

MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP



Emerging Themes and
Interpretations with
Insights from Italy

DANIELA BOLZANI

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Migrant Entrepreneurship: Emerging Themes and Interpretations with Insights from Italy

BY

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About the Author

Daniela Bolzani is currently a Senior Assistant Professor in Management at the University of Bologna.

She received her PhD in General Management from the University of Bologna in 2013 with the dissertation *Internationalization intentions: Micro-foundations and psychological distance perceptions in immigrant and non-immigrant entrepreneurs*. Between 2013 and 2017, she worked as a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Management and the Department of Education Studies at the University of Bologna. Between 2017 and 2020, she worked as an Assistant Professor in Management at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan (Italy).

She has been a visiting scholar at the Leeds School of Business, the University of Colorado Boulder – USA (2013, invited by Prof. M.D. Foo), and at HEC Paris – France (2016, invited by Prof. T. Åstebro).

She has been a member of research teams for several European projects in the domain of entrepreneurship and technology transfer, such as the project “TASTE – Taking Stock of External Engagements of Academics” (PI R. Fini, funded by EU FP7, People – Marie Curie), “SOCCES – SOCial Competences, Entrepreneurship and Sense of initiative” (PI E. Luppi for University of Bologna, funded by EU Erasmus+), and “PROGRESS-TT – PROs GRowing Europe through best practice Solutions for Technology Transfer” (PI F. Munari for the University of Bologna, funded by EU Horizon 2020). In the domain of migration and intercultural issues, she participated to the project “EUMENTORSTEM – Creation of a European e-platform of MENTORing and coaching for promoting migrant women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics” (PI R. Grimaldi for the University of Bologna, funded by EU Erasmus+), and the project “MERGING” (PI S. Ferriani for the University of Bologna, funded by H2020), and Principal Investigator for the project “WeLearn – Intercultural Communication and neighbourness learning” (for the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, funded by EU Erasmus+), and “MIG.EN.CUBE – Fostering MIGrant ENtrepreneurship inCUBation in Europe” (for the University of Bologna, funded by EU Erasmus+).

Before starting her PhD, Daniela worked as a professional for over five years in the fields of financial audit and international development in Europe and Africa.

Her research interests concern the multi-level antecedents and processes of entrepreneurship, especially in the contexts of international, academic, social, and immigrant business. Because of the different perspectives required to analyze these topics, she favors interdisciplinary approaches and has gained experience in using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

Introduction

1. Rationale and Background

Researchers and policymakers have been interested in the entrepreneurial activities carried out by migrants since the late 1970s. As the number of people moving around the world has increased constantly over the last decades (UN DESA, 2019a), international migration has become a top priority on international agendas, being a key characteristic of a modern open society (Kourtit & Nijkamp, 2011; Massey et al., 1993).¹ As I am writing these introductory remarks, the total number of international migrants around the globe is 271.6 million, representing nearly 3.5% of the total world population (UN DESA, 2019a). In many Western economies, the increasing presence of immigrants began during a phase of slow growth, and massive technological and socio-demographic changes (Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Volery, 2007). Scholars and policymakers therefore have made efforts to understand the phenomenon more fully and plan for the inclusion of immigrants into receiving societies and maximize the contribution of immigrants to economic revitalization and social renewal (e.g., Naudé, Siegel, & Marchand, 2017; Rath & Schutjens, 2019). Considering that three out of every four international migrants are of working age (UN DESA, 2019c), in the next few decades, population and labor force growth in many member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will be fed by immigration (Boubtane, Dumont, & Rault, 2014; Clements, 2015).

In this global scenario, Europe, counting around 82.3 million migrants, has become one of the most important destination regions for international migrants (UN DESA, 2019a). Migrants nowadays comprise around 11% of the European population, with around two-thirds of them born in a non-EU country (UN DESA, 2019a). Over the last decade, the number of immigrants has grown by 28% (OECD/EU, 2018), partly driven by the increase in asylum seekers and refugees (OECD, 2019a). Southern Europe hosts around one fifth of these migrants, after Central Europe (37%) and Eastern Europe (24.7%).

