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Existential Transformation through Entrepreneurship: Conceptualizing Entrepreneurial Identity via a Four-Type Framework

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Abstract

Emancipatory entrepreneurship—actions aimed at freeing oneself from constraints in work and life—reshapes entrepreneurs' lives and influences how they view themselves as entrepreneurs. Despite its importance, this topic remains insufficiently examined. In this conceptual article, we integrate research on entrepreneurial discovery and emancipatory entrepreneurship to propose a typology describing how emerging entrepreneurs undergo entrepreneurial transformation, thereby extending existing understandings of entrepreneurial identity formation. The core contribution is the articulation of four forms of entrepreneurial transformation (minimal, career, personal, and existential), each involving shifts in one's personal domain, professional trajectory, or both. The fourth category—Existential Transformation—reflects the most profound degree of change in both personal and career spheres. Within this quadrant, emancipatory entrepreneurship appears as a deeply agentic undertaking, where individuals simultaneously reshape who they strive to become and pursue a venture that aligns their working life with their desired sense of self. We outline each of the four transformation types, discuss what prompts them, and consider theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial discovery, Emancipation, Identity, Transformation

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship involves a process of becoming for the emerging venture and simultaneously represents a developmental journey for the entrepreneur, who brings together disparate aspects of their world while creating something new [1]. Consequently, entrepreneurship concerns identity-building and meaning-making as much as it concerns markets and economic outcomes [2, 3]. However, research has not sufficiently focused on how individuals construct their social reality in relation to entrepreneurial behavior [4], limiting our broader understanding. Yet, grasping how the entrepreneurial self is formed is essential for the effectiveness of entrepreneurial action [4-6]. We approach entrepreneurial activity as an existential expression of the individual and extend knowledge about entrepreneurial identity by considering distinct forms of personal and career transformation encountered as entrepreneurs work toward launching their ventures.

Rindova *et al.* [7] framed entrepreneurship as a path that reshapes the entrepreneur by enabling emancipation from social and structural restrictions. At its core, entrepreneurship may serve as a means of transcending political, social, or power-based limitations that prevent individuals from pursuing life and work aspirations, with the process of moving toward becoming an entrepreneur called entrepreneurship [7, 8]. This type of entrepreneurship—aimed at enabling individuals to break constraints and initiate change—highlights the emancipatory capacity of entrepreneurial activity and its impact on both identity and professional trajectory. Although research has shown that such change influences entrepreneurs' lives and careers, the



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mechanisms through which these transformations unfold and the drivers of different intensities of transformation remain insufficiently clarified.

The reasons one starts a business—whether through intentional choice or due to external pressures—shape entrepreneurial identity and influence the entrepreneur's effort and behavior during venture creation [3]. As entrepreneurs act and progress through the entrepreneurial journey, they undergo shifts affecting their personal circumstances and/or careers [7]. Nevertheless, current understanding of these transformations, including how they reflect entrepreneurial identity and relate to outcomes at individual and venture levels, is still limited. Since entrepreneurial success—professionally and personally—may depend on understanding how these transformative factors interact, the primary aim of this paper is to examine the personal and career transformations experienced by nascent entrepreneurs engaged in emancipatory entrepreneurship and to identify the elements that stimulate such transformations.

In examining what constitutes the act of entrepreneurship, we begin by using entrepreneurial discovery theory [9] as a lens to explore how personal initiative and situational factors shape entrepreneurial behaviour. We then turn to research on entrepreneurial identity, concentrating on how identity influences the formation of new ventures, particularly in relation to early-stage emancipatory forms of entrepreneurship. Emancipatory entrepreneurship describes how people employ entrepreneurial activity to move away from restrictive life conditions and redesign their working lives to better express their sense of self [7, 8]. Our position is that individuals pursuing emancipatory aims can use entrepreneurship to bring their work roles closer to their preferred career identity and/or to shift their self-understanding toward a desired personal identity. To illustrate this, we outline four distinct patterns of change: minimal alteration, career-oriented change, self-oriented change, and combined career-and-self transformation. In this framework, entrepreneurship becomes an intentional effort that advances both venture creation and shifts in personal and vocational identity.

In presenting entrepreneurship as a mechanism for individual and occupational development, this paper offers three primary contributions. First, it lays out a conceptual foundation for analysing entrepreneurship at the level of the individual, thereby extending perspectives on entrepreneurial identity from categorical labels (e.g., gender, family-business background) to existential questions of self-definition (Who am I? Who would I like to become?) [10, 11]. Second, the paper advances the discussion of entrepreneurial identity by emphasising how identification with the entrepreneurial role [3] is shaped by intertwined processes of change in one's personal life and career trajectory. Third, by examining how individuals engage in entrepreneurial discovery and direct their agency toward aligning with personal and/or career identity, we propose a typology that enables classification of identity-based motivations for entrepreneurial entry. Through this approach, the paper responds to recent calls to extend existing theories and deepen understanding of entrepreneurship as both an individual-level phenomenon and a transitional journey [10].

