



# ***“My Disability Is Something We Use as a Strength” — Hero or Not Hero: Revisiting Critical Studies about Entrepreneurship***

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**Abstract.** Critical perspectives challenge the figure of the hero. Meanwhile, the scientific debate lacks a conceptual framework to define the hero characteristics. The objectives of this research are to present and extend the hero-matrix, to use entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWD) as a means to test the matrix empirically, and to shed light on what defines a hero in our current post-modernist context. To do so, we interviewed 20 EWD twice over the course of a year. Our results show that a hero is someone who successfully copes with seven injunctions relating both to himself or herself as a person, and to someone who interacts with others. Disability seems to increase the intensity of each criterion.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurs; entrepreneurship; leadership; opportunity; disability.

## **1. Introduction**

The myth of the heroic entrepreneurs emerges within a framework, where they are perceived as individuals who create profits and wealth within society (Roberts and King, 1991, 1996; Weiskopf and Steyaert, 2009). This myth was broadcasted in society through fictions, advertising and narratives. But decades later, reality appears dissonant with this hero-innovator figure (Jones and Spicer, 2009; Ogbor,

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2000). Most entrepreneurs fail often, and could not be credited alone for their success. Furthermore, a large array of motivations such as providing self-employment, emancipation or autonomy can also contribute to initiating a business. Therefore, generating profits is no longer the only motivation. Critical perspectives are challenging this heroic figure, and assert that entrepreneurs are more agents of transformation, who sometimes only seek their own self-employment. The hero, as the neo-liberal society's savior, is no longer relevant.

Therefore, the core of the debate is to redefine the relationships between 'heroic' entrepreneurs and society. However, such a debate needs a conceptual framework to define the characteristics of these new heroic entrepreneurs and better understand this type of entrepreneur. In response to this gap, Fournout (2017, 2022) designed a topical hero-matrix with seven criteria, by perusing more than 500 fiction movies, newspaper articles, advertisements, and 200 management and self-help books edited in the last decades. The objectives of this article are to present and extend the hero-matrix, to use entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWD) as a means to test it empirically to better apprehend this theory, to perceive its scientific usefulness, and to shed light on what defines a hero in our current post-modernist context. The EWD category of entrepreneur could, in fact, be described as heroic. The representations of people with disabilities vary. They can be positive but they are not always in favor of these individuals considering, according to Barnes (1996), the history of disability research and how some individuals with disabilities have argued that it has played a role in the oppression of disabled people. In films, progress has been made in the representation of characters with physical disabilities, who are no longer depicted as comic figures or beasts. However, the theme of pity is still prevalent (Black and Pretes, 2007). The labor market for people with disabilities continues to experience significant disparities in employment, unemployment, and poverty compared to those without disabilities (OECD, 2022). One of the motivations for individuals with disabilities to undertake entrepreneurship is to avoid discrimination (Norstedt and Germundsson, 2023). It is important to note that this research aims to depict objectively the situation of entrepreneurs with disabilities without seeking to reinforce the superhuman image of individuals with disabilities.

Self-employment and entrepreneurship can indeed offer viable solutions to address the inequalities faced by people with disabilities (Ashley and Graf, 2018). They are often seen as a viable avenue to secure employment and earn a livelihood because individuals with disabilities often encounter challenges when trying to enter the job market (Norstedt and Germundsson, 2023). Overall, individuals with disabilities are more inclined to choose self-employment as a means to meet personal, economic, and social needs or, as suggested by Mota, Marques, and Sacramento (2020), to avoid unemployment. Consequently, they are more likely to be self-employed than others. Self-employment provides flexibility and a better fit between disability status and professional life. For

people with disabilities, the levels of job satisfaction, job type, and working conditions for self-employed workers are higher than those reported by employees, as noted by Logan (2009) for individuals with dyslexia. Thus, it would be preferable for disability to be rigorously integrated into all relevant policies and practices, as this integration represents the missing link for better inclusion in the labor market (OECD, 2022).

Although research has started to move away from an individualized discourse on disability, disability remains inadequately theorized as a constructed difference (Williams and Mavin, 2012). In “The hero-leader matrix in business and cinema”, Fournout (2017, pp. 42-43) develops an iconic case study devoted to a fictional hero who is disabled: Jake Sully, in James Cameron’s 2009 film *Avatar*, one of the biggest blockbusters in film history. It is noted that “the sensations, hopes and feelings of the hero are increased tenfold by his physical handicap. His need to love and to act is reinforced by his furious need to escape the strict limits of his wheelchair”. As we will see later, the situation of disability clearly brings to light the interiority criterion of the hero-matrix (see Section 2.3 for further explanation). This article hypothesizes that this result could be generalized to all the criteria of the hero-matrix no longer using a fictional figure, but real people in a situation of disability investing in an entrepreneurial project. Disability could make the heroic effect more intense, more obvious, more exemplary, because of a higher level of difficulty. If entrepreneurs are classically heroised, entrepreneurs with disabilities could represent the paragon of modern heroism. Does the hero-matrix apply to entrepreneurs with disabilities? Can these entrepreneurs exhibit the characteristics of this matrix?

