themes that emerged from interviews with refugees and refugee aid agencies.

Obstacles to refugee entrepreneurship in Jordan

Three main obstacles to engaging in entrepreneurial activity are highlighted in our research: legal, financial and social. Each of these obstacles had similar significance according to refugees. The major legal obstacle is the absence of supportive laws and regulations permitting refugees from taking paid employment or starting up their own businesses outside the camps where they live. According to participants, such permits are heavily restricted and almost impossible to obtain for the vast majority of refugees. As interviewees noted:

R: *“There are some work permits issued, but with many restrictions. Without these permits, any Syrian caught working outside camps will have his business closed, or will be returned to the camps”.*

AA: *“They don’t have the same rights as citizens; they have refugees’ documents, and cannot obtain a work permit, or let's say it is very hard for them to obtain a work permit”*

As a consequence of these legal obstacles, many refugees have no alternative but to work for exploitative business owners, and many thus complain of being underpaid and manipulated:

R: *“As a refugee, I have to accept whatever small amount of money the business owner is offering me, because there is no alternative. However, by doing that I know that I am harming citizens by feeding the greed of the employer to hire ‘cheaper’ human resources”.*

AA: *“You can see opportunistic behaviour by some business owners in hiring Syrians, who are well skilled, for very low wages”.*

Many live a day-to-day existence:

R: *“Outside camps we live day by day. We work one day and stop for 10, we are at the risk of being caught any time, and would agree to do anything, in bakeries, restaurants, shops... even children they are sacrificing their education to help their brothers, sisters and parents, why would a child given up his education, unless he sees the suffering of his parents?”*.

Consequently, many refugees are in a poor financial situation, and, to complicate matters further, many are unable to access financial aid dedicated to their support in Jordan:

R: *“They think we are benefitting from the UNHCR, but 90% of us are not receiving aids! and the money we receive doesn’t cover a house rent!”*.

AA: *“Despite having a monthly allowance, more than half of them do not receive those allowances, and many applications are refused, adding to their frustration. Even those receiving support don’t get enough”*

Overall, the refugee community suffers from a distinct lack of social cohesion and refugees are forced to survive as individuals rather than as a community.

Syrian refugees are often perceived as a threat to the employment opportunities of Jordanian citizens because of their high level skills in many areas, which renders them capable of producing products that might be of better quality than those produced by local people. It is also widely claimed that Syrians accept work for less pay than the local population for working the same job. This increases social tension, and there is a wider perception that the presence of refugees creates price increases in society more generally as suppliers cannot meet the increasing demand for some products. As noted in interviews:

R: *“We are perceived as competitors to citizens, and whenever we are offered a chance to work they feel angry about it despite the fact that we are working for third the amount of money a citizen would be paid. We are blamed for the increase in prices here”*.

AA: *“In general, Syrians have more craft skills than Jordanians and that is one reason why citizens view them as competitors to their employment”*

Entrepreneurial values and skills

Among interviewees and focus group participants, there was a general consensus that Syrian refugees in Jordan have a variety of entrepreneurial skills that could support them in self-employment or business start-ups. These skills are mainly related to crafts such as sewing, cooking and baking, but also to more significant skills related to plumbing, sanitation and electricity. The following quotes illustrate these points well:

R: *“Syrians are well known for the skills they have, and maybe the nature of life we lived in Syria has taught us to be responsible and self-sufficient, and for that we have grown to learn many skills that help us run businesses and generate income”.*

AA: *“Refugees have many skills. I have seen these skills demonstrated inside and outside camps at very good standards. Mainly baking skills, carpentry, car mechanics, electricity, and plumbing and sanitation”.*

However, the lack of opportunity to practice entrepreneurship in Jordan means that many refugees justify their actions, whether in paid or self-employment, by talking about survival values linked to their children and families and, to a lesser extent, their dignity and self-respect.

R: *“As a refugee, I have no choice but to accept any income generating activity, no matter how little, to support my family”.*

R: *“I work in making hand-made crafts, which is a very rare craft to find here in Jordan. I make crafts and sell them through personal networks to support my family”.*

When Syrian refugees engage in entrepreneurial activities, often this is because this is the only option available to them.