Methodology and Theoretical Background

Literature search methodology

To integrate insights from entrepreneurial discovery theory, entrepreneurial identity scholarship, and the study of emancipatory entrepreneurship, we applied the systematic literature review (SLR) procedure outlined by Ojong *et al.* [12]. SLR was selected due to its strong methodological standards and replicability [13]. The review proceeded as follows:

1. Business Source Complete was chosen as the central database because of its breadth.
2. No date restrictions were imposed.
3. Only peer-reviewed work was retained.
4. An initial Boolean search using the terms (entrepreneurship OR entrepreneur OR enterprise OR business OR firm OR entrepreneurial discovery) in titles, keywords, and abstracts produced 3,191,145 records. (TI entrepreneurship OR KW entrepreneurship OR AB entrepreneurship OR TI entrepreneur OR KW entrepreneur OR AB entrepreneur OR TI enterprise OR KW enterprise OR AB enterprise OR TI business OR KW business OR AB business OR TI firm OR KW firm OR AB firm OR TI entrepreneurial discovery OR KW entrepreneurial discovery OR AB entrepreneurial discovery)
5. A second search requiring the word theory in titles, keywords, or abstracts produced 394,651 items.
6. Following Poggesi *et al.* [14], we again required that titles, keywords, or abstracts include one of the terms (entrepreneurship OR entrepreneur OR enterprise OR business OR firm OR entrepreneurial discovery), which yielded 188,952 items.
7. Again, following Poggesi *et al.* [14], we limited results to papers with entrepreneurial discovery mentioned in the abstract, leaving 26 articles.

After analysing these 26 papers, entrepreneurial discovery theory [9] was identified as the most appropriate foundation for reconsidering entrepreneurship as a process of discovery.

For the entrepreneurial identity component, we relied on the systematic review by Mmbaga *et al.* [11]. For literature on entrepreneurship, we again searched the EBSCO Business Source Complete database. An abstract search for 'entrepreneurship' AND 'discovery' returned 0 results. A broader search using only 'entrepreneurship' identified 83 documents. Because the most influential article in this area—with more than 1000 citations—is the seminal publication by Rindova *et al.* [7] on

emancipatory entrepreneuring, this piece served as the key theoretical anchor. The next section combines insights from entrepreneurial discovery, entrepreneurial identity, and emancipatory entrepreneuring to construct our theoretical contribution.

Theoretical background

Theory of entrepreneurial discovery

Entrepreneurship involves bringing a new venture into existence through the entrepreneur's own choices and effort [15, 16]. This can range from a straightforward activity, such as becoming an Avon seller to build a micro-enterprise [17], to large-scale innovations, such as creating the electric light or the electric car [18]. No matter the magnitude, the individual acts as the originator of the business idea. Therefore, any attempt to understand entrepreneurship as a process begins with a theory clarifying how ventures come into being. Entrepreneurial discovery theory [9] offers such a foundation by proposing that new ventures arise through the interplay of two key elements: surrounding conditions and personal agency.

According to entrepreneurial discovery theory [9], numerous pathways can lead to developing and implementing a business idea. Some individuals encounter potential opportunities unexpectedly or through natural evolution, while others invest significant time actively seeking, evaluating, and shaping an initiative. Murphy [9] highlights two forces that influence entrepreneurial discovery: deliberation—how intentionally a person examines and plans potential opportunities—and serendipity—the extent to which opportunities are constructed through one's actions or emerge independently. A highly deliberative entrepreneur is one who surveys several potential options and selects the most promising. Deliberation requires intentional reflection and strategic assessment. By contrast, minimal deliberation describes someone who accepts the only available option, whether self-generated or inherited. A classic example is a daughter who suddenly becomes responsible for her late father's business without ever intending to pursue entrepreneurship. Alternatively, an entrepreneur demonstrating high deliberation might spend years accumulating financial resources, conducting extensive analysis of different opportunities, and carefully weighing risk and reward before choosing a venture.

The second dimension in entrepreneurial discovery theory [9] is serendipity. Serendipity refers to how much the venture emerges through chance circumstances versus sustained agentic effort. One end of the continuum reflects high serendipity combined with low agency; the other reflects low serendipity paired with strong agency. Ventures with high serendipity tend to emerge with relatively little intentional planning. For example, a person needing employment may accept a house-painting job from a friend, perform well, and then receive further requests. Over time, the workload grows enough to justify hiring staff, effectively turning the activity into a business. Here, the venture advances largely through unfolding circumstances and consistent work rather than purposeful venture design. At the opposite end, low serendipity/high agency characterizes ventures that materialize only after long periods of effort, such as persistent attempts to secure financing, support, and customers to bring a business concept to life.