First, this article reviews the literature on the hero, its myths and its criticisms in the field of entrepreneurship, and proposes a conceptual framework. Then, it presents the qualitative methodology used to test the hero-matrix. Entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWD) are an underrepresented group in entrepreneurship research (Hidegh et al., 2022). 20 EWD in the Parisian metropolitan area, France, were first interviewed twice over the course of a year. Then, the data were coded and organized according to the seven criteria of the hero matrix. The results show that a hero is someone who successfully copes with seven criteria relating both to himself or herself as a person, and to someone who interacts with others. The discussion challenges the hero-matrix and demonstrates how it can contribute to critical studies in entrepreneurship. Finally, this research concludes by highlighting its empirical, theoretical, and managerial contributions.

## 2. Review of the Literature and Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. *The Myth of the Entrepreneur as a Hero*

When emerging in a neo-liberal policy context, ideologies, narratives and dominant assumptions view entrepreneurship as a good thing for society: “the more entrepreneurs the merrier” (Weiskopf and Steyaert, 2009). Consequently, the entrepreneur is considered as a hero that is tenacious, works hard, and is willing to take risks. The figure of the “hero-innovator” (Roberts and King, 1991, 1996), a creative genius, having skills to come up with brilliant ideas and to pull the strings to use political connections at the same time (Brown and Osborne, 2005), was initially a shared representation in the literature. In early scholarly work, heroes possess three sets of capacities: to engage in rational analysis, to see new possibilities offered by the evolving historical situation, and a desire to make a difference (Doig and Hargrove, 1987). Entrepreneurs also develop an alertness that helps them to identify opportunities before others (Kirzner, 2009). Once they gather information and signals from their environment, they process and transform them quickly into something creative that generates wealth (Aldrich, 2005). Dealing with uncertainty and asymmetrical knowledge of information, entrepreneurs are willing to take risks (Palich and Bagby, 1995). If not everyone can be a hero-innovator by birth, everyone can be taught and stimulated to become one (Roberts and King, 1991, 1996).

To understand how the heroic figure emerged, it is important to explore how political and socio-cultural factors influence entrepreneurial identities, activities and processes. The interconnections between the political and conceptual representations of entrepreneurship reveal what lies behind this figure (Jones and Spicer, 2009). The hero-figure emerged in a neo-classical economy and liberal environment. In 2011, the World Bank published a report entitled “Entrepreneurship Snapshots 2010: Measuring the Impact of the Financial Crisis on New Business Registration” where it acknowledged that “the concept of entrepreneurship lacks a common language” (p. 6) but that: “For practitioners, entrepreneurship has generally been viewed as the process of creating new wealth. The entrepreneurial process centers on the discovery, creation, and profitable exploitation of markets for goods and services.” (p. 7). The World Bank logic is that entrepreneurs enable growth and wealth, which in turn enhance general well-being. At a time when dominant thinking was functionalism, generating growth was the evidence for success (Kiviluoto, 2013). This also contributed to legitimize discourses on heroic entrepreneurs (Perren and Jennings, 2005). Studies about their profitability show how important entrepreneurs are to the economy and society in general (Lazear, 2005).

Meanwhile, bureaucracy was also pointed out as inefficient and cumbersome (Grey, 2004; Hendry, 2004). By comparison, entrepreneurship appears to be more agile, and can benefit from innovations quickly. Anderson and Warren (2011) summarized the opposition between contra-entrepreneurial and entrepreneurial

identifiers in dialectical oppositions especially bureaucratic management and self-motivation.

## 2.2. Critical Perspectives on Hero Entrepreneurs

Jones (2012) shed light on the dangers of the previous assumptions, as entrepreneurship is much more complex than generating profits. In line with Jones's work, academic critical perspectives became numerous, and disputed the heroic figure (Calás et al., 2009; Jones and Spicer, 2009; Ogbor, 2000; Rehn and Taalas, 2004). They questioned the liberal roots of entrepreneurship, the relation between entrepreneurship and society, and challenged the hero myth.

A first critique came from the implication that a hero is unique and acts alone. It is for example the case of Ancient Greece or fantasy heroes. Neo-liberal values are closely related to individualism, calling for an enterprising man (Collins and Moore, 1964). However, a bulk of research points out the importance of networks, partners and other stakeholders, emphasizing the role of teams (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2003; Meijer, 2014). Furthermore, the heroic traits of the entrepreneurs, relating to their uniqueness and the fact they act alone, were criticized as early as 1998 by Osborne (1998) and by Doig and Hargrove (1987). All argue that in spite of their importance, individual traits have to be understood within an organizational context and a contingency of organizations and regulations. The assumption that an entrepreneur is a hero only accountable for success is arguable. Meijer (2014) asserts how difficult it is to separate the role of individuals when it comes to innovation in the case of public service organizations. He therefore advocates for distributed-heroism, and identifies five roles contributing to the development of innovations (creator, innovation entrepreneur, test manager, innovation packager, innovation diffuser), showing how such roles are distributed through the successive stages of an innovation project. Some people play a key role during the early stage of idea generation, while some others focus on idea selection, idea testing or idea scale-up.

A second critique of the hero myth came from the simple observation of reality: many entrepreneurs are facing major crisis and have to cope with failure and insolvency (Jones, 2012). The hero-figure does not emphasize symbolic violence and suffering, even though entrepreneurship and crisis have at least three interconnections. Jones (2012) asserts how entrepreneurship can be a solution to crisis, a crisis-creator or how crisis can be an opportunity for entrepreneurship creation. The relationship between entrepreneurship and economic growth is therefore much more complex than the one established by the growth oriented liberal paradigm.