Entrepreneurial activities of Syrian refugees in Jordan

Engagement in entrepreneurial activity by Syrian refugees in Jordan is limited to specific opportunities in most instances, and these are often illegal. Many refugees live a peripheral existence outside the camps on the fringes of society, knowing that they could be apprehended at any time and sent back to a camp. As noted above, outside-camps, refugees

often make the most of craft based skills, while others make the most of any available opportunity. For example, some refugees sing songs at parties or sell drinks in the street, as an interviewee stated:

R: *“My son is also a singer and sings in parties whenever a chance arises. I used to sell tamarind juice with the traditional juice jug and traditional costume that I had, but the security officers took away my traditional jug because I don’t have a permit”.*

Sometimes refugees invest in a business only to see it fail because of the dangers posed to those that gave them the opportunity in the first place, with support often being withdrawn at short notice:

R: *“My friend rented a very small place in a very poor neighbourhood for 70 JDs/month, this was the best he could afford. He bought baking equipment for 3000 JDs from his savings, and the place started working well, but after two months he was forced by the owner of the shop to evacuate”.*

Our material also shows that refugees develop new patterns of entrepreneurial behaviour in illegal – or at least hidden – forms of self-employment in order to supplement the meager income that can be derived from paid employment. In such cases, it is often impossible to cover all life expenses and survive outside a camp without turning to illegal income sources:

R: *“We are forced to follow twisted illegal paths to feed our families”.*

AA: *“They grab any opportunity to work illegally without a work permit. If they get caught, they return them back to the camp”.*

Even with appropriate skills and/or qualifications, it was often impossible for refugees to get the required permit to work legally:

AA: *“They can apply for a work permit if they have the qualifications for that job, but this requires particular conditions and is not easy to obtain, therefore, most of them seek work in an illegal way”.*

Some refugees build illegal alliances and partnerships in Jordan to put themselves in a better position. One refugee had bought a car to transport students round, as his wife explained:

R: *“My husband bought a car with his own money - which by the way is not registered under his name as he can’t own a car as a Syrian - and uses it to transport students for some money, but we all know if he is caught the car will be scrapped and he will be sent back to camp”.*

Other partnerships are complex and they are sometimes based on family ties or marriage with a Jordanian citizen, as in the following case of Syrian starting a hairdressing business through family connections:

R: *“I have a hair dressers place which I have started with my own savings, however, it’s not registered under my name... My daughter is married to a Jordanian, so it’s registered under her name as she’s got Jordanian citizenship. The shop is working well, but if someone complains about me, then they will grab me and take me back to the camp because I don’t have a work permit and I’m not allowed to work!”*

A destabilized habitus?

The barriers and obstacles Syrian refugees face in Jordan often result in feelings of frustration and anger at the lack of opportunity. An interviewee summed up the feelings of despair many refugees feel about this lack of opportunity and of not knowing what the future holds in the following way:

R: *I’ve been here 4 years, and I feel I’m only moving backwards.*

Arguably, this situation is characterized by the emergence of a ‘destabilized [refugee] habitus’ (Bourdieu, 2000). Indeed, as result of the unstable situation they find themselves in, many refugees simply view their time in camps as a transitional phase, as an aid worker pointed out:

AA: *“The simplest way to describe refugees’ lives after years of working with them is to say it’s an unstable life or a transitory stage. They feel it’s a temporary phase that they are going through at the moment.”*

Others, however, have come to a similar if more profound conclusion that they must leave Jordan at all costs to have the chance of a better life:

R: To put it simply, our problem in Jordan will never be solved. Our only solution is in immigration. I have relatives in Germany who are living a very good life with honour and full rights, and they have peace of mind that in time they will get citizenship that will allow, if not them, their children the right to live a decent life.

While it is to be hoped that the situation Syrians find themselves in is a transitional phase, nothing is certain. If things stay the same indefinitely, this will create many more problems for refugees, as an aid worker also confirmed:

AA: “Definitely if it stays as it is it will be very unsuitable on the long run. This applies to refugees inside and outside camps”.

We elaborate on these findings below in relation to our research question by drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Discussion

Our research findings highlight numerous legal, economic and social obstacles faced by Syrian refugees in Jordan. In this context, refugees encounter a *field* governed by new social, economic and legal constraints, where the social, economic, cultural and symbolic forms of capital that allowed them to entrust their dispositional practice in Syria are no longer relevant. As soon as Syrians arrive in Jordan, their lack of social, cultural and symbolic capital comes into play, as they find themselves in a contradictory and destabilizing social context. The sense of being in the ‘right place’ at the right time is no longer evident and refugees thus find themselves in a difficult and awkward situation within which they are forced to watch themselves more closely than they had to previously (Bourdieu, 2000).