Murphy [9] represents entrepreneurial discovery through a 2×2 matrix, with Deliberation forming one axis and Serendipity the other. This framework generates four types of entrepreneurial discovery: Legacy, Deliberate Search, Serendipitous Discovery, and Eureka. Legacy reflects ventures characterized by low deliberation and low serendipity (but high agency). In these cases, individuals assume responsibility for an opportunity that is placed before them and work to make it viable. Deliberate Search is also driven by the agency but differs from Legacy in that the entrepreneur intentionally explores and compares opportunities before committing to a specific one. Serendipitous Discovery describes ventures that emerge unexpectedly for individuals who were not actively seeking to create a business. Finally, Eureka combines high deliberation with high serendipity. A well-known illustration of Eureka is Bill Gates, whose trajectory was shaped by IBM's decision not to purchase his operating system. Although Gates was actively building a software company, IBM's refusal of his Disk Operating System [19] created the pivotal moment that led to Microsoft becoming the supplier of DOS for personal computers. From that point, every PC required DOS, and IBM opted not to enter the software market. That single decision laid the groundwork for Microsoft's creation as the PC DOS provider. Today, roughly 40 years later, Microsoft's market capitalization surpasses IBM's by 2.85 trillion dollars.

While entrepreneurial discovery theory offers a useful lens for examining how ventures originate, it largely separates the process from the individual who drives it. Yet, in practice, entrepreneurs and the businesses they establish are often inseparable [20]. Microsoft cannot be discussed without Bill Gates, and Gates himself was reshaped through the act of creating and expanding Microsoft. Understanding entrepreneuring therefore requires attention to entrepreneurial identity. For this reason, we draw on the entrepreneurial identity literature to shift the notion of discovery from simply initiating a venture to viewing entrepreneuring as the enactment or emergence of an entrepreneurial identity.

Entrepreneurial identity

A central question in entrepreneurship research is how entrepreneurs understand themselves at the outset of a venture and throughout its development [21], a topic that continues to attract wide scholarly and practical interest. Identity perspectives

address fundamental questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who do I intend to become?” [22]. Entrepreneurial identity serves as a framework for interpreting entrepreneurs’ choices, tendencies, and motivations, and can help anticipate the courses of action they take [23]. It also redirects attention toward the entrepreneur as a person who not only launches enterprises but engages in activities that affirm and express self-meaning [24].

Despite its importance, the identity literature within entrepreneurship remains conceptually dispersed [11, 25]. Mmbaga *et al.*’s [11] integrative review highlights that entrepreneurial identity is typically framed in two distinct ways—either as a property or as a process—yet these perspectives rarely intersect in foundational assumptions or theoretical orientation. When viewed as a property, entrepreneurial identity is treated as a relatively enduring set of attributes that shapes both the individual and the venture [11]. This is comparable to regarding identity as a state: an existing condition within the entrepreneur. This perspective, strongly aligned with positivistic traditions [26], builds on identity theory [27], role identity theory [28], and social identity theory [29]. Here, entrepreneurial identity is something the entrepreneur “has.”

The alternate conceptualization—entrepreneurial identity as process—draws from social constructivist views and is shaped by personal experiences and wider sociocultural contexts [26]. In this view, entrepreneurial identity is fluid, negotiated, and continually reconstructed [11]. It is informed by narrative identity theory [30] and identity work theory [31].

Although both perspectives illuminate how the individual and the venture shape one another, only the property perspective helps clarify entrepreneurial discovery. The moment of discovery marks a shift from non-entrepreneur to entrepreneur, making entrepreneurial identity prior to venture creation especially relevant. Identity as process becomes essential for understanding how identity evolves once the venture is underway, but identity as property—existing before the venture is founded—best explains identity during the discovery phase. Consequently, this review adopts the property-based view for examining entrepreneurial identity.

Entrepreneurial identity refers to internalized meanings and expectations tied to entrepreneurial roles [32] and captures features that entrepreneurs find self-defining [33]. It includes multiple role identities—organizer, innovator, facilitator, developer, inventor, and founder [34]. While the literature recognizes that entrepreneurs may hold several role identities at the same time, little is known about how these subordinate identities operate during the earliest stages of venture formation or later on [35]. For the purpose of understanding how ventures are created, we focus on the specific subordinate identities that entrepreneurs claim or display during the founding moment, reflecting how they interpret their role as they pursue opportunities they have either discovered or had brought to them. We propose that the combination of these identities with the form of entrepreneurial discovery produces meaningful shifts in the entrepreneur’s personal life, career trajectory, or both, thereby shaping outcomes at both the individual and venture levels.