The third critique came from the complexity of the entrepreneur as a person. As Gartner (1988) concludes, defining an enterprise is easy (as is the creation of organizations), but defining the essence of an entrepreneur is more challenging. It uncovers a wide range of realities (Rehn and Taalas, 2004). Jones and Spicer (2005) assert that entrepreneurship researchers have mostly focused on the

investigation of structural factors, without considering the entrepreneurs' subjectivity. Relating to Lacan's mirror stage and identification process, they build their reasoning on Žižek's concept of the sublime object. The entrepreneur's subjectivity, history and uniqueness is a sublime object that must be taken into account. As a piece of this sublime object, the motivation to start a business can be a good starting point. The hero myth takes for granted that wealth creation is the dominant motivation for starting a venture (Carsrud and Brännback, 2011). Essers et al. (2017) challenge this premise of mainstream research and invite researchers to confront “dominant ideologies, intellectual traditions and prevailing assumptions which bind entrepreneurship within the dictum of profit maximization and wealth creation” (p. 1). Profit and economic utility are not necessarily the main drivers of most of the entrepreneurs (Shane, 2009), and have moved from mainstream to secondary goals, whereas non-financial motivations became predominant (Baker and Pollock, 2007). Rindova et al. (2009) further suggest that entrepreneurship researchers should focus on other motivations such as the search for autonomy, self-realization, self-employment, or contributing to social change among others. Indeed, many other legitimate motivations can lead to entrepreneurship than just wealth creation (Thoelen and Zanoni, 2017). For women, it means freedom and emancipation (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). For migrants or “barefoot entrepreneurs”, it is a matter of survival (Villares-Varela et al., 2017). EWD usually want to be self-employed (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020).

Lastly, all entrepreneurs are not equal. Carland et al. (1984) differentiate entrepreneurs from small business owners. While small business owners create companies for individual purposes, entrepreneurs seek more collective goals. Hybrid entrepreneurs move smoothly towards self-employment while keeping other sources of revenue (Folta et al., 2010). Instead of aiming for the development of innovative businesses, many entrepreneurs look for self-employment, although it is worth noting that this form of work comes with constraints, such as limiting the ability to work with others or organizations. Besides seeking profit and economic utility, keeping the company at flow, reaching personal goals, or transforming society are today mainstream motivations to start and manage a company.

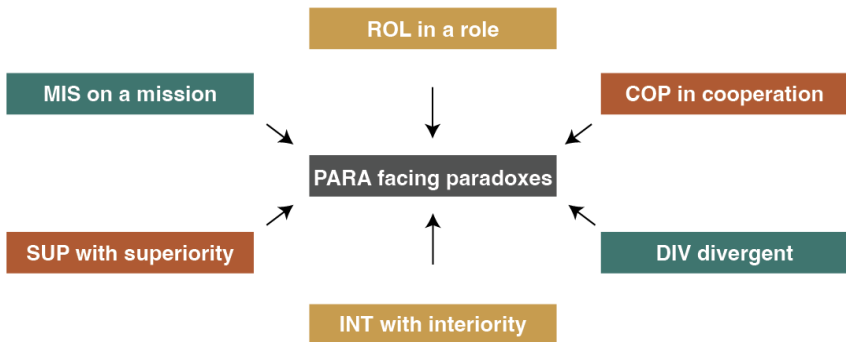
### *2.3. Conceptual Framework for the Entrepreneur as a Hero*

The literature about the entrepreneur as a hero deals with goals and motivations to a great extent. However, if wealth creation is not the main motivation of the heroic entrepreneur anymore, the debate then needs to be reframed to define a new type of entrepreneurial hero for society. Both critical and non-critical perspectives do not offer a conceptual framework to think and assess what a hero is in this regard. Fournout's hero-matrix (2017, 2022) offers one that mixes both personal characteristics and social interactions. Fournout's integrated framework is relevant, as it offers an avenue to think about the characteristics of the entrepreneur at the crossroads of several interactions in society.

Fournout (2017) explores the heroic posture by synthesizing six criteria in tension with each other: being both very good at constructing external roles [ROL] while being very internally invested [INT], focusing on a structured mission [MIS] while diverging from usual frameworks [DIV], displaying superpowers to power through and withstand difficulties [SPW] while exhibiting good negotiation skills [NEG].

More recently, Fournout (2022) slightly altered his conceptual framework by changing the terms on one of the axes, and adding a seventh criterion (see Figure 1). The following seven criteria are: role [ROL]/interiority [INT], mission [MIS]/divergent [DIV], superiority [SUP]/cooperation [COP]. [SUP] and [COP] replaced [SPW] and [NEG], and are associated with the capacity to show superiority in adversity, especially when entangled in power relations [SUP], while also being able to cooperate [COP]. The final criterion is at the center of all of these injunctions and enlightens their paradoxes. [PARA] is therefore associated with the capacity to orient oneself in a world of paradoxical injunctions.

Figure 1. The seven features of the hero-matrix. Source: Fournout (2022)



In the present article, we follow the conceptual framework of 2022, insisting on the fact that the words used to label the criteria point to a cloud of possible meanings in a larger semantic field. These labels are coherent, but the words serving as labels should not be fetishized.

