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Intent on Change: microbusinesses transforming places through individual, collective and 'aggregate' agency.

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We use agency and performativity theories to explore microbusiness entrepreneurial agency in creating brighter futures for economically marginal places. Ethnographic methods reveal how microbusinesses play an active role in shaping their left-behind context, seeking to regenerate their environment using a mix of individual, collective and what we term 'aggregate' agency – the informal yet purposeful collective assemblage of microbusiness action. We examine how microbusiness contributions to local, social and economic development are not incidental byproducts of entrepreneurial actions; rather, owners start-up with explicitly transformative intentions and use their individual, collective and aggregate agency purposefully to signal hopeful futures for left-behind places.

Introduction

Whilst entrepreneurial agency is key factor in regional development, policy and research surrounding the tends to focus on how entrepreneurship drives economic growth through innovation, prioritising larger businesses and job creation in urban areas (Huggins and Thompson, 2020), missing the contributions of everyday microbusinesses, and the contexts of small and rural towns (Welter et al., 2017; Mayer and Motoyama, 2020). This research explores how microbusiness entrepreneurial agency is pivotal in reimagining and regenerating a rural town in the northwest of the UK, characterised by post-industrial economic decline and multiple deprivation. Drawing on a blend of ethnographic methods, including qualitative interviews, reflective diaries and field observations, we explore how these businesses explicitly seek to transform their environment in a left-behind place.

Our consideration of agency is situated within the broader debate on entrepreneurship as social transformation, which defines entrepreneurship as creating structural changes through ‘transformative capacity’ (McMullen et al., 2021). This emphasises the dynamic interplay of agency and structure, as entrepreneurial actors interrelate with and shape context. We take the concept of performativity (Gibson-Graham, 2013) as our theoretical underpinning to help understand how microbusinesses reimagine and enact a more hopeful version of place. We argue that by performing an alternative to the depletion characterising the left-behind context, microbusinesses can performatively challenge and potentially change the prevailing structures. Their intentional and performative agency is not purely economic but also material in nature.

Analysis draws attention to how microbusiness agency involves a performative representation of an alternative future that appears to be making a difference to local people who perceive their town as on the cusp of change. We see microbusiness agency operationalised firstly through their intention and reflexive actions; and secondly through their performative practices at individual, collective and aggregate levels. Our discussion highlights how it visible manifestations of new microbusinesses signal potential and challenge negative perceptions. There is recognition that individual agency of microbusinesses is limited, expanding on how a formalised collective exercises proxy and collective agency (Bandura, 1999). We introduce the concept of ‘aggregate agency’ to explain how the informal collective of individual microbusinesses operate separately yet in unison, intending to create change. We point to how interrelations between owners, their businesses, premises, customers, visitors and other human and non-human entities emphasize the distributed nature of their aggregate agency (Callon, 2007).

Dynamic relationality of entrepreneurial agency and place

Place is a critical context for entrepreneurship (Stam and Welter, 2021). Geographer Doreen Massey’s conceptualisation of place as dynamic and relational - continually in the making through the nexus of interrelating social relations, economic transactions, political negotiations and specific histories - underlines the significance of entrepreneurial agency in making and shaping place (Massey, 1991). Traditionally, research focused on how place enables or constrains entrepreneurship (Refai et. al., 2023). Conversely, entrepreneurial action instigates change in local places - through job creation, developing business ventures, or social entrepreneurship (McKeever et al., 2015). Bottom-of-the-pyramid businesses

generate social transformation in place (Rindova et al., 2009; Villares-Varela et al., 2018) and grassroots entrepreneurs circumvent national institutional constraints to enact change in local communities (Lang et al., 2014; Muñoz & Kibler, 2016). Our research contributes to this work by demonstrating how micro-businesses actively shape the constrained place in which they are embedded, through a focus on agency.

Entrepreneurship embodies agency, offering pathways to individual personal wealth, independence, fulfilment and creative freedom. From self-employment to game-changing growth and innovation of Silicon Valley tech companies; entrepreneurship drives change (McMullen et al., 2021). Definitions of entrepreneurship rest upon the role of entrepreneurial action in discovering, evaluating and exploiting opportunities (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Bandura (1999) explains agency as 'self-organising, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulating' processes, highlighting the importance of self-efficacy – a distinguishing factor of entrepreneurship (Chen et al., 1998). An entrepreneur's perceived ability to achieve their goals provides the incentive to continue with their business opportunity and overcome any difficulties.