As a property, entrepreneurial identity can be developed, strengthened, or diminished over time [11]. Fauchart and Gruber [23] view entrepreneurial identity as a resource that entrepreneurs strategically use in new venture creation. Similarly, Shepherd and Haynie [34] argue that entrepreneurial identity supplies psychological benefits, supporting needs for belonging, growth, and distinctiveness. However, identity can also act as a constraint; for instance, entrepreneurs may resist an entrepreneurial identity if it conflicts with their self-perception or threatens who they aspire to become [36, 37]. What is not yet well understood is how agency contributes to the formation of entrepreneurial identity, the kinds of transformations that may result, or how these identity shifts influence the choices entrepreneurs make when launching a new venture and the outcomes they achieve.

Entrepreneurial identity as property has been linked to two key individual-level precursors: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [3]. Intrinsic motives typically arise when people voluntarily choose entrepreneurship, even when alternative employment exists, because they seek personal satisfaction [38] or a sense of accomplishment [39]. In contrast, extrinsic motives stem from unfavorable external pressures that nudge individuals into starting a business [40]. At the sociocultural level, interactions with peers, mentors, or admired business founders can also shape entrepreneurial identity. Together, these individual and contextual antecedents influence the identity an entrepreneur adopts, enacts, or is assigned by their community [3].

The entrepreneurship domain poses distinctive questions about identity because new ventures are frequently viewed as reflections of their creators [41]. Founders often perform multiple organizational functions [32] and become symbolically tied to their businesses [42]. As Ireland and Webb [43] note, entrepreneurship inherently involves ongoing identity construction, and scholars continue to call for deeper investigation into the evolving and multifaceted nature of identity within entrepreneurial settings [11]. Although existing research acknowledges the importance of contextual influences in identity formation, there remains a limited understanding of how entrepreneurial identity as property appears in developing economies [3]. This review also highlights the scarcity of studies exploring this identity within the setting of emancipatory entrepreneurship, a phenomenon especially common in emerging contexts.

Emancipatory entrepreneuring

Entrepreneuring refers to the actions that push an entrepreneurial process forward [44]. In this framing, entrepreneurship is the broader process, while *entrepreneuring* emphasizes the behaviors that enact it. Viewing entrepreneurship as an activity rather than a static state opens new avenues for expanding theories, analytical tools, and understandings of the field [45].

Entrepreneurship has been examined in settings outside conventional business environments, including small-scale and grassroots efforts through which individuals or groups attempt to reshape aspects of their lives [45, 46]. More recently, entrepreneurship has been reframed as a core life competency extending beyond venture creation. It is seen as a skillset that equips people to navigate uncertainty [47], enabling them to think and act entrepreneurially, identify possibilities, and solve problems [48]. Through this lens, entrepreneurs gain the capacity to pursue and generate diverse opportunities [1]. Rather than forecasting the future, they participate in shaping it; by producing outcomes they desire or require, they become agents of their own trajectories [49, 50]. This aligns with literature conceptualizing entrepreneurship as the creation of something novel [51, 52].

Rindova *et al.* [7] add to this conversation by framing entrepreneurial activity as a mechanism for emancipation—what they call *Emancipatory Entrepreneurship*—through which individuals dismantle personal and structural barriers to attain greater autonomy in life and work. Emancipatory entrepreneurs view venture creation not merely as an end goal [53], but as a pathway to escape constraints that restrict their lives [7]. According to Rindova *et al.* [7], entrepreneurship as emancipation consists of three core pursuits: seeking autonomy, authoring, and making declarations. Seeking autonomy captures the intent to break away from imposed authority; authoring and making declarations reflect the actions taken to mobilize resources and shape stakeholder perceptions as change unfolds. This form of entrepreneurship involves identity transformation [54]. Whereas seeking autonomy expresses the desire for change, authoring and making declarations represent efforts to implement and reinforce that transformed sense of self [7, 45].

Seeking autonomy

Seeking autonomy refers to the aspiration to gain greater freedom and has long been recognized as a central entrepreneurial drive [55]. From an emancipatory perspective, entrepreneurship entails disrupting entrenched social and economic arrangements that limit valued activities for the entrepreneur and their community [7].

Authoring involves assuming ownership over one's identity, decisions, and actions. After deciding to detach from particular constraints, the entrepreneur becomes the creator of their own path, defining themselves and influencing others who participate in the exchange processes necessary for change [7]. This requires establishing or revising relational structures and norms that enable the entrepreneurial project to fulfill its transformative potential [45].

Making declarations consists of articulating one's intended change within existing cultural and symbolic systems through explicit communication and narrative acts. Such declarations aid stakeholders in interpreting both the entrepreneur's emerging identity and the relevance of their offerings [18, 56]. Although declarations are essential to emancipatory entrepreneurship, they are delicate because they involve challenging established collective assumptions. Consequently, entrepreneurs may struggle with when, how, or to whom they should disclose their entrepreneurial identity and activities [7].