The first six criteria are arranged in pairs of contradictory injunctions — [ROL]/[INT], [MIS]/[DIV], and [SUP]/[COP], which cover three axes — the axis of the self, the axis of belonging to a reference group, and the axis of interaction with others in general. The order of exposure adopted here does not imply any hierarchy between the axes or criteria. All the criteria function in parity with the others.

### *2.3.1. Axis of the self, assuming both an external role and an interiority [ROL]/[INT]*

The category “role taking” [ROL] enlightens diverse behaviors. The individuals/characters are sensitive to social roles and to the image they give. They assume a part in displaying specific behaviors and play with them, even if they are not always comfortable communicating.

Under the label of “internality” [INT], several registers can collide. The individuals/characters show a tendency to introspection. They know themselves, their values and visions. They pay attention to their sensations, feelings, thoughts, emotions, which come from the body itself.

### *2.3.2. Axis of belonging to the group, valuing both the mission framework and the way to diverge from it [MIS]/[DIV]*

The mission criterion [MIS] is declined according to several aspects. The individuals/characters set priorities within an established framework and accomplish what is important. They comply with the objectives. They have clients or sponsors. If they do not have a mandate, they invent a mandate for himself/herself.

The criterion divergence from the frameworks [DIV] is defined through several possible behaviors. The individuals/characters innovate. They deviate from what exists, are creative, invent, disrupt habits, and break the frameworks. Sometimes, these processes happen at the limit of legality.

### *2.3.3. Axis of general interactions, as specific actions are deployed both against and with others [SUP]/[COP]*

The tendency to seek superiority [SUP] manifests itself in a variety of possible ways. The individuals/characters know how to compete. They do not shy away from power struggles, and claim their due. They show resilience in the face of difficulties, stress, and risks.

The call for cooperation [COP] can be valued in different ways. The individuals/characters adjust, and adapt to others. They have the ability to listen, communicate, interact, and dialogue. They show a taste for democracy, equality, peace, and respect.

### *2.3.4. The paradox [PARA] criterion*

The seventh criterion, paradox [PARA], is at the crossroads of the three axes, and comes as a meta-injunction. It formulates that, in the face of the tensions generated by the first six criteria, there is a need for an intense capacity to digest paradoxes in order to succeed in today’s world. This can be expressed in different ways, by being both realistic and idealistic, by establishing a long-term vision while being in the moment, by considering financial constraints while finding a way to escape from them, etc.



It is important to underline that the hero-matrix integrates some parts of the “heroic entrepreneur myth” (cf. section 2.1. above) and of the “critical perspectives on hero entrepreneurs” (cf. section 2.2. above), without opposing them. The resulting definition of the hero does not imply that the heroic posture is solely oriented towards profit generation and is exercised only in a solitary manner. On the contrary, it emphasizes the dimensions of inner, emotional and subjective motivations and of the ability to play collectively. It does not imply that the heroic posture does not go through crises, accidents, and difficulties. It suggests that the capacity to go through crises, accidents, and difficulties, while not always being victorious, is part of the definition of the modern hero.

Heroization is then rather based on resilience in the face of tensions, which define a system of paradoxical injunctions: “The heroization of hypermoderns does not come only from having to fulfill difficult missions of technological innovation and value creation in complex and risky environments. It has a deeper cause, which comes from psycho-socio-pragmatic prescriptions. A race to satisfy them is boundless, because a system of paradoxical injunctions can never be completely satisfied. It is by definition always precarious, always to be put back on the job, always in crisis, always in imbalance” (Fournout, 2022, p. 16).

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Data Collection*

There is an imbalance among the different national contexts analyzed in terms of knowledge production about entrepreneurs with disabilities, with a bias towards English-speaking territories (Billion et al., 2024). Thus, it seems important to dedicate attention to other countries such as France. The empirical material is based on in-depth interviews with 20 entrepreneurs with motor or sensory disabilities in the Parisian metropolitan area in the Ile-de-France region.

Contact with potential informants is made through the researchers’ personal and professional networks, supplemented by meetings with associations, companies and local authorities. Word of mouth works favorably among informants and other individuals and organizations who have direct contact with this kind of entrepreneurs. Twenty informants were selected according to different variables in order to get a diversity of stories and to understand the subtle connection between disability and entrepreneurship. The sample is very qualitative. As the research progresses, it is refined according to the personal characteristics of the entrepreneur, such as type of disability, gender, age, social origin and ethnic minority. The sample is also built according to the professional characteristics of the entrepreneurs: their occupation, geographical location, sector of activity. The stage of development and the size of his/her company were also selection criteria. Finally, the status of the entrepreneurs and their stage of advancement in the entrepreneurial project — start-up, intermediate stage,

advanced, at the end of the journey or ex-entrepreneur — were variables that oriented the composition of the sample. The meetings with the informants took place in person, by videoconference or by phone. Characteristics of the sample participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the informants and their businesses