The importance of agency has recently been reinforced by McMullen et al.'s (2021) suggestion that the field could be unified through a definitional focus on entrepreneurial agency, whereby entrepreneurs can be recognised by their transformative actions. Entrepreneurial agents do not act alone, but are embedded in social context that simultaneously influences and is influenced by their activity (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Therefore, when examining entrepreneurial agency we are concerned with the dynamic relationship between agency and context. Rather than passively adapting to context, entrepreneurial agency creates, disrupts and transforms structures. In other words, entrepreneurship is concerned with social transformation (Laine & Kibler, 2022; McMullen et al., 2021).

Rather than examining agency in isolation, we need to consider the dynamic interplay between agency and context. Human agency and social structures are interdependent whereby people are influenced by and shape social structures (Bandura, 1999). Institutional entrepreneurship concerns how entrepreneurs transform societal institutions (Jennings et al., 2015), despite institutional pressures to conform to them (Garud et al., 2007). This suggests a dialectical relational view that recognises how entrepreneurial actions are shaped by formal and informal societal structures, whilst actively shaping these structures. This moves the focus beyond how societal contexts constrain or promote entrepreneurship, to consider the many and diverse ways that entrepreneurship drives societal change. Businesses can shape the local institutional fabric by participating in lobby groups and networks, often co-evolving with the development of the institutional landscape (Dieleman & Sachs, 2008), business associations collect and disseminate industry information, collaborating to foster cluster development (Berrone et al., 2016), and entrepreneurial actors create change through cultural processes that include entrepreneurial story-telling, and identity construction to legitimise new ventures (Lounsbury et al., 2019). Through understanding of agency and place as dynamically relational, microbusinesses are seen to actively shape the constraints of the place in which they are embedded.

Operationalising entrepreneurial agency – the role of intentionality

Intentionality is a core feature of agency, underlining the proactive pursuit of intended goals, as opposed to mere coincidence. Agency involves setting goals, anticipating consequences, and following through with action (Bandura, 2001). Therefore, both motivation and ability are prerequisites for transformative entrepreneurial action (McMullen et al., 2021). There can be multiple motivations for starting up a small business venture, including profit, social impact, passion to innovate (Douglas et al., 2021), familial tradition, personal and social values (Wimalasena et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial intention can be related to place, motivation to build community solidarity (McKelvey and Lassen, 2018), or desire for community respect and concern to improve local economic conditions (McKeever et al., 2015). Smaller for-profits are often motivated by social concerns, reflecting a commitment to their local communities by providing quality well-paid work and training for local people, addressing environmental concerns, or combatting inequality (Soundararajan et al., 2018; Tenant, 2015). There is collective nuance to these complex and mixed motivations that combine societal (collective) and individual drivers (Wimalasena et al., 2021) – particularly, we argue, for microbusinesses.

Collective agency occurs when a group with shared motivations and goals work together, pooling power and action in a coordinated way (Bandura 1999). The emphasis is on shared goals and collective action, extending beyond the sum of individual action (Bandura, 1999). Entrepreneurial collectives are ‘reflexive, self-aware, and bound within meaningful local or regional spaces’ working together to create change (Lippman and Aldrich, 2016). This can be seen in industry collaborations, such as craft brewers, sharing cultural capital relating to recipes and methods, balancing competition and co-operation to sustain growth (Dodd et al., 2021). This is important in peripheral regions where sharing resources helps overcome structural challenges and retain competitiveness (Larsen et al., 2022). Collective entrepreneurial agency can itself have intentional social goals such as sustainable growth (Korsgaard and Anderson, 2011), or maintaining local culture and heritage (Hasim and Soppe, 2023).

Distributed agency brings an alternative view of intentionality in collective entrepreneurial action. Distributed agency concerns actions spread across various human and non-human entities, highlighting the complexity and interconnectedness of agency involving combinations of actors (Callon, 2007). There is limited consideration of distributed agency in studies of entrepreneurship. Garud and Karnoe (2003) consider how multiple actors including entrepreneurs, institutions and customers are embedded in a web of technological artifacts, policy and knowledge that influences action, and the development of new technology itself. More recently, consideration of interconnecting human and non-human elements is seen as critical to addressing environmental grand challenges (Calas et al, 2018), examining the distributed role of the natural environment in co-constructing the context of green spaces (Melin and Gaddefors, 2023). This brings implications for whether this type of agency might always involve conscious and shared intention, conflicting with Bandura’s definition (Bandura 1999;2001). Whilst distributed agency views everyday entrepreneurial context as co-constructed, it can miss the intention within small business actions. As seen later, our findings emphasize the distributed nature of microbusinesses’ agency (Callon, 2007), revealing how an informal collective assemblage of microbusinesses operating

separately yet in unison co-constructs the context *with intention*, using what we term ‘aggregate agency’.