There is increasing anecdotal insight, alongside a steadily expanding empirical base, showing that many people begin *entrepreneurship* not because they are attracted by the possibility of financial gain, but because they are compelled by restrictive conditions that force them to craft avenues for subsistence [45, 57, 58]. This phenomenon—entrepreneurship pursued out of limited employment choices—is typically described as *necessity-based entrepreneurship* [59, 60]. Individuals in this category often turn to small, low-growth ventures that mirror existing business models to secure a livelihood [61, 62]. Although this type of entrepreneurship is frequently perceived as less prestigious, it remains widespread [63] and has been associated with positive outcomes across various regions [59]. In many developing economies, entrepreneurial activity is dominated by micro-enterprises operating largely within informal sectors [64]. These small businesses provide essential income for entrepreneurs and their families, helping reduce poverty and improve social well-being [61, 65, 66]. For instance, Colovic and Schruoffenegger [61] reported, through case studies of three Brazilian entrepreneurs, how micro-enterprise practices generate value in disadvantaged communities. Similarly, Garba *et al.* [67] documented the prevalence of necessity-driven entrepreneurship in Nigeria, underscoring how unemployment and poverty push individuals toward business creation. In a more optimistic example, Dencker *et al.* [68] found in Germany that ventures launched out of necessity showed comparatively higher survival rates.

One central difficulty in achieving emancipation lies in breaking away from culturally embedded beliefs and behavioral norms, especially in developing contexts where entrepreneurship is adopted as a pathway to self-determination [54, 69]. Emancipation can involve leaving behind assigned social roles or hierarchical authority structures to pursue careers that correspond more closely with one's preferred identity rather than externally imposed expectations [70]. Modern societal challenges—such as exclusion, insecurity, and elevated crime—create conditions in which individuals in both developed and developing settings may attempt to address these obstacles by bypassing restrictive structures. In doing so, they enact emancipatory entrepreneurship [71].

Despite its relevance, the emancipatory view of entrepreneurship has not attracted as much empirical research as anticipated, especially concerning developing countries and women's entrepreneurship. Examining under-resourced urban neighborhoods in Brazil, Colovic and Schruoffenegger [61] showed how micro-entrepreneurs engage in entrepreneurship to produce social value. They demonstrated that such efforts can lead to transformative, connective, or emancipatory outcomes, reflected in

improved capabilities, enhanced living standards, increased social status, reduced exclusion, heightened awareness of community issues, and strengthened relational networks. Their analysis broadens current understanding by indicating that entrepreneuring entails not only change and emancipation but also community connectivity.

Alkhaled and Berglund [72] explored women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia and Sweden as mechanisms for empowerment and emancipation. Their findings supported empowerment—defined as increased freedom within institutional boundaries—but found weaker evidence of deeper emancipation aimed at challenging power structures and attaining shared freedom, motivating them to call for further empirical study. Jennings *et al.* [45], focusing on a developed context, analyzed the practices through which entrepreneurs seek liberation and discovered that women were less inclined to diverge from established norms, reporting lower satisfaction when such deviations were substantial. Investigating Avon's model in South Africa, Scott *et al.* [17] further expanded emancipatory entrepreneurship literature by showing that entrepreneurship aids women in escaping poverty, while also urging more inquiry into how women navigate and overcome persistent inequalities.

Integrating the theory of entrepreneurial discovery and emancipatory entrepreneuring

Murphy's model of entrepreneurial discovery [9] suggests that the *emancipatory* outcomes associated with entrepreneurial engagement may take two forms: occupational and personal. Occupational emancipation involves shifts in work or career that help individuals bypass employment-related barriers. Personal emancipation involves changes in one's identity and life circumstances, enabling individuals to move from limiting conditions toward careers and work arrangements that reflect an entrepreneurial sense of self. In this way, entrepreneuring can serve as a mechanism for overcoming both professional and personal constraints.

Murphy's [9] framework also positions entrepreneurial discovery along two dimensions—deliberation and serendipity—resulting in four categories: Legacy, Eureka, Deliberate search, and Serendipitous discovery. These quadrants appear in **Figure 1**. In the next section, we outline the ways emancipatory changes in identity and/or occupation manifest across four related patterns (Minimal Transformation, Career Transformation, Personal Transformation, and Existential Transformation), and discuss how the emancipatory processes of seeking autonomy, authoring, and making declarations unfold within each quadrant.

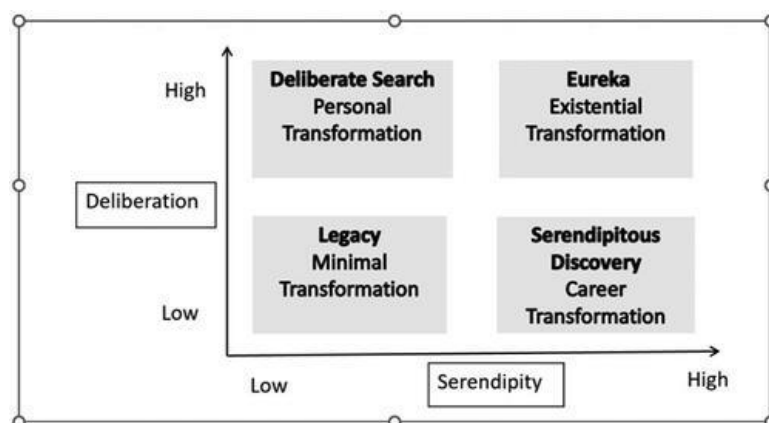


Figure 1. Murphy's [9] model of entrepreneurial discovery reinterpreted to illustrate emancipatory entrepreneuring as a framework of transformative pathways