Name	Age	Disability	Line of business
Agnès	40	visual	Continuing education
Bernard	32	visual	Sport
Bertrand	67	motor	Photography
Bruno	60	visual	Multi-activities: IT, training
Dalele	46	motor	Communication and events management
Daniel	49	visual	Multi-activities: consulting, catering...
Dina	59	motor	Continuing education
Gabin	63	visual	Physical therapy
Jacques	60	visual	Physical therapy
Jérôme	20	motor	Sales
Justine	40	hearing	Graphic Design
Kacim	36	motor	Multi-activity: laboratory, textile
Marwan	32	motor	Matchmaking technology
Maryam	32	motor	Matchmaking technology
Nicole	43	hearing	Media
Odin	56	visual	Consulting
Olier	39	hearing	Communication
Sabar	40	hearing	Catering
Thierry	47	visual	Continuing education
Victor	25	visual	multi-activities: Continuing education, consulting

Two interviews were planned to understand the individual characteristics and the relationships to others of the entrepreneurs and the context to entrepreneurship. During the first interview, the reasons leading to entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurial path, the status of the entrepreneur, the functioning of the business, and the difficulties encountered were explored. Direct

questions are asked about disability. Interrogations allow us to question the heroic character or not of each informant.

With the exception of Dalele and Dina, who were the only informants to have chosen face-to-face interviews and email respectively, all the interviews took place by phone or videoconference. The massive use of remote interviews can be explained by potential time savings, difficulties of traveling due to disability, and the COVID-19 pandemic during which this research took place between 2020-2022.

One year later, all informants were contacted for the second and final interview. The purpose of this interview was to get an update on the informants and their company. It also focused on the possible support of their relatives and business partners within the wider network of their company. It was punctuated by questions about their entrepreneurial wishes and their dreams in a broader sense. Seventeen informants completed the second interview. Ten interviews were conducted by phone, seven interviews were received by email. Three informants did not participate in the third interview despite numerous solicitations.

### *3.2. Data Analysis*

Interviews were recorded and transcribed word-for-word. The interview transcripts are the units of the narrative analysis (McAdams, 2012). Three sequential coding phases were conducted in the analysis research: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Notes were taken during and after the interviews to identify relevant key points. In the open coding phase, words or short phrases are detected and marked to develop a set of first main concepts. Interview texts were coded around the three main themes based on the research questions: entrepreneur, disability, hero.

During the axial coding phase, data are classified into groups according to similarities and frequencies. The interview texts of all codes were re-read and a condensed text was produced about each code in order to identify significant statements (Kvale, 2007). The connections between the concepts were structured into new categories (Hsieh et al., 2019). Critical components of conceptualisation are constituted of coding and categorisation of data (Basit, 2003). The data are classified according to the seven categories of the hero-matrix. During the selective coding, the concepts are analyzed to detect their resemblances and differences and clarify the critical insights from them (Basit, 2003). The hero-matrix can be tested and refined.

In general, we adopted a method of triangulating data between researchers. The constant-comparative method is used (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The four researchers code independently the full interview transcripts for recurring themes. Then, the researchers discuss together any differences in interpretation, and agree on the findings.

## 4. Results

The results are organized according to the seven major criteria of Fournout's hero matrix outlined above.

### 4.1. Role [ROL]

Bernard: *“You never know how your disability is going to be handled between yourself and especially the looks of others.”*

Bruno: *“Actually my disability negatively affects my relationship with others because it is the others who see my disability negatively.”*

The image of disability in the eyes of others, even more than the disability itself, can be an issue, as this image can have a greater impact on the entrepreneurs' activities than the image the latter have of themselves. Individuals in society are subject to prejudices that influence their relationship with others. Stereotypes about people with disabilities relate to their incapacity, powerlessness and inadequacy. Furthermore, despite all the contemporary discourses on inclusiveness, people with disabilities may be totally or partially on the margins of society. Discourses are not always followed by facts.

Agnès: *“My disability (...) It is something that is used as a strength, as a commercial argument.”*

Marwan: *“The fact that you have to re-educate people every time, educate people on the fact that you can do things. Maybe also the side that you have to demystify disability.”*

Disability is used by some EWD as a marketing and communication argument. Some of the informants use self-marketing and their own disability as a sales pitch. They differentiate themselves by highlighting their uniqueness. They use their own experience of disability to feed their company with their own experience, their history and their trials. They also transform their stigma into a marketing strategy to get a competitive advantage. Challenges and limitations imposed by society restrain the development of the persons with disability. However, these individuals are able to rectify such limitations. Disability is an integral part of their professional identity, company, corporate culture, and business development.

Disability is demystified by the entrepreneur in order to make it a strength. It also contributes to storytelling. EWD can be successful, go beyond their limits and the limits that others expect of them. They can be models of success or be unnoticed. Since they are not expected to achieve their goals, competitors or opponents may underestimate them. This surprise effect can be a strength during the entrepreneurial adventure.

#### 4.2. Interiority [INT]

Daniel: *“I realized that I had to cultivate this eternal optimism in order to first live and sometimes survive in complicated situations.”*

Nicole: *“I rebel against obstacles (...) It's anger and rage that make me roll up my sleeves. Or from another point of view, it's my empathy and willpower that make me roll up my sleeves for actions that I don't necessarily benefit from by the way.”*

Disability leads to actions that are rooted in emotions. Inner involvement and dispositions can be powerful and take the form of passion, optimism, faith in oneself, empathy, dreaming and anger. Faith, empathy and anger correspond to human qualities that help the entrepreneurs to maintain their focus in order to overcome obstacles inherent to their projects. On the other hand, passion, optimism, and dreams allow them to live, to survive the difficulties of life, and to imagine themselves differently elsewhere. Optimism is also a key element for developing an entrepreneurial project.