Besides increasing migration flows, Europe has accomplished fundamental transformations in the labor market and in the industrial structure over the last 40

¹While there are flows of international migration happening across destinations located in the global South, in this book I will focus mainly on South-North migration flows (especially in Chapters 3, 4, and 5) in the specific context of Italy.

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years, which have pushed toward a general shift favoring self-employment and employment in small and medium-sized enterprises (Blaschke et al., 1990). This restructuring has hit certain immigrant groups much harder than native populations, which is reflected by historically higher unemployment rates among certain groups of immigrants in some countries (e.g., Barrett, Jones, & McEvoy, 1996; Clark & Drinkwater, 2010; Constant & Zimmermann, 2006). Even as recently as 2018, the average unemployment rate across EU member states was 11.5% for immigrants and 7.5% for natives (OECD/EU, 2018). Immigrants also face other disadvantages in the labor market such as deskilling, overqualification, and lower wages (OECD, 2019a). As a result, labor market integration has been and is still a major policy priority in the EU, together with social integration policies (OECD, 2019b).

One way through which labor market integration for immigrants can be achieved is through self-employment and entrepreneurship. On average, self-employment in the EU accounted for 14.9% of total employment in 2018. For immigrants, this rate was slightly lower (13.7% for those born in another EU member state, 13.1% for those born outside the EU). These data are extremely differentiated across EU countries (OECD, 2019a), as I will discuss later in the Italian case. The number of self-employed immigrants in the EU reached 3.6 million in 2018, which is around 11.7% of total self-employed individuals in the EU (OECD, 2019a). Among them, slightly more than 60% were born outside the EU (OECD, 2019a). The percentage of self-employed individuals increased steadily over the last decade (in 2008, only 7% of immigrants were self-employed; OECD, 2019a).² Nearly one-third of self-employed immigrants are job creators, which is slightly below the proportion of non-immigrants.

The phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship is significant not only in quantitative terms but also from a qualitative point of view. Migrant-owned businesses have been characterized increasingly by a growing diversity (or super-diversity; Ram, Jones, & Villares-Varela, 2017) in motivations, business models, entrepreneurial teams, organizational structures, and performances, among other aspects (e.g., Arrighetti, Bolzani, & Lasagni, 2014; Nazareno, Zhou, & You, 2018). In addition, some of these businesses are characterized by an additional layer of complexity linked to the transnational or circular migration patterns maintained by their entrepreneurs, or their embeddedness in diasporic communities (e.g., Lo, 2016; Schøtt, 2018).

To date, while numerous studies have addressed issues of interest from a sociological, anthropological, or regional development point of view, the topic of migrant entrepreneurship also has attracted considerable attention from management scholars (Dheer, 2018). However, available reviews of the literature on this topic show a general neglect of several key issues for management and entrepreneurship researchers, including the processes of identification and exploitation of opportunities (Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Dheer, 2018), and organizational-level strategy

²These figures do not account for Germany due to missing data issues in the sources of information (OECD, 2019a).

and performance (Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Ilhan-Nas, Sahin, & Cilingir, 2011). In addition, previous reviews call for additional insights gained from improved methodologies (for instance, the use of longitudinal research designs) and for the widening of research scope to under-studied contexts (Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Dheer, 2018; Ilhan-Nas et al., 2011).

In this book, I position my research within the increasing attention devoted to this topic, by both academics and policy-makers, by proposing research-based considerations from a management perspective. Based on a systematic review of 1,072 abstracts of journal articles published on migrant entrepreneurship up until 2019, I will focus on several topics and contexts overlooked by extant management research: ethnic vs. class resources, internationalization patterns, migrant entrepreneurship in entrepreneurial ecosystems, and returnee micro-entrepreneurship by assisted migrants. I draw on unique datasets that I started building in 2012 through research based on primary and secondary data collection carried out in (or from) the Italian context.