Legacy — Minimal Transformation

Can someone move into self-employment with almost no meaningful shift in either their work trajectory or sense of self? This can occur in the quadrant characterized by *low deliberation* and *low serendipity*, which Murphy [9] designates as Legacy. In this situation, the entrepreneurial role emerges with little active planning and few unexpected openings. A typical illustration is an employee who becomes an entrepreneur mainly because of circumstances rather than choice. Imagine a worker dismissed during corporate downsizing. A supplier—seeking continuity—approaches them to establish a small firm to handle the same sales interactions the employee used to manage. The person transitions into entrepreneurship, yet the nature of the work, relationships, and routines remains almost unchanged. As a result, both career-related and personal transformation are minimal.

Under the lens of emancipatory entrepreneuring (seeking autonomy, authoring, and making declarations), this quadrant also produces limited change. Autonomy shifts only slightly, as the power dynamic merely flips between buyer and supplier. Authorship is weak because the individual continues operating much like an external employee rather than redefining their role. Declarations are also minimal; the only public signal is the formal acknowledgement of a new occupational title.

Thus, the Legacy quadrant represents the least transformative outcome. The individual avoids unemployment but does not meaningfully alter either their professional direction or sense of identity—essentially stepping sideways rather than remaking their circumstances.

Serendipitous Discovery — Career Transformation

At the opposite end of the serendipity scale—yet still involving a modest degree of discovery—lies Serendipitous Discovery [9]. Here, an unexpected entrepreneurial possibility emerges that diverges substantially from a person's previous line of work and pushes them into a markedly different career path. The triggering event may again be job loss, but instead of simply falling into a near-identical role, the individual begins weighing alternatives and shaping new possibilities. Through exploration and evaluation, they eventually launch a venture that bears little resemblance to their earlier occupation, illustrating how entrepreneurial activity reflects market needs rather than employer-driven skill requirements.

Consider an electronics repair technician who can no longer secure employment because repair services have become economically unviable. Observing that consumers now purchase replacements instead of repairs, this individual recognizes unmet demand for a local electronics store and decides to open one. A small market shift thus becomes the catalyst for a complete career reorientation.

From an emancipatory entrepreneuring perspective, transformation in this quadrant occurs primarily on the occupational front. Entrepreneurship enables the individual to escape financial precarity and reclaim direction over their work life—demonstrating autonomy in redefining their career trajectory. However, authorship is initially limited: the early phase of serendipitous discovery prioritizes launching a viable business rather than crafting a new identity or embedding one's values into the venture. Declarations, likewise, tend to focus on business promotion rather than personal reinvention. Messages such as “We are excited to open ABC Store to serve your XYZ needs” signal the start of operations rather than a redefinition of self (“I have shifted from employee to founder”).

In short, Serendipitous Discovery reshapes one's career but does not immediately produce deep personal transformation; public communication remains centered on business legitimacy, not identity change.

Deliberate Search—Personal Transformation

The third category, *Deliberate Search – Personal Transformation*, describes forms of emancipatory entrepreneuring aimed primarily at reshaping one's inner identity rather than redirecting a career trajectory. The extended covid-19 restrictions during 2020 and 2021 pushed some individuals out of employment and obliged many others to work remotely for long periods. That unusual situation prompted significant self-reflection regarding the meaning and direction of one's work life. A portion of the population chose early retirement, while others tried to reshape their jobs to suit personal preferences—operating closer to home, seeking greater flexibility, or pursuing activities that felt more meaningful. This environment also encouraged the expansion of “side hustles,” where individuals converted personal interests into small enterprises. Examples range from producing online yoga content to turning enthusiasm for pets into part-time grooming or walking services. These cases illustrate pathways to personal reorientation through entrepreneurship that do not require an outright career overhaul.

Murphy's 2011 entrepreneurial discovery framework acknowledges that some venture creation emerges from a deep introspective process in which people attempt to understand their core identity. In such cases, transformation occurs mainly within the self, while occupational change is secondary. Here, deliberate search involves thoughtfully exploring questions such as “Who am I?” and “What kind of work expresses that identity?” The resulting business pursuit allows alignment between identity and occupation, even if the core profession remains largely the same. One might simply choose self-employment to regain autonomy—such as a hairdresser leaving a salon to launch an independent shop—or leave an employer whose practices conflict with personal ethics, seeking to conduct business in a more principled way.