Bertrand: *“I'm not going to say that this is the solution for a disabled person, but at some point you have to know how to use your head to get around problems. When you have a problem that you can't do anything about, you figure out how to get around it.”*

Bruno: *“You have to anticipate all the time, otherwise you can get hurt, you can make mistakes etc. The life of visually-impaired people forces them to anticipate.”*

Physical and sensory disabilities have cognitive effects, as they force the entrepreneur to think more and to see further to compensate for their disadvantage. EWD have specific issues, which require them to find innovative and unique solutions. They perceive situations differently, and therefore act differently. They anticipate in order to achieve their mission, as they encounter specific difficulties in their daily and professional life. Anticipating allows them to reflect on the diverse situations they may have to face. It is a way to counter or circumvent potential future obstacles, and is part of the obligation to adapt. By anticipating, people with disabilities develop singular intellectual skills. For instance, the visually-impaired informant learned early on to memorize information quickly. Memory is therefore an important lever which allows compensation.

#### 4.3. Mission [MIS]

Maryam: *“I became an entrepreneur because quite simply I was having a really hard time finding my place in employment.”*

Victor: *“For me, my greatest entrepreneurial experience was to live in Paris.”*

Entrepreneurship allows people with disabilities to work, to access the economic market, to create and develop their own place in society. It adds meaning to their lives. An anecdote is worth considering. Changing cities, moving to and living in Paris is in itself an entrepreneurial act. The capital can be hostile for a disabled individual, who must face the subway, thieves, unfriendly passengers, and find his/her way. These new experiences and obstacles suggest entrepreneurship is more generally a way of life that imposes challenges to overcome.

Agnès: *“That is to say, there is eye strain. But what is positive is all the methods I have been able to put in place.”*

Bruno: *“I have complete control of my project. And that’s what being blind gives me.”*

Organizing one’s work, knowing how to present it in an attractive way, motivating one’s collaborators, convincing partners or clients to join the entrepreneurial adventure, and finding solutions in a hostile context require mental strength and correspond to qualities specific to all types of entrepreneurs. Personal determination is constantly tested, and entrepreneurs sometimes need to overcome their loneliness.

EWD are seeking to organize themselves and master the tasks to be accomplished. They are versatile, implement specific work methods, set objectives, seek to structure, master and develop their business project. They sometimes mimic the attitudes and behaviors of their able-bodied peers. They need to adapt to achieve their mission. They create their professional identity by carrying out the tasks that are part of their job. They respect the process to achieve their goals.

#### *4.4. Divergence [DIV]*

Agnès: *“Disability is perceived as a difference, we are part of different communities.”*

Victor: *“Stuff, I do it in a different way and that, yeah, I might waste time on one thing but I’ll go 10 times faster than a guy on something else.”*

Disability is a difference and is perceived as such. Nevertheless, this difference can be a strength or the source of other strengths. People with disabilities must live with their differences, accept them and do something with them. To do so, entrepreneurship can be a solution, as it responds to a quest for freedom and risk.

EWD create change and novelty, in relation to others and to themselves, in order to make the world evolve. They are engines of creativity, as entrepreneurs with motor or sensory disabilities move away from the established framework.

Bernard: *“Doing things that I would never have expected to do, simply achieving them. It’s things that are a little unexpected, also by the effect of opportunities.”*

Daniel: *“Innovation often comes from those on the fringe so I’m part of that. And so to think differently, to design things differently, I think it’s a plus for me, for the entrepreneurial adventure I’m in, in the sectors I’m in because as a result, I’m going to bring new ways of designing the product, of designing the service.”*

Innovation can come from people on the margins, who think differently. However, the latter are often part of a minority and discriminated against. Therefore, they must develop specific strategies and innovations in order to be able to live like, and with, the others. They can be innovative in several ways, whether it is in the way they work, create a product, or manage employees. People with disabilities also develop a set of managerial skills that can be used to strengthen their company.

#### 4.5. Superiority [SUP]

Bruno: *“I have worked in the private sector, in the public sector, in different companies, in large companies, I have never found a place adapted for visually impaired people. So we’re forced to adapt every time more or less.”*

Dalele: *“These are fights that require a lot of energy because that day, I really wanted to do an action against this service because I tell myself, they are humans, they can understand the vagaries that can happen. But no, it’s fixed, the rule will not change.”*

People with disabilities do not have an easy life. They face adversity, can feel restricted, stifled in their progress at work. Their daily life as citizens, workers and entrepreneurs can be difficult and painful. It is up to them to take the step to adapt, as they are losers by definition in the balance of power. As a minority, they are in an imposed situation of submission. They adapt to the majority, whereas the majority does not necessarily adapt to them.

Dalele: *“You have to fight.”*

Dina: *“I never give up; I like to win; my disability has often made it difficult for me to access certain things but I’ve always tried.”*

EWD also demonstrate superiority. Disability can be understood as an education to struggle. It does not prevent entrepreneurs to have the power to make decisions about their lives. Informants develop their strength to move forward particularly through the overcoming of their own disability, which pushes for social and economic progression. In general, field data relate to the superiority criterion, which is characterized by recurrent themes such as power dynamics,

competition (as opposed to cooperation), risks to life (physical or psychological), and challenging trials.