Operationalising entrepreneurial agency – a lens on performativity

Performativity offers further potential for understanding how entrepreneurial action actively shapes and constructs context (Garud et al., 2018; Garud and Gehman, 2019), recognising how “phenomena are constituted, de-constituted and re-constituted” through the discourse and actions of social actors (Garud et al., 2018:61). Callon’s economic performativity has considerable influence, using discourse to demonstrate how economic theorising shapes and constructs market behaviours and structures (Callon, 2009). Berndt and Boeckler (2023) develop Callon’s work to explore how economic knowledge shapes broader social and spatial contexts. Translating to micro-business, we would expect the way that people talk about and practice entrepreneurship and small business within their contexts to be instrumental in constructing the social and economic reality of the business and context (Parkinson et al., 2018). This can strengthen and reinscribe dominant structures, such as heroic narratives that present entrepreneurship as a masculinised concept (Galloway et al., 2015;). Alternatively, it provides transformative potential - offering believable and realistic alternatives, that can be talked or enacted into being.

Geographer Gibson-Graham uses performativity to reimagine the economy through enacting alternative forms of economic organising that challenge conventional capitalist focus on profit and growth (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). They draw attention to already existing multiple forms of transaction, work and enterprise – including social enterprise, ecopreneurship, self-employment, local trading schemes and community business – to demonstrate that community-focused economic practices are more prevalent than perceived, thereby performatively strengthening their presence in the economic landscape (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Bringing attention to diverse forms of economic activity promoting community, equity and sustainability, legitimises them and opens potential for enacting them (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). Similarly, highlighting the actions of socially-driven and informal enterprise within micro- home-based businesses contests the focus on heroic, for-profit entrepreneurship (Williams and Nadin, 2013; Welter et al., 2017). By the same logic, performative demonstrations of possibility could also provide hope for economically left-behind communities. It would follow that visible performances of economic vitality in a depleted community might contribute to bringing the change into being, positioning local businesses as having a constitutive role in the local place, with power alongside others to bring about change.

Our context for exploring entrepreneurial agency in place

This research centres on a small rural town in northwest England that is geographically and economically peripheral. Once prosperous in the 18th and 19th centuries, the town (hereafter the Town) fell into decline with the rapid collapse of the coal and iron industries in the early 20th century. Like many other former industrial hubs, the Town was left behind by industry and vast unemployment and associated social problems accompanied its decline and depletion. Today, the Town ranks among the UK’s most persistently deprived (MHCLG 2019) but as outlined below, our research participants recognised the community as strong

and resilient. Over time engaging with the community, the authors observed shifting dynamics in the Town. While previous regeneration initiatives have largely failed, current major regeneration initiatives are starting to bring change and there have been multiple attempts to reframe the Town's negative image. A new sense of hope comes across in interviews, when businesses and residents revealed their feeling that the town is 'on the cusp of change' (Bill), or at 'a tipping point' (Dan), with a sense of positivity. "It just feels as though it's heading in the right direction now....I think the positive people are starting to be seen and heard and believed and maybe outweighing the negative people" (Jan). It seems the town is in the process of being re-imagined as a more positive place for enterprise.

Several factors are contributing to this shift, particularly – we argue - the role of local microbusinesses. This is contingent on current physical investment to revitalise the high-street and cultural heritage visible during our fieldwork. In one block of interviews the road was closed as a prominent building was being demolished as part of the works, and at the next construction had started. Some interviewees were directly involved - Oliver was completing grant-funded renovation of one of his properties at the end of the street. The regeneration was raised by interviewees, particularly local Business Group members. Here our focus is on the role of the microbusinesses operating in the Town, acknowledging that contingent influences bring benefits but suggesting that locally embedded businesses are facilitating and driving the change. We suggest that micro-businesses are central to the reimagining of the Town's identity and trajectory.