Since this typology emphasizes personal rather than career shifts, the three emancipatory entrepreneuring dimensions—Autonomy, Authoring, and Declaration—manifest differently. Autonomy, in this context, refers to emancipating the self rather than escaping an occupational structure. It involves removing others' constraints on how one performs one's craft. A hair stylist establishing their own studio would exemplify such liberation.

Authoring becomes central: individuals direct their efforts toward understanding and expressing their identity through their work. They redesign their occupational setting to reinforce who they believe themselves to be. In essence, they construct an environment that supports and amplifies their sense of self.

With respect to declarations, ventures arising from Deliberate Search are typically announced in a way that conveys pride in personal expression [73]. Business names often reflect the entrepreneur's identity—such as “Cathy's Hair Salon”—because the enterprise symbolizes the person behind it. Statements like “I've dreamed of doing this for years” or “This project represents everything I care about” underscore how deeply personal these ventures are.

This quadrant may also serve as a stepping-stone toward the fourth quadrant—Eureka—Existential Transformation—in which individuals pursue alignment of both self and career on a more comprehensive scale. Engaging in self-exploration through a side venture may ignite a broader rethinking of potential entrepreneurial futures that combine both personal evolution and business viability.

Eureka—Existential Transformation

The final quadrant, termed *Eureka–Existential Transformation*, encompasses situations in which individuals intentionally reconstruct both their self-concept and their occupational path. It is characterized by simultaneous agency in personal reinvention and intentional design of a new business. Viewed through the lens of emancipatory entrepreneurship [7], which frames entrepreneurship as a mechanism for breaking through constraints, this quadrant represents the most complete expression of emancipation. Individuals not only redefine who they wish to become but also build a venture that integrates this envisioned identity with their economic activities.

Eureka–Existential Transformation therefore reflects a fully agentic, two-level undertaking: deliberate self-change paired with purposeful career reconfiguration. The entrepreneurial endeavor becomes the mechanism through which both personal ideals and professional aspirations converge, creating a tightly integrated alignment between life purpose and livelihood.

This circumstance—where an individual undertakes a reflective examination of their identity and who they aspire to become, ultimately resigns from their job, and launches a venture that aligns their work with their authentic self—illustrates Eureka–Existential Transformation. Consider, for example, a long-time computer consultant who realizes through extensive reflection that their position no longer expresses who they genuinely are. They conclude that a more authentic path would involve *creating* tangible outcomes. The individual reviews a variety of entrepreneurial possibilities related to building something: perhaps establishing a retail business, or purchasing land to develop and sell an apartment complex. After weighing these options and accumulating sufficient financial resources, he/she leaves the consulting role and initiates a business focused on constructing an apartment building.

Because Eureka–Existential Transformation reflects intentional reinvention of both self and enterprise, the emancipatory entrepreneurship dimensions—autonomy, authoring, and declaration—are expected to be strongest here. Regarding autonomy, entrepreneurial action is pursued specifically to escape work that conflicts with personal identity [74]. This process is driven by deliberate self-exploration and a systematic review of different venture pathways, followed by the selection of the option that most closely matches one’s desired identity. In this quadrant, entrepreneurship functions as a means of liberation: release from career paths that did not fit who one is, and from external expectations imposed by employers or organizational structures.

Similar to Deliberate Search–Personal Transformation, the authoring component involves deep self-examination. However, within Eureka–Existential Transformation, individuals also thoroughly assess potential entrepreneurial avenues and craft a venture that expresses both who they are and who they intend to become. They design a business that enables them to shape both their professional trajectory and their evolving personal identity.

Declarations in this quadrant reflect transformation at both identity and occupational levels. Because individuals have altered their sense of self as well as their career direction, we can anticipate statements that signal both forms of change—such as “I have finally become my own boss,” representing identity-level transformation, or “Opening my own store is the next phase in my professional journey,” signaling career advancement. Given the full autonomy achieved in this typology, expressions of these declarations may range from understated to proudly assertive, depending on the entrepreneur’s personality.

Discussion and Implications

Departing from the assumption that entrepreneurship’s primary aim is “wealth creation” [75], this review broadens the perspective by framing entrepreneurship as a transformative process that supports the development of new identities. Our analysis focused on emancipatory entrepreneurship and the acts individuals take to free themselves from limitations [7]. We also considered entrepreneurial activity as a mechanism through which individuals overcome existential constraints in their lives. Responding to calls for research beyond traditional entrepreneurial settings, this review paid attention to everyday entrepreneurs striving for autonomy and personal freedom [7].

The findings indicate that entrepreneurship can provide avenues for liberation—whether in one’s occupation or personal life. To better understand how entrepreneurs experience change, we examined deliberation and serendipity as drivers of venture emergence and development [9]. While emancipatory entrepreneurship offers important insights, incorporating entrepreneurial discovery theory clarifies why different individuals experience different types of transformation. Through this lens, entrepreneurial transformation becomes a product of both planned action and unexpected opportunity, producing material shifts in one’s circumstances and/or changes in one’s identity. Ultimately, conceptualizing entrepreneurship as a transformation process highlights entrepreneurship as a self-directed, constructive path toward personal fulfillment.