In Italy, the 6.3 million migrants present in 2019 represented around 10.4% of the population (UN DESA, 2019a). This is an interesting context in which to examine migration trends for several reasons. First, Italy is a country characterized by a relatively more recent migration phenomenon compared to other European countries (e.g., France, UK, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, ISMU, 2020): in 1990, migrants were less than 3% of the population; in 2005, they were 6.8% (UN DESA, 2019a). Second, in Italy the net inflow of migrants helps to offset population loss caused by more deaths than births (UN DESA, 2019b). Third, Italy in the last decade has witnessed an increasing diversity in its population of migrants, following some changes in the composition of migration flows (e.g., increasing family reunifications, asylum requests, international students and start-up visa applicants, creation of a second generation of migrants). This diversification has been accompanied by increasing evidence of political, economic, and sociocultural transnationalism (e.g., Ban, 2012; Grillo, 2004; Riccio, 2008). At the same time, Italy has experienced increasing migratory pressure from countries in situations of conflict or with dictatorial regimes, while at the same time reducing the channels for regular access through work visas, resulting in a mounting number of irregular migrants (ISMU, 2020). This situation has been accompanied by increasing social tension in the country, measured, for instance, in terms of the increasing cases of racial discrimination in the country (La Repubblica, 2019) and intolerance on social media (Vox, 2019). The attention to migration in the country increasingly has been associated with public security issues by several political parties and used as a way of getting votes during the most recent European political elections (Istituto Cattaneo, 2019).

The trends in the Italian labor market present immigrants as having higher activity and employment rates, but higher unemployment rates (Zanfrini, 2020). However, immigrants are much more likely than natives to be employed in sectors and job roles/tasks requiring a low qualification, precarious contracts, low remuneration, and disregarding their age, education, and work experience (Zanfrini, 2020). Notwithstanding this engagement into what Zanfrini (2020) defines as “poor” and “bad” work, the share of immigrants among employees is

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greater than the share working as self-employed (9.4% vs. 15.8% in 2018, [OECD, 2019a](#)). It seems, therefore, that self-employment is not a structural substitute for poor work opportunities in Italy, possibly due to self-selection effects of migrants entering the country with certain expectations and migratory project ([Zanfrini, 2020](#)). Overall, therefore, since in Italy self-employment is a common work trajectory, natives maintain higher self-employment rates than immigrants (21.8% vs. 13.1% in 2018, [OECD, 2019a](#)).

Migrant entrepreneurship is nevertheless a consolidated phenomenon in Italy, where the latest data report more than 600,000 firms, representing around 9.6% of the firms in the country ([Unioncamere, 2018](#)). Around 80% of these firms are solo enterprises ([Unioncamere, 2019](#)). Aggregate statistics based on data from business registers managed by Unioncamere in Italy (the national Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Crafts, and Agriculture) normally are released only with regard to this last group of firms, because it is easier to identify the role of migrant entrepreneurs as owner-managers of the company and their countries of origin ([Unioncamere, 2018](#)). Migrant enterprises are active across many sectors, especially in retail trade (around 162,000 firms, 19% of all the firms in the sector), specialized constructions (109,000 firms, 21% of all the firms in the sector), and restaurants (43,000 firms, 11% of all the firms in the sector; [Unioncamere, 2018](#)). The literature has provided evidence about the engagement in transnational business for firms operating in both low- and high-value added industries (e.g., [Ambrosini, 2012](#); [Brzozowski, Cucculelli, & Surdej, 2017](#); [Lan & Zhu, 2014](#)). As I will explore further in Chapter 3, although 94% of municipalities in Italy count at least one firm established by a migrant entrepreneur ([Unioncamere, 2019](#)), many of them (18%) concentrate in the Lombardy region, in the north of Italy, followed by Lazio and Tuscany regions, in the center of Italy (12% and 10% of total respectively). Migrant entrepreneurs come from an impressive variety of countries of origin, although migrants born in Morocco (around 15%), China (around 11%), and Romania (around 10%) are the most represented ones.

