ABSTRACT

This paper explores the drivers of career transitions into sustainable entrepreneurship with the aim of furthering our understanding of the individual-level aspects of this phenomenon. Using a multiple case studies approach, insights are provided into the interconnectedness of individual identity and social change drivers. Hence, sustainable entrepreneurship emerges as a space for the enactment of authenticity in one’s career which, regardless of intentionality, results in contributing to social change activities. We find that individualistic identity-related reasons for breaking free (e.g. from authenticity constraints) may be vital antecedents to social outcomes (e.g. breaking up unsustainable practices).

INTRODUCTION

It has been stated that a well-established motivation for entrepreneurs relates to the opportunity for autonomy from an established order (see Baker & Pollock, 2007). In their “entrepreneuring as emancipation” view Rindova et al. (2009) have proposed that entrepreneurship is a vehicle for social change involving individuals, or groups of individuals, in a process of “breaking free” from and “breaking up” perceived constraints in their worlds. As a consequence of individuals’ overcoming constraints that have impinged upon their ability to act in accordance with something valued, entrepreneurship may lead to social change (Rindova et al, 2009). In line with this logic there is an opportunity for sustainable entrepreneurship research to move beyond systems-level, market-failure based explanations for its occurrence (e.g. Cohen & Winn, 2007; Dean & McMullen, 2007) towards emphasizing individual-level drivers (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2010). Indeed, our paper endeavours to generate novel insights into individual-level phenomena driving sustainable entrepreneurship and thus, explores how individuals who “break free” may then “break up” in the context of sustainable entrepreneurship (Rindova et al. 2009). We argue that to shed light on sustainable entrepreneurship drivers, the first step should be an exploration of the types of constraints individuals emphasise. In this paper, we seek to expand the deployment of identity concepts to entrepreneurship. By doing so, we hope to understand if identity phenomena, other than those related to entrepreneurial identities, are implicated in triggering the “breaking free” from constraints that Rindova and colleagues (2009) emphasised as pivotal to individuals’ engagement with entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship scholars have begun to explore the significance of identity in explaining entrepreneurial activity (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Cardon et al. 2009; Farmer et al, 2009). However, this work only explores identities salient to the core task of entrepreneurship, for example founder, inventor, or developer roles (Cardon et al. 2009). Whilst the individual may indeed aspire to develop an entrepreneurial identity (Farmer et al, 2009), focusing on this alone may result in the importance of other individual identity phenomena being largely overlooked. In this paper, we seek to expand the deployment of identity concepts to entrepreneurship. By doing so, we hope to understand if identity phenomena, other than those related to entrepreneurial identities, are implicated in triggering the “breaking free” from constraints that Rindova and colleagues (2009) emphasised as pivotal to individuals’ engagement with entrepreneurship.

Through exploring our empirical data gathered from individuals who have recently launched sustainability-driven ventures, we offer that such transitions can be triggered by a desire to achieve an expression of authenticity in one’s career. This finding extends existing work on identity and entrepreneurship by highlighting how identity deficits (Pratt, 2000), particularly in relation to authenticity, can be triggers for entrepreneurial activity. By unpacking the role of “authenticity”
(Trilling, 1972; Taylor, 1991) in initiating career transitions into sustainable entrepreneurship, we are able to offer an insight into the role of this identity-related phenomenon in the process of “breaking up” constraints for society. Regardless of any social change intention, deeply individualistic reasons for entering entrepreneurship (e.g. overcoming authenticity constraints) can lead to deeply social outcomes (e.g. creation of sustainability practices).

In what follows, we outline the literature on career transitions and entrepreneurship, individual identity and the concept of authenticity. This provides an explanation of the key concepts employed to evaluate the significance of the paper’s findings. We then present a series of themes from the data analysis of the participants’ accounts. Following this with a discussion section, we pull together the findings to illustrate the role of individual identity as a trigger of sustainable entrepreneurship and, potentially as a driver of social change. Finally, we conclude by elaborating how our findings offer a contribution.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Careers Transitions and Entrepreneurship
As stated above, our paper explores individuals’ career transitions into sustainable entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship can be linked to career dynamics due to the fact that an individual often leaves one organization to establish their own (Dobrev & Barnett, 2005). Whilst Rindova et al. (2009) have not explicitly connecting “breaking free” to the concept of career transitions, this can be implied as an individual’s efforts to break free from their personal circumstance through their work (entrepreneurship) would likely involve a new career direction. It is for these reasons that we believe it is useful to explore entrepreneurship as a career transition.

Building on Arthur et al. (1989), Greenhaus and colleagues propose that the career is: “the pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of a person’s life” (2000:9). This definition accommodates out-of-kilter transitions, such as shifting organizations, changing occupations, and entrepreneurial activity. Indeed, the “boundaryless career” concept has been introduced to capture a shift from traditional careers, as continuous and unfolding in one setting, to those that are discontinuous and moving across the boundaries of separate employers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Whilst calls have been made for research to understand why individuals ‘opt-out’ of organizations to establish their own ventures (Sullivan et al. 2007), there still remains a dearth of research on career transitions in the field of entrepreneurship (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010).