The four-quadrant typology described above not only illustrates how emancipatory entrepreneurship unfolds as a process—through pursuing autonomy, crafting one’s own narrative, and making identity-oriented declarations—but also highlights how entrepreneurs themselves change. It shows the breadth of possible personal shifts linked to the level of agency and/or serendipity present when a venture is conceived. To date, the entrepreneurship field has paid limited attention to the *extent* of transformation entrepreneurs undergo or to the drivers behind that transformation. A notable exception is Chandra [76], who demonstrated that previous behaviors (such as involvement in terrorism) can constrain individuals and that emancipatory entrepreneurship may function as a release mechanism. Other scholars point to external pressures—dissatisfaction at work,

economic hardship, or joblessness [61, 67, 77]—as catalysts for new venture creation. Together, these insights suggest that variation in one's own actions, or lack thereof, may explain the spectrum of transformation an entrepreneur experiences. In essence, entrepreneurship becomes a means of reshaping not only the venture but also the entrepreneur's life, sense-making processes, and identity.

By identifying deliberation and serendipity as critical contributors to entrepreneurial transformation, we argue that individuals can intentionally shape this developmental journey by altering how much proactive evaluation and opportunity openness they engage in. For instance, someone starting a business specifically to escape personal or occupational constraints will recognize the need for both extensive deliberation and receptivity to unexpected possibilities, as the typology illustrates. Even though serendipity is inherently unplanned, entrepreneurs can heighten their exposure to potential opportunities. Virkkala and Mariussen [20] support this view, proposing that the entrepreneur's pursuit of self-understanding activates a transitional process in which individuals regulate their agency to match their desired change.

A previous study [78] explored how agency and identity shape the micro-emancipation of women entrepreneurs in patriarchal and Islamic contexts, yet it did not address entrepreneurial discovery or the transformation experienced by these individuals. Instead, it focused on how they converted male family members from "constraints" into "resources" through calculated acts of compliance and noncompliance. While our purpose is not to construct a comprehensive theory of entrepreneurship, integrating emancipatory entrepreneurship [7] with entrepreneurial discovery [9] sheds light on the broader significance of entrepreneurship [79] and provides direction for research on transformative entrepreneurial outcomes. Three avenues for future work emerge. First, the typology that connects identity and work transformation with emancipatory entrepreneurship warrants deep empirical study—qualitative approaches may be particularly fruitful, although quantitative research is also viable. Treating emancipatory entrepreneurship (autonomy seeking, authoring, declaration) as behavioral components of the entrepreneurial process, and deliberation/personal introspection as well as serendipity as antecedents to discovery, future studies could empirically test the moderating roles of these actions. Second, research that examines entrepreneurs' concrete behaviors during venture creation—especially those behaviors that substantially alter both their lived circumstances and their emerging identities—could make meaningful contributions to entrepreneurship scholarship.

In this review, we brought together research on entrepreneurial discovery, emancipatory entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurial identity to illustrate the different types of transformation individuals may encounter as they initiate new ventures. The framework offered here helps entrepreneurs interpret the shifts occurring in their professional or personal lives as their entrepreneurial identity evolves. It also implies that entrepreneurs can regulate the transformation process depending on whether they seek changes in work identity, personal identity, or both. By centering emancipatory entrepreneurship, this review draws attention to the significance of "ordinary entrepreneurs," long overlooked in prior scholarship [75, 80]. Additionally, our focus extends emancipatory entrepreneurship beyond the narrow contexts of economically disadvantaged groups. The insights presented here show that understanding identity formation within emancipatory entrepreneurship is relevant for entrepreneurs in both advanced and emerging economies. Ultimately, these perspectives contribute to more comprehensive theorizing about how discovery, change, identity, and value creation intersect in entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

This paper examines the personal and/or career transformations entrepreneurs undergo while engaging in emancipatory entrepreneurship. Through synthesizing scholarship on entrepreneurial discovery and emancipatory entrepreneurship, we propose a four-part typology of entrepreneurial transformation—Minimal Transformation, Career Transformation, Personal Transformation, and Existential Transformation—each shaped by the levels of deliberation and serendipity involved. We discuss how the emancipatory entrepreneurship processes of autonomy seeking, authoring, and declaration differ across these four quadrants based on the degree of deliberation and serendipity. Our argument is that emancipatory entrepreneurs can use entrepreneurship as a mechanism to realign their work roles with their aspirations (career identity) and/or their lived identity with the selves they wish to become (personal identity). Importantly, the typology provides a conceptual tool to help new entrepreneurs understand the changes occurring in both their work and personal lives as they engage in emancipatory entrepreneurship.

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