Given the legal restrictions they face and the meager income they generate from paid employment (see Lever and Milbourne, 2014), **it is not surprising to notice their motivation towards entrepreneurial activities, which goes in line with the findings from Bizri (2017).** It is also not surprising to witness the emergence of illegal forms of entrepreneurship amongst this group of refugees; **this, however, contradicts the findings from Bizri (2017) who found that refugees are motivated towards sustainable entrepreneurial activities in order to enhance their ‘feelings of belongingness and chances of success’ (p. 861).** Furthermore, in attempting to make themselves more employable to Jordanian businesses by taking low paid work in

the informal economy, refugees not only practice a form of self-exploitation (Lever and Milbourne, 2017), they also open the door to illegal forms of ‘survivalist’ (Rogerson, 1996) and ‘necessity- driven’ entrepreneurship (Tellegen, 1997). As Lee and Shaw (2016) confirm, entrepreneurs operating in deprived contexts often prioritize an embodied disposition based on survivability, when successful entrepreneurship in a context characterized by economic growth actually depends on access to a mix of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital.

As we have seen, these experiences are reflected in attempts to grab the opportunity to open a shop without a license – at the risk of losing it at any time – in baking from home, in selling juice, for example, or in many other income-generating activities that ‘work for now’, but which also quickly lead to the realization that these are non-sustainable forms of income. While illegal forms of entrepreneurship are necessary for survival in this context, it is clear that such activity can also lead to feelings of frustration and anger, and therefore, to social harm (Machan, 1999) – a situation Wood (2003) describes as ‘Faustian bargain.’

At this juncture, we can clearly see how illegal entrepreneurship amongst Syrian refugees in Jordan arises from their dispositional practice and situated subjectivity (Bottero, 2010; Haynie et al., 2010). Their EI is thus reflected, in Bourdieusian terms, through a ‘cleft habitus’ destabilized and torn by internal division and contradiction (Bourdieu, 2000; Bourdieu, 1999; Ingram and Abrahams, 2015). This analysis clearly illustrates that in certain contexts refugees with entrepreneurial ambitions have to accept chance for their own purposes as and when the need and opportunity arises, not least because they are unable to plan for the future in the normal way (see Bourdieu et al., 1963). Indeed, our findings also indicate, in line with notions of a ‘community of the poor’ (House, 1984), that Syrian refugees view their time in Jordan in a transitory phase. However, while they attempt to circumvent the harsh social conditions they encounter by setting up ‘survivalist enterprises’ (Rogerson, 1996), Chavez’s (1991) work on Mexican nationals in the United States illustrates that the final stage of incorporation in a new country is rarely achieved, with migrants often remaining marginal members of society. Syrian refugees in Jordan find themselves in a similar situation, trapped in precarity (Lewis et al., 2014) and illegal forms of self-employment, with no indication of when things will change for the better. In sum, illegal entrepreneurship amongst Syrian refugees in Jordan arises from the objective

contradictions they encounter, conditions which hold them tightly in their grasp (Bourdieu, 1999).

Conclusions

This paper set out to explore the role that context plays in supporting and/or hindering the entrepreneurial activities and identity of Syrian refugees in Jordan. The paper demonstrates that the EI of Syrian refugees in Jordan is based on a context specific disposition and a destabilized *habitus* that emerges in line with a complex set of social factors that influence perceptions of refugees as well as their ability to engage in entrepreneurship. Syrian refugees present themselves in Jordan with a number of entrepreneurial skills that enable them to demonstrate their usefulness, yet their attempts to achieve recognition (symbolic capital) for their attributes and skills (cultural capital) are hindered by various legal and financial obstacles, and by a lack of social cohesion (social capital) within the refugee community itself. Consequently, a new form of EI is emerging amongst Syrian refugees based on embodied survivalist dispositions and a destabilized *habitus*.

Arguably, our research adds value to theoretical debates about EI by illustrating the importance of context in all accounts of entrepreneurial action. It demonstrates how, for example, alongside entrepreneurial skills, financial, legal and social issues also act as push and pull factors for refugee engagement in entrepreneurial activity. More research is needed to investigate the nature of the illegal refugee activities brought about in this type of situation. The arrival of refugees also creates challenges for countries such as Jordan through the growth of informal economic activity within their borders. More research is also required to investigate the role of aid agencies in enabling and/or constraining refugee livelihoods inside or outside camps, particularly when they are operating under national legal frameworks. Furthermore, as the focus of this research is mainly on refugees outside camps, it would be interesting to conduct studies inside refugee camps. Longitudinal studies could also shed more light on how social relationships develop, and how the identity and position of refugees changes (if at all) over time, as well as what the consequences of this situation may turn out to be. From a practical perspective, this research can develop the understanding of aid agencies and policy makers about ways to reduce the frustration of refugee communities and supports their motivation for entrepreneurial activities by helping them overcome the contextual challenges.

Acknowledgement: The authors would like to acknowledge the efforts of the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD) for their support in organising interviews and data collection, with special thanks to Mr Qais Tarawneh and his team.

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