2. Key Definitions

The study of migrant entrepreneurship requires the researcher to clarify the boundaries for their work, given the plethora of definitions, categories, types, and labeling of entrepreneurial endeavors undertaken by people with a migrant background (e.g., [Chaganti & Greene, 2002](#); [Dheer, 2018](#); [Drori, Honig, & Wright, 2009](#); [Elo et al., 2018](#)). There are two sources of confusion in this regard. First, the definition of “entrepreneurship”: what it is, how it works, what it should accomplish, and what are its overall social and economic goals ([Anderson & Sarnawska, 2008](#); [Honig, 2020](#)). Most agree that there is not a single, universally accepted definition of entrepreneurship, and this has long been the case; in 1988, Morris listed 77 definitions while in 1989, Gartner listed 24 diverse definitions. Second, the definition of “migrant” in terms of generational characteristics (e.g., foreign-born vs. second-generation), citizenship, and diasporic embeddedness (e.g., [Dheer, 2018](#); [Drori et al., 2009](#)).

In addition to these issues in defining theoretical terms, the measurement of migrant entrepreneurship also is fraught with problems. For instance, the background data presented at the beginning of this introductory chapter were extracted from the European Labor Force Survey that regards “self-employed people as those who work in their own business, farm or professional practice and receive some form of economic return for their labour” (OECD, 2019a, p. 22). It, therefore, counts entrepreneurs as individuals who work in their own organizations; but it does not provide information about the number of companies established by these individuals, given that more than one individual could be a partner of the same firm. Similarly, business registers, such mentioned earlier about the ones managed by Unioncamere in Italy, identify companies but might omit details about the shareholding and management composition that could allow identifying the participation of migrant entrepreneurs (e.g., country of birth, equity share, board membership).

Given that this book aims at investigating migrant entrepreneurship from a managerial perspective and in under-studied contexts, I approach these definitional issues as follows. First, I define entrepreneurs as individuals who create new organizations (see Gartner, 1989). This definition is close to an occupational characterization of entrepreneurs as individuals working on their own account and risk (e.g., Hébert & Link, 1982; Hopp & Stephan, 2012). This fits well with my objective of investigating a range of different contexts for entrepreneurial endeavors, such as “involuntary” returnee entrepreneurs and start-uppers in entrepreneurial ecosystems. Second, I adopt a broad definition of migrant as an individual born in another nation who subsequently moved to a host nation at some point in their lifetime (Wadhwa, Saxenian, Rissing, & Gereffi, 2007). This definition therefore focuses on first-generation migrants, but leaves open the possibility for considering transnational, return, and diasporic linkages and practices pursued by these individuals. However, it does not account for individuals from minorities from certain racial (e.g., Afro-Americans in the US), religious (e.g., Muslims in the US), or indigenous groups (e.g., Native Americans in the US).

3. Structure of the Book

The book is composed of five chapters. After this introduction, kept short on purpose and focused on key background and definitional issues, Chapter 1 presents a systematic mapping of the available literature on migrant entrepreneurship, comparing the contribution of management literature on this topic with all other disciplines over the last 30 years. While several reviews of the literature on migrant entrepreneurship already exist (e.g., Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Dheer, 2018; Ilhan-Nas et al., 2011; Nazareno et al., 2018), my work differentiates itself from these previous works because I span disciplinary boundaries and types of journals, apply a wide definition of migrant entrepreneurship (as described above), and privilege coverage over focus by favoring abstracts. The data collection, carried out using the ISI Web of Science Core Collection, including and analyzing 1,072 articles,

resulted in the most extensive review effort conducted on this topic to date. I map the field using an antecedents-process-outcomes framework across the three relevant levels to investigate entrepreneurial endeavors (i.e., individual, organizational, and contextual; e.g., [Bolzani, Marabello, & Honig, 2020](#); [Saebi, Foss, & Linder, 2019](#)). This mapping provides insights about the different contributions made by management scholars to date, and about future research avenues still remaining that they could investigate to make a meaningful contribution to the understanding of migrant entrepreneurship. Among the themes still waiting for the attention of management researchers, I identify four topics which I analyze in depth in the following chapters: the distinction between ethnic vs. class resources (Chapter 2), migrant entrepreneurship in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Chapter 3), internationalization patterns (Chapter 4), and returnee micro-entrepreneurship by assisted migrants (Chapter 5).