#### 4.6. Cooperation [COP]

Agnès: *“Then we are very well supported. (...) We have volunteers, people who are volunteers and who support us since the beginning. (...) I am very well supported. My friends that I had before I started my company support me wholeheartedly, my family.”*

Bernard: *“To get opinions, concrete feedback, it’s always a good thing to get feedback from the first circle. It’s kiff kiff. Family, friends. Depending on who they are and what skills they may have it’s always so good to get that.”*

Cooperation is essential for people with disabilities in general, and EWD more specifically, as they need help for specific tasks such as travel and writing for instance. Because of their differences, they may feel the need for support from loved ones and others in general, such as family, friends, and volunteers. Family, friends, and volunteers make their networks and skills available. They accompany and take over the tasks that the entrepreneurs can hardly accomplish alone because of their disability. They contribute to the company thanks to their skills, help the entrepreneur to travel, to access some documents, achieve some administrative tasks etc. Entrepreneurs know how to create connections and surround themselves with their loved ones. Their network allows them to progress.

Professional partners are also involved in the entrepreneurial adventure. From a strategic and personal point of view, these partners have a vested interest in the success of the venture. Thus, they could also benefit from it. By helping the entrepreneur, they help the company and, therefore, themselves. They also have specific powers associated with the entrepreneur’s handicap. The entrepreneur may find himself/herself in a situation of dependence, and needs assistance that is not necessarily desired in theory. When the work equipment is not accessible, the entrepreneurs rely on their business partners to assist them.

Dina: *“If I have an example of support, the CPME (Confederation of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) has been with me since the creation of Handytrick. It has helped me a lot with the directions I have given to the company and has brought me a number of extraordinary and always benevolent entrepreneurial friends.”*

Gabin: *“I was very lucky that I got along well with the council of the Ile-de-France region which helped me a lot along the way and everything.”*

Entrepreneurship constitutes a place for cooperation with collaborators, awareness raising, transmission, joint learning, collaboration with supporting



institutions, and network development. Cooperation can present specificities related to EWD. Their network can be very extensive, as it is necessary for them to be able to organize, to structure their organization, to look for and find clients. A very dense network can also mean that the entrepreneur needs a lot of help to deal with his/her disability. Knowing how to network effectively is an important skill for EWD.

#### 4.7. Paradox [PARA]

Daniel: *“For me, entrepreneurship is the opportunity to achieve the right balance between my autonomy and my performance.”*

Maryam: *“Entrepreneurship is something that today is very sensitive for the disabled because it is still very difficult.”*

Entrepreneurs want to do everything by themselves. They are aware of their disability while denying it. At the same time, they recognize that entrepreneurship is a difficult path and yet they take it. They are sometimes in a comfortable situation but want to get away from it.

Tensions appear between the criteria leading to entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship challenges disability while valuing independence and performance. It can be a solution to the work of people with disabilities while not necessarily being a first choice. It can provide the means to excel while making it difficult to excel.

Jacques: *“Well, it’s annoying because you want to be independent.”*

James: *“So I have to ask someone every time, because people don’t tend to help too much so I have to ask please can I cross.”*

Tensions emerge more generally in relation to disability itself. EWD want to be autonomous, like everyone else, while being aware of the impact that disability has on their life. They seek company when they do not have other solutions but cannot be accompanied at all times. They ask for help from people who do not necessarily think about helping them.

## 5. Discussion

The discussion first loops back to the hero-matrix and then proposes a contribution to critical studies.

### 5.1. Validation and Extension of the Hero-matrix

This research on EWD provides an empirical validation of the hero-matrix. The robustness of the matrix was furthermore tested on a specific population, EWD,

who illustrated the seven criteria thanks to their personal and professional experiences. The assignment of their verbatims to each criterion worked relatively well. Reciprocally, the hero-matrix contributes to disability and entrepreneurship literature. For example, developing a role seems complex for an entrepreneur with a disability. The tensions that arise are twofold, as they are due to the duality of the entrepreneur's identity. As reported by the informants, the image that potential clients have of them relates both to their entrepreneurial capacity and their disability. EWD have to justify themselves more, to show that they are fully capable of carrying out their missions (Billion & Doussard, 2023). And this is true even if they are also users of the tools they legitimately created and sell to solve some of their disability issues. The difficulties associated with their disability feed their interiority with emotions such as anger, empathy or dreams at their peak. Furthermore, EWD show divergence and since those we interviewed were successful, they feel superior. This criterion crystallizes their fighting ability. Cooperation is also necessary, and calls for a variety of support: family, friends and partners among others. Finally, the paradox criterion shows two dialectics between autonomy and dependence, and disability and performance. Successfully starting a business fits into this matrix.

Ultimately, EWD intensify each of the criteria of the hero-matrix, and bring them together as a whole. At the same time, disability and entrepreneurship further reinforce the saturation of such criteria, by exacerbating the tensions, and by making the informants appear as paragons of success by fulfilling the criteria in an exemplary way.

### *5.2. Contribution to the Critical Studies Debate*

The research contributes to the critical studies debate in several ways. First, it provides a definition and a matrix related to the hero that responds to the concerns of critical studies. It is necessary to rethink what a hero is in relation to diverse socio-economic contexts, in order to better analyze the connections between hero and society. This matrix is originally based on the analysis of several hundred sources (books on personal development and management, press articles, advertisements, cinema films, etc.). The matrix places the individuals at the crossroads of paradoxical injunctions that they must resolve to face the tensions that are exerted on him/her. The matrix then describes the interactions between an individual and society, corresponding to the requirements of critical studies identified in section 2.2. Through the analysis of entrepreneur's narratives, the matrix makes it possible to determine if he can be qualified as a hero.