Career transitions can be understood as phases bridging stable and less stable zones which emerge in light of events that change conceptions about oneself and the world (Chudzikowski et al. 2009: 825-6). Within this conceptualization is the idea that career transitions are inherently connected to shifts in people’s self concepts (i.e. individual identities). Further to this, Baker & Aldrich (1996) posit that boundaryless careers allow one the freedom to escape from an old identity, thus indicating the identity enhancing potential of transitions. Within the small body of empirical research on identity in career transitions, it has been demonstrated that as people enter new roles, a process of identity negotiation commences (i.e. identity work) (Goffman, 1959; Ibarra, 1999). Hence, career transitions provide scope for people to reconstruct, and renegotiate, private and public views of the self (Ibarra, 1999: 766). Meaning is still found in work contexts (Dutton et al. 2010) but rather than individuals being defined by an extant role, the process is now one of self-definition built up from individual efforts to form positive careers projects and expectations (Touraine, 2007).

In light of the growing literature on identity phenomena during career transitions, we propose that there is scope to assess the role of individual identity not simply during career transitions but in triggering career transitions. Our paper considers whether entrepreneurship is pursued as a route to temper any instability and/or identity struggles arising from changing conceptions about oneself and the world (Chudzikowski et al. 2009). Whilst some work contexts may lead to adherence to “off the peg” professional roles (Gergen, 1991; Costas & Fleming, 2009), entrepreneurship can provide scope for some integration of one’s identities (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009a). Hence, a significance element of Rindova’s breaking free may relate to efforts to construct and renegotiate public and private views of the self (Ibarra, 1999; Goffman, 1959). This may be an identity work strategy (see below) conducted to reduce the negative psychological impacts of an incongruent career life whereby deeply held values have not been fully engaged (Ryan & Deci, 2001 in Shepherd & Haynie, 2009a: 322).
Individual Identity

The field of organizational studies distinguishes between research on organizational identity (e.g. Albert & Whetten, 1985) and research on individual identity in workplace contexts (e.g. Collinson, 2003; Kuhn, 2006). Further distinction arises between researchers who regard identity as stable and fixed and those who see identity as fluid and malleable. However, as Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010) note consensus generally tends towards the idea that individuals (Mead, 1934) and organizations (Pratt & Foreman, 2000) have multiple identities and that different identities become more or less salient according to contextual circumstances (Kreiner et al. 2006). As alluded to above, where identities might have been cemented through one’s occupation or employer, for example, (Gergen, 1991; Taylor, 1991) the individual now faces complex identity choices. Thus, careers are greatly implicated in a process of self-invention and even re-invention (Albert et al, 2000).

In this paper we align our work with constructionist perspectives of individual identity. This approach provides an understanding of identity as being shaped by a continuous process of justification to the self and others, which lends itself to idea of identity adaptation (Kuhn, 2006: 1340). In brief, individual identity is understood as “a dynamic, multilayer set of meaningful elements deployed to orientated and position one’s being in the world” (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001: 64). This invokes the concept of individual identity as constructed, multiplicitious, and evolving rather than fixed, coherent and stable (Mead, 1934; Kreiner et al., 2006).

Emerging from this constructionist ontological position is a body of research that scrutinises the identity construction process: identity work. Identity work is succinctly stated as that which “concentrates on actors’ efforts to create a coherent sense of self in response to the multiple and perhaps conflicting scripts, roles and subject positions encountered in both work and non-work activity” (Kuhn, 2006:1341). Identity work involves individuals forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, rather than viewing identity construction as a fairly straightforward process of role adoption, identity work offers that it is an interactive and problematic process (Pratt et al. 2006: 237). Research on identity work has given attention to individuals struggling with identity in work contexts for example: during adaptation to career transitions (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010); where multiple identities conflict with one another (Kreiner, et al. 2006); in occupying stigmatized work roles (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999); and where work-identity integrity is violated (Pratt et al. 2006). Interestingly, rather than subjugating elements of one’s identity to achieve work-identity fit, Pratt et al. (2006) found that professionals are active in customizing their work identity to achieve their own internal sense of integrity.

Whilst identity issues in entrepreneurship are gaining ground with papers touching on identity management (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009a; 2009b) and entrepreneurial role identity (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Cardon et al. 2009; Farmer et al. 2009), work is fairly nascent. Hoang & Gimeno (2010) presented an important piece of work on transitions to entrepreneurship but they focus on identification with the founder role. They argue that the extent of one’s orientation to the founder role, role centrality, is likely to be a significant element of the motivational force driving individuals to entrepreneurship. However, we hope to further elaborate the importance identity as a motivational force by looking at identity phenomena other than those role identities salient to the core task of entrepreneurship. While Cardon and colleagues’ (2009) work extends role identities to encompass founder, inventor or developer there is still little consideration of alternative identity phenomena. In sum, we argue that identity in entrepreneurship research should not be limited to understanding the extent to which individuals identify with roles that are central to the core task of entrepreneurship (e.g. founder, inventor or developer roles) (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Cardon et al. 2009). Instead, we believe there is value in researching if transitions into sustainable entrepreneurship are part of identity work process and if so, what the implications of this might be.

Dutton et al. (2010: 281) suggested potential for research to explore the antecedents of identity construction, especially in respect of how context and “jolts” trigger identity work in careers. As will be evident below, our analysis and findings suggest that a major aspect of identity work leading to career transitions in the context of sustainable entrepreneurship is authenticity. Ibarra’s study (1999) showed the importance of portraying public identities that are congruent with the private sense of self. Where this is not achieved, an individual was spurned on to search for way to position themselves which would feel more authentic (see below), or true-to-self (Ibarra, 1999). In Ibarra’s study context, the individual is able to maintain an authentic identity through a process of experimentation and
adaptation within the employing organization. However, other authors have demonstrated that where one’s ability to construct a coherent sense of self at work is inhibited, there exists the possibility that a career can be problematic for one’s identity (Pratt, 2000; Costas & Fleming, 2009). In this paper, we explore that a “jolt” triggering identity work and transitions into sustainable entrepreneurship can be the realization of an authenticity constraint in one’s career. As authenticity is a complex concept it is addressed below.