Research design

As our aim was to explore how agency is operationalised in the context of a left-behind town, the research sought to capture both the experiences of microbusinesses and our observations of them. We combined ethnographic research methods to conduct research from within the context, allowing us to understand the operation of entrepreneurial agency through the accounts of microbusiness entrepreneurs' experiences (from the voice of practitioners) that were also observable from the ethnographic position as researchers in the constrained context. Ethnographic methodologies allow researchers to access the patterns and systems of everyday life and mundane entrepreneurial activity (Van Burg et al. 2022) by immersion within cultural groups.

To analyse the multiple sources of data, we moved iteratively between data and theory (Jack al. 2015) and made sense of the data through dialogue over time. Independently coding and interpreting the data initially allowed sensemaking from our own slightly different subjectivities and understandings of the context, informed but not driven by our underpinning theoretical understanding of performativity and agency. Coming together at planned weekly points to compare and integrate our analyses, led to richly iterative and interpretive insights, which we could then 'check in' on with key microbusiness entrepreneurs locally.

Data collection

We collected qualitative data via multiple sources over a nine-month period. The ethnographic data comprise 15 qualitative interviews with 18 participants, supported with observations from the field and personal reflections. These were supported with recordings

of our conversations both in the field and during messy attempts at analysis in the office/over MS Teams.

Five microbusinesses seen by the researchers and community contacts to be making a difference to the town through their entrepreneurial presence/actions were selected for the primary interviews. Face-to-face interviews were held in the participant's workplace or a local café, with an interview schedule designed to elicit information relating to whether businesses were perceived to be making a difference to the Town, what they were doing that made a difference and what their motivations were (to establish whether the action was agentic or accidental). Most interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Table 1: Key interview participants

Interviewee	Role
Will and Suzie	Eatery (restaurant and seasonal food van)
Helen	Local gift shop
Lou and Mike	Café/Bnb
Oliver	Newsagent/gift shop/ property developer/UCBG
Dan	Property developer/coffee shop owner

Snowballing identified a further set of interviews, extracts of whose transcripts are used in this paper to complement and elucidate our analysis of the primary microbusiness interviews, alongside the other ethnographic data sources.

Table 2: Supplementary interview participants

Interviewee	Role
Abby	Craft workshop
Bill and Cat	BnB & care home
Eve	Building trade/UCBG
Fran	Community member/prior microbusiness entrepreneur in the town
Gaz	Community member/prior microbusiness owner in the town
Ian	SME manufacturing/Business Group member
Jan and Kev	Business services/Business Group & community member
Neil	Tourist attraction
Reg	Regeneration officer
Rob	Regeneration officer

Data analysis

Data was analysed through a process of abductive sensemaking. In a truly iterative process, our analysis also became data, as we captured our sensemaking on Teams and face-to-face using the transcribed data in perpetual cycles of analytical interpretation. Analysis was often in the moment, through conversations that afford impromptu sense-making opportunities (Johansson and Jones 2019) themselves in temporary spaces (on the way to the train, to get a coffee, debriefing after fieldwork, answering questions puzzling us in the night). This

iterative approach to analysis allowed us to surface our different subjective understandings and biases (Vershina and Discua Cruz 2021).

Our iterative analysis followed three stages.

1. *Individually* Repeated listening to interview recordings, reading transcripts and fieldnotes and listening to recorded observations to identify broad themes of interest - 'naïve readings' (Johansson and Jones 2019) generated initial themes.
2. *Together* We shared these individual notes on emerging themes, before discussing them in recorded meetings, modifying and making sense of them in relation to theoretical understandings. These conversations grounded our analysis and sought to balance both our perspectives and understandings of context.
3. *Iteration* Repeat of above analytical process separately and together, incorporating insights from transcripts of our conversations in the meetings, bringing in abductive movement to and fro, between data and theory.

Analysis: Understanding microbusiness agency in a constrained context

Entrepreneurial motivations – shared intentions and aspirations

When asked about their small businesses, many owners ascribed their motivations to creating a more aspirational future for the Town. Opening a boutique café in the mid 2000s, Lou was a trailblazer among aspirational businesses, seeing her eclectic cafe as 'something different' for the Town. When she first opened there were only a couple of other traditional 'greasy spoon' cafés and she talks with pride about having brought one of the town's old established buildings back into use sympathetically. Following a failed submission to the Mary Portas high street fund, Lou has ploughed her energies into other local campaigns and events. Despite the business facing challenges over the decades, Lou's interest in stimulating change through her business has established a strong community and unique events. Jan singles her out among entrepreneurs taking bold steps: 'Lou has always had that mindset'.

