NEURODIVERSITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Edited by Louis D. Marino,
Andrew C. Corbett and Daniel A. Lerner

ADVANCES IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP,
FIRM EMERGENCE AND GROWTH

VOLUME 24

NEURODIVERSITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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ADVANCES IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP, FIRM EMERGENCE AND GROWTH VOLUME 24

NEURODIVERSITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

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While only recently receiving explicit attention from business scholars, the concepts of neurodivergence and entrepreneurship have been linked since the earliest research in the field. In its most fundamental form, neurodiversity simply means that some brains process information and function differently than others. Neurodivergent individuals are those who process information and function differently (than neurotypical individuals). The popular press and academics alike have highlighted that many entrepreneurs think and operate differently. In entrepreneurship research, seminal works have identified the importance of the general atypicality of the willingness to act in the face of uncertainty (Knight, 1921), of undertaking entrepreneurial activities, particularly those leading to creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1934), and of simply identifying opportunities others have missed (Kirzner, 1979). Indeed, anecdotal cases suggest that entrepreneurship is a context in which individuals who see the world differently can drive innovation, enhancing the public good and creating wealth. Relatedly, practice-oriented organizations have recently emerged, such as the Neurodiversity & Entrepreneurship Association and Neurodiversity Hub.

The term neurodiversity was coined in the 1990s by Australian sociologist Judy Singer, who initially used the term to apply exclusively to autistic individuals. Since that time, the use of the term has expanded to include a variety of conditions that cause neurodivergent individuals to function differently than neurotypical individuals. These conditions often include autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, other learning and developmental disabilities, and sometimes other clinical profiles such as hypomania or bipolar. While not romanticizing such conditions, the umbrella term of neurodiversity recognizes such naturally occurring diversity.

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Organizational researchers have theorized and found that entrepreneurship is a context in which some neurodivergent individuals can create a situation that enables them to harness their atypical perspective/proclivities. Many entrepreneurship scholars doing work in this area build on the foundational work of Verheul et al. (2015) and Wiklund et al. (2016, 2017) by examining the role of ADHD neurodiversity and entrepreneurship through a person–environment (P–E) fit theory lens. This perspective focuses on the antecedents and outcomes of alignment between an individual and their work environment. Expanding on this, Lerner et al. (2018a, 2018b) and Tucker et al. (2021) argue that while some aspects of neurodiversity may enhance an entrepreneur's fit with their environment, other aspects may be a detriment to the successful founding and growth of a new venture. Similarly, Moore et al. (2021) advocate for examining how neurobiological differences impact entrepreneurial cognitions as well as the behaviors of entrepreneurs.

Recent research in the field of entrepreneurship indicates that in some circumstances, entrepreneurship may indeed be a context in which the unique skills and characteristics of neurodiverse individuals fit with demands in the external environment (Freeman et al., 2024; Lerner et al., 2018b; Wiklund et al., 2016, 2017). For example, Wiklund et al. (2016, 2017) found that aspects of ADHD, including hyperactivity, can be positively associated with entrepreneurship, especially in highly dynamic and uncertain environments. Further, Lerner et al. (2019) establish a positive association between clinically diagnosed ADHD, entrepreneurial intentions, and entrepreneurial action. However, scholars in this domain recognize that the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurial activity is complex (Hunt et al., 2022; Lerner et al., 2018a), and a variety of nuanced relationships need further examination.

In addition, the unit of analysis of extant research in the area has been largely focused on the individual, and the types of neurodiversity examined in the literature have been limited. In this edition of *Advances in Entrepreneurship*, *Firm Emergence and Growth*, we encouraged authors to address these gaps in the literature and to expand the discussion of neurodivergence in entrepreneurship.

The seven chapters in this volume advance our understanding of neurodiversity in entrepreneurship by offering theoretical frameworks, empirical evidence, and interdisciplinary insights. The chapters vary considerably in their focus and methodological approaches, but they all offer insight into the connections between neurodivergent individuals and venturing. Each chapter provides a unique contribution – and collectively, the chapters advance the importance of understanding neurodiversity for entrepreneurial ecosystems and of leveraging the strengths associated with neurodivergent conditions while addressing concurrent challenges. Below, we provide a brief summary of each of the works in this volume.