**Authenticity**

Whilst the concept of authenticity emerged from our inductive data analysis, for clarification purposes we account for the concept prior to our discussion of the data. Authenticity has its roots in enlightenment philosophy, for example in the work of Rousseau, Kant and Herder. Rousseau relates authenticity to morality in the sense of pursuing the inbuilt voice of nature found within us (Taylor, 1991:27). In slight contrast, Herder asserted that authenticity is more concerned with the idea that human beings have their own originality (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Together these ideas bring an understanding of morality as differentiated across human beings due to the very uniqueness of humans’ inner voices (Taylor, 1991). With the taken-for-granted social categories upon which identities used to be based now largely absent, self-fulfilment may be achieved through the search for a ‘true self’ largely through inward activity (Taylor, 1991).

There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me (Taylor, 1991:28-9).

Thus the moral ideal of authenticity, Taylor argues, is about being in touch with one’s originality and is concerned with realizing one’s potential through the articulation of this originality. It is this basic principle that has forged a modern understanding of authenticity as inherently individualistic “doing your own thing” or as freedom of action (Tedeschi, 1986; Taylor, 1991; Costas & Fleming, 2009). It is this version of authenticity witnessed in Sullivan et al.’s (2007) brief description of a man who left a sales job to launch a cookery school and a kitchenware retailer. These authors state his entrepreneurial efforts are driven by his authenticity as he sought to be true to his passion for cooking (Sullivan et al. 2007). However, authenticity as a career driver should not be limited to the desire to express something you enjoy, it relates to the expression of integrity: “an authentic person is one who takes responsibility for freely chosen actions that represent some internal standard – of self, potentials or principles” (Tedeschi, 1986:7). It is about being sincere, honest and genuine rather than fake, insincere and untruthful (Trilling, 1972).

Building on the notion of authenticity, an authenticity-driven career may be understood as the willingness to take initiative and responsibility for one’s own career and to achieve congruence between past and future as well as between the public and private self (Svejenova, 2005:951). Svejenova (2005) details that authenticity work is concerned with the efforts required to overcome factors that constrain an individual’s expression of authenticity. This links to Hochschild’s (1983) work that suggested some organizational careers require a “jewel of integrity” be reserved for one’s private life: this jewel is not able to be integrated into one’s career without “authenticity work” (Svejenova, 2005). As discussed in the individual identity section above, some individuals may prefer to enact this jewel to achieve identity integrity in their professional identity (Pratt et al. 2006). We see this as an opportunity for our research to explore how and if entrepreneurship might be considered an appropriate context for achieving the expression of authenticity as an inner jewel, and what the implications of this activity might be for “breaking up” as a social change objectives (Rindova et al. 2009).

**Research Questions**

Studying the context of career transitions is interesting given that (1) individual identity may be a trigger of the instability that Chudzikowski et al. (2009) state leads to transitions and (2) transitions provide scope for the reconstruction/ renegotiation of public and private views of self (Ibarra, 1999). Furthermore, research on identity issues in entrepreneurship need to go beyond focusing on development of an entrepreneurial identity as a founder, inventor or developer roles (see Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Cardon et al. 2009). Finally, we believe our research context of sustainable entrepreneurship offers an opportunity to probe the breaking free/ breaking up link (Rindova et al. 2009). To summarise the intentions of the paper we seek to unpack the role played by individual
identity in the establishment of sustainable entrepreneurship ventures by addressing two research questions:

1) Which aspects of individual identity influence a decision to engage in sustainability-driven entrepreneurship?
2) How might individual identity interact with entrepreneurship as a driver of social change?

The paper continues by briefly elaborating our methodology before presenting and discussing the data taken from the case studies.

**METHODOLOGY**

Given the lack of any comprehensive entrepreneurship theory (Venkataraman, 1997), proximity to the phenomenon of interest is a way to enrich the field of entrepreneurship (Zahra, 2007). Thus, rather than using deductive reasoning to formulate hypotheses, our explicit aim was to develop insights from proximity to the entrepreneurs behind sustainability-driven ventures. Indeed, our realisation of the importance of identity phenomena, particularly authenticity, to sustainability-driven entrepreneurship emerged inductively through our data collection and analysis process. For us, this confirms the appropriateness of qualitative research for revealing substantive issues that have rarely been addressed in entrepreneurship (Gartner & Birley, 2002).

Our paper employs a multiple case studies approach which is suitable for “how and why” questions and for research that involves observations over time (Yin, 1994). Multiple case studies may be used to build evidence that supports emerging theory through analytical, not statistical, generalization: evidence is accumulated through comparing cases where similar aspects exist (Yin, 1994). To identify appropriate participants we conducted searches using Google and searched profiles in online networks for start-up businesses. Whilst initial data was gathered from 16 participants, to avoid death by data asphyxiation (Pettigrew, 1990) we selected nine case studies. These nine cases were deemed most likely to enable theory-building as they demonstrated the “transparently observable process of interest” (Eisenhardt, 1989). In other words, they had made a recent (post-2004) career transition into sustainable entrepreneurship, they were based in, and operated in, the UK and openly used terms such as “sustainable”, “green” or “ethical” to describe their businesses. According to theoretical sampling, such “extreme” cases enable easier observation of the phenomenon and facilitate pattern recognition (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As the paper seeks to portray the details of the rich and complex setting, a few cases are deemed adequate (Langley, 1999). These nine cases where developed by a further round of interviews with the founders, interviews with stakeholders, and using documents (e.g. blogs, media coverage). However, quotes from other initial interviewees are used where appropriate.