Lou's café has been joined recently by microbusiness start-ups with aspirations for the Town. Dan talks about also being "socially minded" in opening a coffee shop with his son, when his attempts to influence regeneration through local political structures failed. Dan is open about having an interest in the town due to their property investments, and notes that another part of the motivation for the café was to provide his son with local employment. He spent a lot of time working to secure regeneration funding for the Town, becoming involved in local politics and chairing the local business group to ensure funding benefitted the local community: 'I'd rather see things done right, do you know what I mean, than whatever'. After becoming frustrated with political structures, Dan decided to affect change more directly by starting a café when their tenant left, aiming to bring something new to the town:

'To cut a long story short we decided to do something proactively ourselves to do something a little bit more, you know, inverted commas "aspirational". And so we set up a quality coffee shop. And that's what was behind it initially...Primarily, the motivation was to bring footfall to [the Town], it wasn't about making money.' (Dan)

Among mixed motivations, entrepreneurial agency is explicitly tied to aspirations for the Town's future. This is echoed by Suzie, who talks about bringing in visitors and helping establish the Town as a food destination. This comes from her deep attachment to the town since first visiting decades ago and, like Dan and Lou, saw huge potential for the place. Suzie was excited when their first forays with the mobile food van attracted new visitors who got the bus or cycled to the Town from 25 miles away. She talks about bringing something quality to the Town, evidenced in this conversation with business partner, Wayne:

Suzie: I think in a way we are sort of holding a mirror up to the Town to say, look, you can have something quality here.

Business partner Will has been struck by the response of the community since starting-up and speaks with pride about the difference they seem to be making:

If it's in the middle of Manchester or Liverpool or something, it would be just be another restaurant. And that's it. Because it's like so unique at the moment for [the Town], people notice and sort of appreciate probably more than they would anywhere else, that they can go and get a nice meal or whatever.

While their own microbusiness might be raising aspirations, this reveals their discomfort with their own perceived entrepreneurial agency. Suzie explains they are reluctant to shout about their own impact: "We have people coming from the more affluent communities, people coming back to the Town to have a meal with us. And people from [prosperous town in the county]. We know we are pulling people in – but it's on a small scale and we don't shout about it."

Members of the local Business Group highlight the influence of people setting up businesses with aspirational motivations. One identified the coffee shop, eatery, boutique shop and boutique café and the recent opening of a gallery, as key to change in the town now, differently than in recent history:

It's personal money coming in with people taking a risk with something they have always really fancied doing. (Jan)

Kev explains that 'there's not a lot of examples of historical success, for people to say "Well, they did it, and so can I". There wasn't a lot of that'. Suzie concurs that "The aspirational businesses are gaining traction now, somehow. In the past it has struggled'. While the marginal town is seen offering scope for change that might not exist in more economically and socially functioning places, small-scale entrepreneurs are seen as wanting to proactively change the constrained context despite the perceived risks. Cat identified the Eatery as an example:

Well, we've got nothing like that in the town. So it's fresh and it's different. And it was quite exciting...there's nothing like this in the Town, and never has, I don't think there ever has been, there hasn't been. So yeah, they've been very brave to do it. They've taken the plunge (Cat, interview)

Aspirations for the economy are intertwined with the built environment. Improving the fabric of the buildings is a motivating factor for small business action, while for some the incipient regeneration has impacted on their decision to locate in the Town. Oliver has owned businesses in the Town since the early 1990's but recently expanded into the refurbishment of a prominent building as part of the regeneration initiative, shifting from proprietor to landlord. Oliver's main driver for the property investment "definitely was, can I bring a building back to life for the town". Whereas his early businesses were primarily a

means of supporting his family, now he feels he can use his time and resources to put something back into the community. He discussed seeing the investment in refurbishing the old buildings as risky, despite the 80% grant funding, as 'no one would ever have done it without the grant'. The regeneration is now motivating start-up's with Helen relating how it influenced her decision to set up in the Town;

The regeneration thing was a huge, a huge pull for us. Because we could see the shops looking better....Definitely, because we could see, we knew what it was like, and we knew it was great place. But to look at it.... The High Street is still ugly, isn't it? You know, let's face it! The harbour is beautiful. And you get to the brow kind of go down by the eatery and all that, it gets nice. That you can see the sea it's lovely. But this bit at the bottom, it just needs some work. And this corner is nice. And this part of the street isn't too bad. The houses are really nice on here. So yeah, it was, it was the regeneration and, and the hope that the Town will improve"

Microbusinesses are united in their collective motivations beyond purely profit. Interviewees talk about wanting to attract people to the Town not just for their own benefit but for other businesses in the town. Talking about the town as on the 'tipping point' of a more hopeful future, Dan emphasises the visible role microbusinesses are playing in reversing negative perceptions of the Town:

I think there's potential because I think, because people are looking at the area now with one or two independent businesses coming in, it changes people's perceptions. [...] It just, just needs that tipping point where you just get that bit of the economy just starts to get momentum, you know, and then I think, I think it'll do very well.