In "ADHD, Gender, and Entrepreneurship," Tran and Wiklund offer a well-elaborated examination of ADHD, gender, and entrepreneurship. The vast majority of the extant literature examining neurodiversity and entrepreneurship either ignores, statistically "controls for," or simply calls for the consideration of the role of gender. This work substantively engages the intersection of gender and provides a comprehensive explanation and review of the role of gender in the

relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. The authors conclude with theoretical, practical, and research implications that provide rich opportunities for future research.

In the next chapter, "Neurological Perspectives on Gender in Entrepreneurial Finance," Heaton, Klein, Platt, and Yun develop a neurobiological model to explore the role of an entrepreneur's gender on investor interest in the venture. In developing this model, the authors introduce the concept of neural synchrony and develop propositions about the role of neural synchrony in investor interest, the role of an entrepreneur's gender, and the experience of an investor in the relationship between neural synchrony and investor interest. In addition to their innovative theoretical model, the authors provide detailed recommendations regarding how key constructs could be operationalized and how their propositions could be transformed into testable hypotheses. This study adds an additional dimension to Tran and Wiklund's discussion of the necessity to consider the impact of gender when examining the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship.

"Venturing Decisions of Neurodivergent People Who Defy to be Bounded by Rationality" explores how various forms of neurodiversity (ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, and dyspraxia) can influence entrepreneurial decision-making, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. Throughout this chapter, Kurdoglu differentiates between the types of nonrational decision-making and actions associated with various types of neurodiversity. He then demonstrates how such nonrational proclivities can be critical for enabling action in complex, uncertain entrepreneurial environments.

In "The Neuroscience of Neurodiversity in Entrepreneurship," Bongiorno, Passarelli, Ooms, and Massaro offer a systematic literature review and a bibliometric analysis on entrepreneurship and neurodiversity. Examining journals covered in Web of Science, an initial 139 articles were identified, with 28 articles ultimately retained. The authors review the neuroscience basis of the neurodivergent conditions covered in the entrepreneurship literature, with a particular focus on ADHD, dyslexia, and bipolar disorders. They conclude with recommendations on how neuroscience understanding may enhance neurodiversity research in entrepreneurship. The authors' emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches is commendable, and their focus on Web of Science journals and ADHD and dyslexia highlights an opportunity for future work to expand their analysis to include other journals and conditions.

The following chapter by Verheul, Vos, and Greven, "Is There a Link Between Sensory Processing Sensitivity and Entrepreneurship? Evidence from Three Perspectives," provides a timely and innovative empirical exploration of SPS as a driver of entrepreneurial alertness and self-employment. Their unique examination of SPS in the entrepreneurial context puts forth findings that generally support a relationship between high SPS and entrepreneurship as a desirable career. However, they caution that the mixed evidence provided by their analysis indicates the need for a nuanced perspective on the relationship between SPS and entrepreneurship. They caution that researchers need to examine both the potential advantages and challenges associated with entrepreneurship for individuals with high SPS.

Within "Differentiation of Self: Mitigating ADHD Symptoms in the Context of New Venture Teams," Franklin introduces Bowen's Family Systems Theory into the neurodiversity and entrepreneurship literature to provide insight into how to enhance the functioning of new venture teams with neurodivergent entrepreneurs. The author provides an insightful discussion of the interpersonal challenges of ADHD in teams and highlights the role of differentiation of self (DoS) in mitigating these challenges. DoS is defined as an individual's ability to balance thoughts and emotions while maintaining autonomy and intimacy in relationships. Franklin leverages this concept to develop propositions focused on the role of DoS in mitigating the interpersonal challenges that entrepreneurs with ADHD-related neurodiversity may face within entrepreneurial teams.

Finally, in "Does Neurodiversity in Founding Teams Enhance Performance? Investigating a New Type of Diversity in Founding Teams," Lawrence-Thomas, Lomberg, Alkærsig, and Keller leverage a dataset of over 5,452 Danish ventures founded between 2004 and 2013 to examine how mental health conditions (e.g., ADHD, mood disorders, and addiction) affect team dynamics and performance. The authors find that founding team neurodiversity is positively related to team performance with mood disorders, followed by addiction conditions, having the strongest impact. Importantly, they find that neurodiverse founders who have undergone treatment further enhance team performance and that teams with ADHD founders perform better in smaller teams. Lawrence-Thomas's empirical study is a standout contribution, offering robust evidence for the positive impact of neurodiverse members in entrepreneurial teams. This research contributes to understanding the adaptive benefits of neurodiversity in entrepreneurship and emphasizes the importance of team composition and organizational support in maximizing the strengths of neurodiverse members.