Our analysis follows an iterative “back and forth” approach between data and existing theories (Van Maanen et al. 2007). This method of comparison (Eisenhardt, 1989) permits inductive theory building as evidence is accumulated overtime to achieve theoretical replication (Yin, 1994). In line with Charmaz’s (2006) explanation of the social constructionist approach to theorizing reality is not considered as singular and concrete, thus insights into what the entrepreneurs believe is real for them were sought. Various themes emerged from the analysis but for the purposes of this paper only those relating to the entrepreneurs’ motivations for career transitions, identity considerations and social change ambitions are detailed. The discussion presented below seeks to demonstrate a sense of being there, which is critical to the authenticity requirement highlighted by Golden & Locke (1993).

**FINDINGS**

During the initial interviews all research participants provided accounts of their education and work histories. Within these narrated accounts, the participants elaborated various thoughts and events which they considered important antecedents to their decision to establish a new venture. Whilst each individual’s story is rich with personal features and biographical details, considerable similarities surfaced. Many had left well-paid, professional careers as for example, lawyers, electronic engineers, designers, regeneration officers, IT trainers, or media professionals. We found this intriguing and sought to evaluate why these similarities existed. Two categories emerged from our data analysis; namely “personal career drivers” and “societal change drivers”. Each of these categories encompasses two themes which are discussed in turn below.
Personal Career Drivers

Two principal personal career drivers appear to have spurred on the participants to change their worlds and begin new careers as founders of sustainability-driven ventures: “identity deficits” and “work freedom”.

A. Identity Deficits

Embedded in the participants’ accounts are various clues supporting a view that entrepreneurship is pursued to overcome previous, or anticipated, constraints that relate to the expression of personal values (authenticity) in their work. Firstly, consider Jack’s comments:

“We were a bit disillusioned with the concept of design as it was, for me personally, it was the idea that it was just making landfill. For Tara it was that she wanted to have a bit of meaning in the designs she was doing and it was similar reasons for Tim. (Jack, Olive Design)”

During our conversations Jack made reference to his interest in environmental issues, for example he discussed the positive impact of Al Gore’s campaigning and talked about his concerns regarding global carbon emissions. Jack foresaw that employment as a designer would lead to the production of goods which all too quickly end up as “landfill”. In an effort to avoid environmentally problematic design work, Jack decided to launch Olive. For Jack, a significant driver for entrepreneurship was the desire to reduce any future identity conflicts emerging from clashes between environmentally unsustainable practices and the duties of a designer. For other participants solace is sought in entrepreneurship due to actual negative experiences in their prior roles. In other words, we noted that many participants pointed to their previous career experiences as having specifically constrained their ability to express something of value to them. For example:

“Previously I was just generating electronic waste basically. I was creating more printed circuit boards and that was what I was doing. I couldn’t use greener alternatives because the policies of the company were not under my control, I just had to design the best I could with the things I had and I got so frustrated... I just thought I can’t make any progress, environmentally being an electronic engineer. (Helen, Oak Consult)”

Helen and her husband Chris give significant consideration to reducing their environmental impacts in their private lives. However, Helen’s work for an electronic engineering company had brought about a fracture between her private self and her public self at work; her colleagues had dismissed her environmental concerns and did not encourage establishing any environmental initiatives beyond regulation. Such a lack of congruence between public and private selves (Goffman, 1959) was typical amongst the participants. Amy’s comments echo Helen’s frustration with the constraints of prior careers:

“I mean particularly for Simon, the company that he was working for things didn’t sit right with him, the way that they ran their business. You know, he was very unhappy and the way that they treated their customers didn’t feel right and he was just like “I don’t want to be a part of this”... (Amy, Cedar E-Media)”

Amy recounted that both of them felt increasing unable to match their personal values with the demands of their workplaces and that this realization was a major antecedent to starting Cedar. Indeed, “not wanting to be a part of this” is indicative of many of the participants’ sentiment towards their old positions. That said, not everyone shared this negative view of their prior career. Peter, states:

“I really loved corporate life actually, so ironically it wasn’t that I was going away from something that I didn’t enjoy, but I just felt that in life we have to try and experience as much as we can and I wanted a complete change! (Peter, Yew Connect)”

Although Peter enjoyed his employment he had significant reservations. He states that before leaving his job he was thinking: “I know exactly what my life is going to look like over the next 5, 10, 20 years and I know the kind of person I’m going to be at 50 and everything about that”. Peter was determined to avoid a predictable life course as he felt he knew exactly who he would become and this vision was not wholly satisfactory. As Pratt (2000) states there is reciprocity between identity and motivation. Where someone feels a deficit between their current self and their ideal self (Markus & Nurius, 1986),
motivational drive should fuel action to close the gap (Pratt, 2000). The participants’ accounts enlightened us to the idea that one’s choice to become a sustainable entrepreneur is entangled with the recognition of a current identity deficit (e.g. Helen, Amy) or an anticipated unappealing future self (e.g. Jack, Peter). Thus, career transitions to entrepreneurship are, in part, related to an individual’s desires to take responsibility for their careers in a way which facilitates a more coherent self-narrative in one’s life-career (Collinson, 2003; Kuhn, 2006). This holds resonance with the insights gathered regardless of whether identity issues were associated with their current position, or with an anticipated future self.

To sum up, we found that the majority of the participants cited “identity deficits” (Pratt, 2000) as central to their career move to entrepreneurship. During the interviews participants had made frequent reference to their belief that either their prior careers had constrained, or their future career was likely to constrain, their ability to enact their internally derived values, their authenticity (Taylor, 1991). The participants chose entrepreneurship as a means to escape from identity struggles between their environmental/social justice values and their professional roles/careers.