Second, even though the EWD we interviewed can be considered as heroes according to the hero-matrix, they never use the term hero or any vocabulary referring to the figure of heroism. This empirical result could lead one to wonder whether the term hero is appropriate, and could not simply be replaced by the word “Success”. The hero-matrix would then become the matrix of success without losing any of the behavioral content related to the seven criteria.

Third, the informants use a vocabulary that heavily relies on the semantic field of combat: one fights, one encounters obstacles in one's path, one has a fighting character, it is hell, it is a struggle and disability is a weapon. This leads to the conclusion that one is not born a hero, one becomes one. The "essence" of the hero does not exist, even though researchers initially based their theories on the myth of the heroic entrepreneur, having been destined from birth to this fate like Greek heroes do (Roberts and King, 1991, 1996). It is indeed the capacity to overcome many obstacles that eventually gives birth to the hero: this is what the hero-matrix integrates well through the [SUP] criterion. But, once again, recognizing success in a particularly difficult context would perhaps be enough to qualify the situation of EWD and make them models of success, without any further reference to heroism.

Fourth, EWD correspond to some extent to the definition of the hero given by earlier works, as someone who is tenacious, works very hard, and is willing to take risks (Aldrich, 2005; Doig and Hargrove, 1987; Kirzner, 2009). On the other hand, this tenacity is not necessarily about generating profits and creating monetary value. This research therefore elaborates two new motivations to become an entrepreneur, far from wanting to generate profits. Creating a job for oneself when the labor market is not very open to people with disabilities, and developing a useful tool for people with the same disability to allow their autonomy and well-being are also two important motivations to become an entrepreneur. The importance of autonomy and well-being is prevalent in today's society.

Finally, this research is also in line with some of the criticisms dealing with the hero entrepreneur myth (Jones, 2012; Jones and Spicer, 2009; Ogbor, 2000; Rehn and Taalas, 2004). The EWD is not alone, but included within a broader network, ranging from business partners to other people with disabilities and stakeholders. Success is collective and associated with the ability to federate, interact and cooperate with different stakeholders. Entrepreneurial skills are considered important for business growth and success (Mitchelmore and Rowley, 2010). Furthermore, the EWD does not always succeed or does not succeed the first time. Failures are inherent to the trajectory of the entrepreneur and can be a way to train, without negatively affecting the qualification of the hero. Basic skills that young people acquire through education are developed through experience and training (Chell, 2013). The hero must show resilience, courage, and tenacity. As mentioned above, the hero is one who knows how to evolve within paradoxical injunctions and who has found a solution to face the challenges posed by his or her presence in society.

## 6. Conclusion

This research makes empirical, theoretical and managerial contributions. From an empirical contributions perspective, the sample of informants includes exclusively EWD, which is original. All of these entrepreneurs are motor or sensory impaired, while also presenting a variety of backgrounds, personalities and businesses created, which produced eclectic field data. Twenty participants were chosen based on various variables to ensure a range of narratives and gain insights into the nuanced relationship between disability and entrepreneurship. The sample is highly qualitative. The characteristics of entrepreneurs are examined across various variables, including disability type, gender, age, social background, ethnic minority status, occupation, socioeconomic status, geographical location, sector of activity, and stage of advancement in the entrepreneurial project.

From a theoretical contributions perspective, this research is the first to empirically test the hero-matrix. This matrix is thus empirically validated, even if some points deserve further study. It contributes to the field of disability and entrepreneurship literature. EWD accentuate each aspect of this matrix and unite them into a cohesive whole. Simultaneously, disability and entrepreneurship continue to bolster the saturation of these criteria by heightening the tensions and by portraying the informants as models of success through their exemplary fulfillment of these criteria. Furthermore, this research contributes to the debate on critical studies. Firstly, it offers a definition and a matrix associated with the hero that addresses the concerns of critical studies. Secondly, even though the EWD we interviewed could be categorized as heroes based on the hero matrix, they never employ the term "hero" or any vocabulary related to the concept of heroism. Thirdly, the interviewees employ a vocabulary strongly rooted in the semantic domain of conflict: they speak of battling, facing obstacles along their journey, possessing a fighting spirit, describing the experience as challenging, even characterizing disability as a weapon. Fourthly, EWD, to some extent, align with the definition of a hero as presented in previous works, exhibiting qualities such as tenacity, hard work, and a willingness to take risks. However, this tenacity does not necessarily revolve around generating profits and creating monetary value. Fifthly, EWD fit into the hero theory, but due to their atypical nature, they reinvent the concept of heroism and offer new perspectives in the field of entrepreneurship. Finally, this research also aligns with certain criticisms directed at the myth of the hero entrepreneur.

From a managerial perspective, this hero theory could be useful in supporting EWD. It could be employed by mentors and advisors working with these entrepreneurs in business incubators. It would provide these entrepreneurs with external feedback on their identity, enabling them to gain better self-awareness and, as a result, leverage their strengths. This self-awareness and self-improvement work can help them transform what might be perceived as weaknesses into strengths.

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