THEMES REVEALED IN THIS VOLUME

In reviewing the collective impact of the works in the volume, several themes emerge, most notably, (1) the potential competitive advantage of neurodiversity, (2) a need for better understanding of neurodiversity and entrepreneurial teams, and (3) a call for more research at the intersection of gender, entrepreneurship, and neurodiversity.

Neurodiversity as a potential competitive advantage: Several of the chapters adopt a strengths-based approach and emphasize how neurodiverse traits can enhance performance in the entrepreneurial context. Franklin, Heaton et al., and Tran and Wiklund link ADHD to entrepreneurial alertness and risk-taking. Additionally, the work by Verheul, Vos, and Greven associates SPS with deeper information processing and opportunity recognition. It is important to note that despite the strengths-based perspective employed by many of the authors, each recognizes that neurodiverse entrepreneurs concurrently face challenges and downsides that must be considered.

Team dynamics and inclusion: Several of the chapters in this volume focus on the interplay between neurodiversity and team dynamics. Franklin and

Lawrence-Thomas, et al. explore how neurodiverse individuals integrate into entrepreneurial teams, highlighting both the benefits and challenges of neurodiversity in collaborative settings. Both works advocate for creating support mechanisms that enable teams to leverage the unique contributions of neurodiverse team members while minimizing the associated challenges.

Neuroscientific and gendered perspectives: Contributions such as Bongiorno et al., Heaton et al., and Tran and Wiklund delve into the neurobiological and gendered underpinnings of neurodiverse traits, offering insights into how brain structures, neural connectivity, and societal expectations influence entrepreneurial behaviors and outcomes. Tran and Wiklund, and Heaton et al.'s work on gender disparities intersects with neurodiversity, highlighting systemic barriers that may differentially affect neurodiverse men and women. These chapters advocate for a more interdisciplinary and intersectional approach, integrating neuroscience, gender studies, and entrepreneurship research.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE ON NEURODIVERSITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

When issuing the Call for Proposals for this volume, we endeavored to secure works that would address key gaps in the entrepreneurship and neurodivergence literature. We believe we succeeded. While you, the reader, will be the ultimate judge, we believe this volume advances and enriches the literature on neurodiversity and entrepreneurship by offering the following contributions:

1. *Expanding theoretical frameworks*: The works in this volume apply interdisciplinary theories – such as Bowen family systems theory (Franklin), reinforcement sensitivity theory (Verheul et al.), and intersectionality frameworks (Tran and Wiklund) – to provide novel conceptual lenses that we believe can lead to new avenues of inquiry.
2. *Addressing underexplored conditions*: While several of our works focused on ADHD, the range of neurodivergent conditions addressed in this volume is arguably the most diverse to date. Kurdoglu's examination of ADHD, as well as autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, and dyspraxia, coupled with Verheul et al.'s examination of sensory process sensitivity, and Lawrence-Thomas et al.'s inclusion of mental health, mood disorders, and addiction, offer clear paths to significantly broaden the scope of neurodiversity research.
3. *Multi-level consideration and providing practical implications (e.g., inclusion)*: Finally, several of the studies highlight the complexity of the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship and caution that the effects are not universally positive. Just as it is unproductive and wrong to pathologize a person, so too it is to romanticize or blindly celebrate neurodivergence for entrepreneurs. In many cases, gaining the potential benefit of neurodiversity in an entrepreneurial setting, especially in a team setting, requires intentional interventions; and all entrepreneurs must effectively address fundamental, persistent issues challenging all businesses (e.g., managing cashflow, suppliers and

or materials, customers, employees, tax filings and other compliance, and profitability). Works in this volume, such as those by Franklin, Lawrence-Thomas et al., and Heaton et al., offer actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners who want to foster inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

We are grateful for the world-class team of scholars who contributed to this volume. We are confident that the works in this volume will open new avenues for inquiry into neurodivergence and entrepreneurship and will serve those seeking to better understand the complexity of this topic, as well as those working to create workspaces and inclusive ecosystems that benefit from naturally occurring (neuro)diversity.