**Proposition 1:** Transitions into sustainability-driven entrepreneurship are triggered by current, or anticipated, authenticity related identity deficits.

B. Work Freedom

The theme “work freedom” captures another significant personal career driver for sustainable entrepreneurs. When asked about the benefits of entrepreneurship, Peter made a comparison between working for an organization and working for yourself:

> When you establish an organization you can literally do whatever you want so the freedom is very important. I mean there are other constraints, like you know lack of funds and so on but basically you it’s up to you, and your colleagues... You can do things incredibly faster than large organizations and, basically, you work on what you want to work with as opposed to working on what you have to work on, if you’re an employee for instance, in any organization. (Peter, Yew Connect)

In accordance with previous literature, Peter emphasises the appeal of entrepreneurship in terms of “working on what you want to” rather than adhering to what a role in an organization dictates. Inherent in this view is the concept of negative freedom (Berlin, 1971) where you seek to avoid interference by others on the type of work you carry out. Now let us consider the following comment made by Stuart:

> There is a lot of freedom to it [entrepreneurship]. Most careers are about perception as much as reality, mostly people get ahead not just on the quality of their work but on how they manage to present themselves to their colleagues and their bosses in particular. It’s not something that I have to worry about at all. (Stuart, Ivy Jewels)

Rather than simply having the freedom to conduct the *kind* of work one is dedicated to, Stuart’s comments infer a perspective of freedom to *perform* work in his own way. Stuart shared his exasperation with the, perhaps inauthentic, tactics he saw his colleagues use to persuade the bosses of their competencies. It seems that in Stuart’s prior career a major constraint arose from the pressures of having to strategically engage in what Goffman (1959) refers to as “front stage” work or impression management. In taking on an entrepreneurial role Stuart alleviates the need for front-stage work as a means to progress in his career. Thus, Stuart believes he no longer has to “worry about” performing his work according to others’ agendas. Indeed, this view of the value of freedom in entrepreneurship relates more to positive freedom: “freedom to lead one’s prescribed way of life” (Berlin, 1971).

The comments above re-iterate what we already know that mainstream entrepreneurship: it is often underpinned by a desire to be autonomous (Baker & Pollock, 2007). However, we know little about the significance of autonomy in the context of sustainable entrepreneurship. Sophie’s comments below indicate that autonomy in sustainable entrepreneurship contexts is sought due to a desire to be free to perform your work in line with your “prescribed way of life” (e.g. to integrate environmentalism into work). When discussing how she decides on suppliers, Sophie talks about the cognitive barriers some of them have to understanding the concept of buying food without packaging. In making a final decision on who to work with, Sophie relies on her clear sense of principles:

> It becomes very obvious who you do and don’t want to work with... it’s easy for me to go
Entrepreneurship allows Sophie to exercise her own criteria for decision-making, which may be in contrast to the expectations of those with whom she comes into contact. Hockerts & Wustenhagen (2010) briefly outlined that sustainability start-ups are often founded by idealist individuals who are so obsessed that they are driven to establishing their own venture. Our findings temper this claim by showing that sustainable entrepreneurs are often responding to their experiences of barriers to simply exercising sustainable and ethical practices in their lives and careers. Autonomy, and hence entrepreneurship, becomes vital in order to avoid being inhibited by other’s policies, behavioural norms or profit-seeking intentions. Relating to this is again the concept of authenticity. Our analysis suggests that lying behind the participants’ will to choose one’s own work is their desire to reflect one’s authenticity. From the data gathered it appears that entrepreneurship provides the freedom to enact one’s authenticity in two key ways.

Firstly, entrepreneurship provides freedom to choose to do work on what you want to. For example, despite criticism from others at the outset Amy and Simon chose to only work with the clients that they felt matched their values:

> We had loads and loads of comments from people saying ‘well why don’t you just work with anyone to start off with, until you’ve got some money behind you’... and we were like ‘no because that wouldn’t be our business’... we would take offence when anyone suggested that “how dare you suggest that we do that!”’ (laughing) (Amy, Cedar E-Media)

Choosing work projects in such a way was a clear means for Amy and Simon to declare this is who we are and this is what we care about. The couple are acting out their authenticity through the freedom to choose work.

Secondly, entrepreneurship provides opportunities to perform your work in an uncompromising way. In other words it relates to how you perform what you want to do. For example, Patrick, a committed cyclist, built up a reputation for his ethical media business by arriving on his bicycle at meeting 10 miles from the nearest train station.

> My personality, me as a person, is absolutely interspersed with what the company is and you know people like that and that’s the whole ethical side of the company, that’s what people like about me that I can turn up on a bike, you know. (Patrick, Pine Media)

Patrick is free to display his environmentalism not just because he can but as it is an intrinsic element of Pine. As an entrepreneur Patrick can perform work in a way which emphasises an alignment of his authenticity with the ethos of the business.

In sum, the “work freedom” driver shows that in the context of sustainable entrepreneurship, freedom relates to the ability to enact one’s authenticity through making decisions based on one’s own principles and not to an external power e.g. boss or a taken-for-granted norm. Autonomy for sustainable entrepreneurs is appealing as they are able to reflect aspects of themselves, i.e. make identity claims, through the work choices made and how work is performed. Rather than adhering to formulaic roles entrepreneurship is the freedom to manage how others perceive you in a way that you see fit.