In Chapter 2, I propose a firm-level perspective to migrant entrepreneurship. Focusing on the importance of firm level resources, the chapter presents some key concepts from three established theories in the field of management (i.e., Penrose's theory of the growth of the firm, Resource Based View, and Resource Dependency approach) to highlight possible avenues for future research on migrant entrepreneurship that can be addressed from a firm level perspective. This chapter contributes to previous work on migrant entrepreneurship, reviewed in Chapter 1, that has focused mostly, either empirically or theoretically, on the individual or the contextual level of analysis, rather than on the firm level. By presenting some theories from a firm level perspective and illustrating how to combine them with other perspectives, I provide an original viewpoint from which to address migrant entrepreneurship, inspiring new studies in the field.

In Chapter 3, I move beyond the copious literature dealing with spatial perspectives on migrant entrepreneurship to elaborate on the environmental conditions that can influence its creation and development. Given the prevalence of migrant entrepreneurship in cities, I analyze the literature on urban dynamics and entrepreneurial ecosystems, and provide insights on migrant entrepreneurship in large metropolitan areas in Italy, focusing on Milan in particular. I compare general statistics on migrant entrepreneurship and knowledge-based entrepreneurship, focusing on innovative start-ups and innovative SMEs. Using exploratory qualitative data collected from two different incubators and the municipality in Milan, I show how the attraction and inclusion of migrant entrepreneurs is influenced both by attributes of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and by actors' strategies and cultures.

In Chapter 4, I shed light on the internationalization intentions and behaviors of migrant entrepreneurs, compared to native ones. The strategic domain of internationalization is one of the most neglected areas of research in migrant entrepreneurship because it regards business-level outcomes intertwined with decision-making, not only pertaining to transnational market opportunities (i.e., with the country of origin) but also to foreign markets at large. Building theoretically on intention models of entrepreneurial behavior, the chapter looks at how immigrant and non-immigrant entrepreneurs compare in regard to internationalization intentions, follow-up on their preparatory actions, and actual

international entry. Comparative analyses are conducted on unique longitudinal primary data collected from a matched-pair sample of 140 domestic migrant and native entrepreneurs active in new technology-based firms in Italy. The study shows that internationalization is equally desirable to domestic migrant and native entrepreneurs, but that the two groups of entrepreneurs differ in their perceptions of the feasibility of internationalization, which is lower for migrant entrepreneurs. Looking at internationalization behaviors, no significant differences exist between migrant and native entrepreneurs with respect to engagement in preparatory activities. However, around 25% of all sampled native entrepreneurs started to export, vs. 18% of migrant entrepreneurs, but the difference was not statistically significant. No entrepreneur opened a subsidiary or a branch abroad. Further analyses show that migrant entrepreneurs have a weaker ability to convert internationalization intentions into actual behaviors due to a greater lack of control over their actions. The implications of these findings for research and policy are discussed.

In Chapter 5, I provide new insights about returnee entrepreneurship by exploring the determinants of entrepreneurial investment for a sample of “non-elite” involuntary returnees. To achieve this, I use information on 93 African and Latin-American return migrants from Italy supported by an assisted return and reintegration program aimed at helping returnees in setting up micro-businesses. The chapter explores the factors that influence the reintegration outcomes of assisted returnee entrepreneurs in the country of origin, by examining the factors influencing their intentions to re-migrate. The findings show that intentions to re-migrate are influenced mostly by returnees’ comparative evaluation of economic, family, and psychological factors in the host and home countries. Assisted migrants who were able to prepare their return, such as those who accumulated financial resources in the form of investments (through remittances), returned with their families, and had a clear idea about the situation in their home country; and migrants who experimented difficulties in the host country, such as being in conditions of irregularity; were found less likely to intend re-migrating. The implications with respect to migrant entrepreneurs’ preparedness for long-term reintegration in their country of origin are discussed.

A concluding chapter completes the book. This chapter provides an overview of theoretical reflections based on the work developed in the previous chapters and summarizes future research directions on migrant entrepreneurship from a management perspective. In addition, it suggests relevant issues for policymakers and practitioners about how to approach migrant entrepreneurship and how the experiences analyzed at the local level (i.e., in Italy) can be generalized to a wider context.

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