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ADHD, GENDER, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the intersection of entrepreneurship, neurodiversity – with a particular focus on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) – and gender. It underscores the concept of neurodiversity, which acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual's brain and embraces the natural variations in mental functioning. This perspective encourages a new way of thinking about mental health in the context of entrepreneurship. Through a review of the literature, this chapter discusses how ADHD influences various aspects of entrepreneurship, such as attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. It also examines the role of gender and highlights the differences in entrepreneurial endeavors and in the diagnosis and manifestations of ADHD symptoms across genders. The chapter points out that gender stereotypes related to both ADHD and entrepreneurship have led to underdiagnosis and inadequate support for women entrepreneurs, who tend to exhibit less noticeable symptoms. This creates significant hurdles to their success in entrepreneurial settings. Despite the acknowledged differences in how ADHD and entrepreneurship are experienced across genders, research in this area remains limited. The chapter concludes by calling for a gender-sensitive approach in diagnosing and supporting individuals with ADHD. It stresses the importance of further academic research into the heterogeneous effects of ADHD on entrepreneurial outcomes and calls for studies that specifically examine the intersections of gender, ADHD, and entrepreneurship, while also addressing existing methodological challenges.

Keywords: ADHD; gender; entrepreneurship; neurodiversity; entrepreneurial outcomes

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research has investigated the intersection between entrepreneurship and mental health conditions within the broader context of neurodiversity. The concept of neurodiversity recognizes the uniqueness of every individual's brain and embraces natural variations in mental functioning (Singer, 1999). This perspective has begun to reshape the conversation surrounding mental health, with ADHD emerging as a focal point of interest. While specific data on the prevalence of ADHD among entrepreneurs is unavailable, multiple studies indicate a tendency for individuals with ADHD to gravitate toward entrepreneurial roles (e.g., Gunia et al., 2021; Lerner et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2020; Stappers & Andries, 2022; Verheul et al., 2016; Wiklund et al., 2016, 2017; Wismans et al., 2020). This trend is noteworthy given the challenges many individuals with ADHD encounter in traditional employment settings (e.g., Barkley et al., 2006; Fuermaier et al., 2021). The emerging research presents a more optimistic and empowering view of neurodiversity in professional environments and highlights alternative paths to success for those with ADHD.

Building on this understanding, the dialogue around ADHD and entrepreneurship could be enriched by accounting for the impact of gender. Gender disparities are evident both in entrepreneurship, where men are more likely to start businesses than women, and in the diagnosis and understanding of ADHD. Although ADHD affects all genders, historical biases in societal perceptions and recognition have skewed toward the male experience, impacting the way ADHD is identified, diagnosed, and treated across genders (Quinn, 2005). Men are more frequently diagnosed with ADHD, partly due to a stereotypical focus on symptoms like hyperactivity and impulsivity, which are more conspicuous and traditionally associated with males (Gaub & Carlson, 1997). In contrast, women with ADHD often exhibit symptoms such as inattentiveness and internalized behaviors, which are subtler and less apparent in academic or social contexts (Young et al., 2020). This difference in symptom presentation can lead to women being undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, resulting in a lack of essential support and accommodations. Such oversight can impede their ability to manage their symptoms effectively. This highlights a critical need for gender-sensitive approaches in both diagnosing and supporting individuals with ADHD. In addition, societal expectations and gender norms exacerbate the challenges faced by women with ADHD. Prevailing stereotypes often pressure women to be quiet, compliant, and organized, attributes that may be difficult for individuals with ADHD to embody (Heilman & Chen, 2005; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). These societal pressures can lead to internalized stress and increase the risk of comorbid conditions like anxiety and depression. The impact of these gender biases extends beyond mental health, potentially influencing the entrepreneurial ambitions and successes of women with ADHD (Young et al., 2020). The unique experiences and challenges faced by women with ADHD may shape their entrepreneurial journeys differently. This emphasizes the need to understand and address these biases in both ADHD and entrepreneurship research.

In this chapter, we review the existing literature on the relationship between ADHD and entrepreneurship and discuss the aspect of gender differences within