Proposition 2: Transitions into sustainability-driven entrepreneurship are pursued as a means of enacting authenticity both in the work one does and how it is performed.

Social Change Drivers
In the discussion above we highlighted that some sustainable entrepreneurship activity is motivated by individuals’ desires to overcome any authenticity constraints in their careers. However, this should not imply that any social change consequences of sustainable entrepreneurship are a side-effect of self-interested, authenticity-driven career transitions. Thus, the personal career drivers on their own only offer a partial explanation of why individuals decide pursue a transition to sustainable entrepreneurship. Our findings also indicated that some participants were consciously pursuing entrepreneurship as a route to social change. Below, we present two categories that elaborate why faith is placed in
entrepreneurship as the most appropriate way to bring about this change.

A. Legitimate Route for Change

James, the founder of Maple, explains why he views entrepreneurship as the most logical way of creating something environmentally sustainable:

> It [business] is the best mechanism for convincing businesses to do it... charities don’t need as much convincing, there are plenty of people on board there... and they are so knee-jerk in politics that you just don’t get a chance to do anything meaningful. So the business sector was always the most attractive sector to reach out to. Also there is a clear point that the more successful one can be in the business context the more one can invest back into the vision and to build influence and make things happen you kind of need money from somewhere! (James, Maple Cars)

Within the participants’ narratives lie frequent expressions of a willingness to play a role in demonstrating the feasibility of sustainable alternatives to incumbent competitors. Indeed, this is in line with Hockerts & Wustenhagen (2010) proposal that disruptive sustainability innovations are frequently introduced by new entrants and that this provokes a reaction from incumbents. However as new entrants entrepreneurs often suffer from a lack of legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994), others may not deem their activities as “desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995:574). Considering that business may be reluctant to adapt to environmentalism (Shrivastava, 1995) a hostile reception many be given to newcomers (Russo, 2003). In spite of these hurdles, the entrepreneurs are steadfast in their view that business mechanisms are the most suitable way to bring change:

> I think we both felt that business can be something positive, it doesn’t have to be that people who do good things work for charities whereas people who do bad things work for businesses... people take advice from us, whereas I think if we were an activist group, they would never come to us in the first place, and if we did try to tell them something they would think we were raving hippies!... they know we have a balanced view. (Helen, Oak Consult)

In the above quote Helen acknowledges that being in business places them in a stronger position to offer sustainability advice. This sums up a particular impression of entrepreneurship as a medium through which environmental change messages can be delivered in a respectable way and in a way that is perhaps more likely to make real achievements than more radical methods of promoting sustainability. Mars & Lounsbury (2009) also find evidence of this view in student “eco-entrepreneurs”. However, not all of the respondents acknowledged that their interest in entrepreneurship is fundamentally connected to change agenda. Consider the two quotes below:

> I’m not trying to be you know like eco-warrior, like “you have to buy this bike, otherwise you don’t care about the environment”. I’m not doing it to change the world. (Claire, Ash Bikes)

> I don’t think we particularly wanted to change the world, I think we just wanted to do something that allowed us to earn a living while not doing anything bad, I can’t honestly say that there was any kind of plans for any kind of big revolution at all. (Stuart, Ivy Jewels)

For these individuals the initial push towards entrepreneurship is less to do with an agenda to “break up” an aspect of society which they find insupportable. However, despite protestations by the entrepreneurs regarding any “breaking up” motivates prior to commencing their entrepreneurial career, later in the interviews there are insights into their nascent roles as drivers of social change:

> We’d like to just raise awareness about the environment, about pollution... it’s all done through networks and through the forums that I go to and stuff, it’s all about networking and joining forces on those levels. (Claire, Ash Bikes)

Whilst Claire did not feel she set out to change the world, through the launch of Ash Bikes she became aware of the barriers to introducing and enhancing sustainable transport options. Hence, a role emerges for her to take up as part of the movement for sustainable transport. Similarly, since setting up Ivy Stuart found himself facing the dominant institutions of the jewellery industry and key actors’ rejection
of sustainable supply chains. Due to this Stuart expresses:

There are people like us in the jewellery industry who genuinely have a will to do something and in some ways the NGOs have just sat on the sidelines – “this is what you can do, this is what we want you to do”, you know they don’t work in the industry, and it will take people in the industry to create change. (Stuart, Ivy Jewels)

Therefore, we see a distinction between two groups of individuals. On the one hand, some participants acknowledged that their desire to engage in entrepreneurship relates to a belief in business as the best way to improve sustainability in business. This group signals that entrepreneurship provides a more civilised and persuasive means of influence to those who might be threatened by environmental messages delivered by others such as activists. On the other hand, other participants actively ruled out any “revolution” ambitions. For this group, the commencement of entrepreneurship activity brought a realization that driving change from the inside is an integral part of sustainable entrepreneurship. Thus, regardless of ambitions to “change the world” those who enter entrepreneurship, face conventions and norms that result in them embracing change agendas. Depending on the participant, entrepreneurship is either chosen as a route for influence beforehand or evolves into being perceived as a route for influence subsequently. Therefore, we concur with Van de Ven et al. (2007) that the individualist and collectivist social change-creating aspects of entrepreneurship are not mutually exclusive.

Proposition 3a: The decision to create a new sustainability-driven venture is driven by a belief in entrepreneurship’s legitimacy as a vehicle for change.

Proposition 3b: The decision to create a new sustainability-driven venture leads to individuals’ involvement in driving change agendas.

B. Providing Tangible Solutions

In accounting for the decision to pursue the establishment of a sustainable venture, the participants expressed their belief in entrepreneurship as the ideal location for ensuring you produce “tangible solutions”. This idea is summed up by Peter’s comments:

I stood as a parliamentary candidate for Labour in the 1997 election. And I always assumed from about the age of 9 that I’d be a Member of Parliament. And quite recently a potential election came up in Walthamstow [London] and someone rang and said ‘was I going for it?’ because everyone just assumed that I would and I thought about it for 30 seconds and I just thought you know “you can achieve more, at least now, maybe outside mainstream politics”... when I was growing up politics was the real way to change society. I think society’s evolved now and it’s, if anything, politics is the end of the food chain and it’s creating the how to get there that’s the more interesting and creative part of the process. (Peter, Yew Connect)

Peter confirms that the appeal of entrepreneurship relates to the freedom to create rather than react, as he feels politicians do. This view suggests that in comparison to alternative career options, sustainable entrepreneurship is about engaging in activity to make something work. By dedicating one’s time and energy to the venture the participants largely felt they would be active in creating something to push forward some agenda. Sophie outlines her aims:

It was the fact that I wanted to buy products without packaging and so that led to “well I need to provide a way for other people to buy products without packaging”, which led to the business model. I thought that having a business would be the best way to achieve that aim... I just wanted to provide somewhere where people could come and buy their stuff in that way rather than having a campaign or being an NGO - I didn’t think that was the right way to achieve my aim. (Sophie, Poplars Store)

Sophie’s idea revolved around a perceived fundamental problem with the over-packaging of food products. However, rather than spending her energy campaigning and criticising existing options without providing tangible alternatives, she wanted to create a positive option for people. The idea of creating solutions is not uniquely a response to a lack of consumer solutions, but it also emerges from the problems associated with ineffective public sector activities:

Another thing that I wasn’t so happy with is the hypocrisy of this whole government thing
Claire positions her bikes as a feasible and realistic solution to issues that the government has been striving to tackle, but to little avail. As one would expect given that the individuals involved have invested financially and psychologically in entrepreneurial activity, the participants frame entrepreneurship in a positive way. However, the interesting finding in respect of “providing tangible solutions” is the shift from politics as social change to entrepreneurship as social change that Peter and Claire’s comments capture particularly well. Despite enterprise discourse being more frequently employed in the public sector (da Gay, 2004), the participants felt that private enterprise remained the domain where their creativity could best be put to work in offering something new and alternatives. This leads to the final proposition:

Proposition 4: The decision to create a new sustainability-driven venture is driven by a belief that entrepreneurship creates a tangible contribution for social change.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on the “entrepreneuring as emancipation” perspective (Rindova et al. 2009), we perceived an opportunity to develop insights in the nature of the constraints leading to “breaking free” for sustainable entrepreneurship activities. To attend to this, we examined sustainable entrepreneurs’ accounts of their recent radical career transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) from employment to establishing a new venture.

Through our analysis a couple of key findings emerged. Firstly, the sustainable entrepreneurs demonstrated that a key personal career driver for engaging in entrepreneurship lies in their realization of “identity deficits” (Pratt, 2000). We found these identity deficits to be specifically related to authenticity (Taylor, 1991; Svejenova, 2005). An additional personal career driver was identified as “work freedom” whereby the autonomy in entrepreneurship was perceived as a panacea for the identity deficit. Secondly, our analysis of the entrepreneurs’ accounts brought to light the interconnection between individual identity concerns and social change. It emerges that sustainable entrepreneurship is often construed by those pursuing it as a legitimate, creative and real means through which change agendas may be achieved (see also Mars & Lounsbury, 2009). However, change agendas are not always a conscious part of the individuals’ motivations for entrepreneurship. Those entering entrepreneurship as a means to “break free” from authenticity constraints often adopted social changes ambitions (“breaking up”) during the entrepreneurship process. These two key findings are discussed in more depth below.

Authenticity-Driven Entrepreneurship: Breaking Free from Authenticity Constraints

Our first guiding research questions asks “which aspects of individual identity influence the decision to engage in sustainability-driven entrepreneurship?” In the context of our research, we find identity deficits (Pratt, 2000) predominantly those relating to authenticity, were significant to the decision to transition into sustainable entrepreneurship. Further to this, participants believed entrepreneurship provides the necessary autonomy for doing the work one wants and performing it in the way one desires. Our results lead us to propose that sustainable entrepreneurship can be viewed as an authenticity-driven career (Svejenova, 2005). Svejenova states: “an authenticity-seeking individual is one willing to take initiative and responsibility for his or her career and able to achieve congruence between past and future, as well as between the private and public domains of one’s self” (Svejenova, 2005: 951). This implies that entrepreneurship can emerge from a process triggered by individuals who take the initiative and responsibility to align their inwardly derived sense of authenticity (Taylor, 1991) with their career. Indeed, the participants articulated the benefits of entrepreneurship in terms of providing them with the opportunity to adhere to their environmentalist ideals in both the work they do (e.g. working with other businesses) and how they perform their work (e.g. recycling, using sustainable transport/ energy). There was a sense that being a founder allowed a greater sense of congruence between public and private domains of self (Svejenova, 2005).
Overall, we suggest that the sustainable entrepreneurship process is intertwined with individuals’ identity work. The participants hoped to eliminate the possibility of feeling inauthentic as they set about repairing, maintaining, strengthening and/or revising their identity through entrepreneurial activity (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In terms of the extant entrepreneurship literature, this confirms that identity does indeed play a role in driving entrepreneurs (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Cardon et al. 2009; Farmer et al. 2009). However, we believe our research extends this view by demonstrating the role of identity phenomena identity other than that of desired entrepreneurial identities. Furthermore, we show that identity work is not only implicated during transitions (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) but it is significant in triggering career transitions. Indeed, a realization of one’s lack of authenticity appears to be a significant source of “instability” which leads to a shift in self-conception, and hence triggers a career transition Chudzikowski et al. (2009). Thus, entrepreneurship is a career option through which individuals may avoid the type of self-alienation experienced by the participants in Costas & Fleming’s (2009) research.

**Implications of Authenticity-Driven Entrepreneurship: Breaking Up for Social Change**

Rindova and colleagues (2009) state that autonomy, an important driver of entrepreneurship (Baker & Pollock, 2007), encompasses both “breaking free” and “breaking up”. An important antecedent to breaking free for sustainable entrepreneurs has been identified as the recognition of personal authenticity constraints in their prior career. However, the decision to proactively enter entrepreneurship also frequently encompasses societal aims to make a difference or to break up. We found evidence from our fieldwork that entrepreneurship is preferable to other career options due to two main points: (1) it provides a route for influence as it uses business mechanisms and it is a non-radical; (2) it is a force for the creation of positive solutions and new alternatives in contrast to often reactive governmental actions or the critical campaigns of charities. Indeed, Amy at Cedar states succinctly that the drive to entrepreneurship is not uniquely about being authentic for self-interest “[It is about] being true to yourself but so you contribute something positive as well.”

Rindova et al. (2009:481) stated “do entrepreneurs who view autonomy as freedom for themselves do things differently and achieve different outcomes from those who view autonomy as freedom (and change) for the social collectivity of which they are a part?” Regardless of the nature of the freedom intentions, in sustainable entrepreneurship we see that deeply individualist reasons for entrepreneurship (e.g. overcoming authenticity constraints), lead to deeply social results. Individuals’ desires to overcome constraints, such as an inability to integrate your environmental ethos into work, resulted in entrepreneurial activity. Entrepreneurship not only provides scope to emancipate oneself from these constraints but offers possibilities for others to overcome related constraints. Whether introducing a new consumer option or a business-to-business service, authenticity-driven sustainable entrepreneurs are inherently active in ‘social change’ as they provide others with environmentally sustainable options. We believe our findings highlight the importance of the interplay between “breaking free” and “breaking up” (Rindova et al. 2009) due the inextricable link we demonstrate between entrepreneurship as a means to avoid authenticity constraints and entrepreneurship as a route to wield a social change agenda. We believe this goes some way in answering our second research question.

Overall, in relation to the implications of authenticity-driven entrepreneurship, we believe we add weight to Van de Ven et al.’s (2007) argument as to the interconnectedness of self-interest and collective interests. Those individuals engaging in sustainable entrepreneurship are doing so to ensure that they make the most of their careers by taking responsibility to leverage their authenticity in a way that contributes to broader social change e.g. breaking up (Rindova et al. 2009). In prior or anticipated careers, the participants felt they were, or would, be limited in their ability to ensure their work activity contributed to collective interests (i.e. broader environmental sustainability). This constraint is especially salient as it suggests that building an authenticity-driven career (Svejenova, 2005) can be important not only for alleviating individual identity concerns but also as an impetus for social change. As is well-documented in social entrepreneurship literature, entrepreneurship can disrupt undesirable practices and enhance society (Austin et al. 2006; Alvord et al. 2004). However, much of social entrepreneurship focuses on the identification and solution of problems “out there” (i.e. in developing countries/ impoverished neighbourhoods). Our findings complement and extend this by demonstrating that individuals’ internal authenticity constraints may act as vital antecedents to social change. In other words, breaking free from personally perceived constraints (where relating to sustainability/ ethical behaviour) can lead the creation of ventures which help to break up social problems (e.g. over packaging or energy use).
CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Our work on individual-level drivers of sustainable entrepreneurship suggests possible interesting insights for several areas of literature. In terms of sustainable entrepreneurship literature, we complement Patzelt & Shepherd’s (2010) perspective on the individual-opportunity relationship by elaborating how individual identity is implicated in the process of identifying, evaluating and pursuing sustainable entrepreneurship. Our research also moves to expand discussions on the role of identity in entrepreneurship literature more broadly. For example, whilst Hoang & Gimeno (2010) and Farmer et al. (2009) have discussed the idea that desired entrepreneurial identities drive people to entrepreneurship, we show that desired authentic identities are additional important motivational forces. We believe this finding opens opportunities for further research into the role of “identity work” in career transitions to entrepreneurship. Whilst Ibarra and others (1999; 2010) have made significant contributions in terms of the identity work that takes place during career transitions, they have not sufficiently explored identity work as a driver of a career transitions. Specifically as identities can be formed and transformed in work contexts (Dutton et al., 2010), we look forward to research in entrepreneurship that explores the impacts on individuals’ authenticity overtime following a transition. Our paper has only looked at identity during the pre-launch and in the early days of new ventures, it would therefore, be valuable to probe the way in which authenticity-driven individuals are able to maintain, and strengthen their desired identities in entrepreneurship contexts. Might “entrepreneurial identity” demands intervene in the identity work process? Might any resulting identity “revision” shift the individuals’ authentic identity dynamic?

Overall, understanding entrepreneurship as part of an identity work process, an authenticity-driven career route, is valuable for elaborating the wealth of heterogeneous entrepreneurial motivations (Van de Ven et al. 2007; Baker & Pollock, 2007; Rindova et al. 2009). As we have found in the case of sustainable entrepreneurship, deeply individualistic identity drivers for entrepreneurship can be inextricably linked to social change motivations, whether social change is an intention or not.

REFERENCES