Alongside the existing assets of the Town and the current regeneration initiatives, it is businesses that many see as pivotal in turning the Town's fortunes around.

Entrepreneurial agency through performative demonstrations of possibility

An aspirational future is enacted performatively in physical and demonstrative ways. Dan setting up the coffee shop was visible in physical displays of entrepreneurial agency. Wayne commented on how the refurbishment of the cafe building had been drawn out over weeks. Suzie recalled interpreting that as the Coffee Shop signalling to others in the town that transformation that was taking place.

Suzie: I think the really interesting thing's perhaps the building, the space. That's aspirational and people do go and hang out there, like coffee culture...

Wayne: Café culture, yeah. But they took weeks to paint the outside. It was like a statement.

Suzie: Mm, a performance, showing something's coming.

Indeed, this notion of entrepreneuring as performance is clear in Dan's plans for expansion - decorating the exterior of their prominent high-street building in keeping with a desire to make a statement using the building itself. Their plan to commission a nationally known artist to create artwork to draw attention to the area is performative in the most literal sense.

What we'd like to do is to get a wrap on the building right around the corner - but real top-drawer, not you know, not I know it sounds it's not elitist. It's just that you know, you want something really striking.' (Dan)

Microbusinesses are seen to physically create an environment that will attract more businesses and people, therefore key to the Town's economic regeneration. Helen refers to her boutique and gift shop opening as signalling the potential for business: "a sign that maybe new shops coming into the area and if people see one independent doing nice they might think 'oh there's scope for another shop in [the Town]". She discusses locating her shop on the main road running through the town, right next to the traffic lights, using her window display to tempt those passing-through to stop and come in, and visit other local shops and café's. While I'm interviewing Helen in her shop, one customer arrives to collect a bag she'd seen in the window, and later another visits having seen that Helen stocks a particular brand (and was very surprised to see a stockist in the Town – Helen later proudly showed me the brand's website with exclusive stockists including Mayfair in London). Although both women live nearby, they both mention how they never visit the Town, and when they completed their purchases, both note they were going to explore the high street. Helen recommends stopping for a coffee at Dan's.

Through their different actions these small businesses are both envisioning and enacting a more hopeful future, performatively reflecting an alternative imaginary.

The more of those type of businesses that come in, the more they will support each other, because they'll attract people and drag people to walk into the town. You want to draw them up to the shops, and more eating places. More like this in the future.

[...] Then great, because it [the Town] becomes a good choice to stay for a week.

(Fran)

Dan agrees that, 'If someone's coming into the town and they're thinking I might buy a house in this area, I'll look in here, there. They come to [the Town], see a couple of little independent businesses, and you know, they like it.' These independent businesses make a demonstrative statement, palpably compared to less visible businesses.

Collective impact from individual entrepreneurial agency is achieved through the physical, visible creation of business start-ups and clustering of small business activity. Bill explains how it needs an 'influx of 'small independents': 'if three or four start all at once to bring another three or four in and then get the ball rolling'. There is talk of a need to build on the emergent independent businesses to consolidate the local high street as a viable attraction. Oliver notes how people want choice of eateries and, while Eatery is a starting point, it needs more to build the economy: 'And then all of a sudden you've got a wee buzz going, haven't you?'

Affecting significant change individually is clearly perceived as difficult and collective performative actions become important. The local Business Group is working to address the run-down shops on the town-centre streets, which can be difficult as ownership is not always clear. They have traced the owners of empty shops, bringing five back into use so far. They have built links with a business support provider, and signposting to this support has helped three businesses start-up to date. Jan wants to do more to 'promote the businesses' and has ideas for promotional weeks. One of their current projects is 'Paint the Town', providing free paint donated by one of Ian's suppliers to brighten up the business premises:

So, if you look on the side of the building around there, there's colours that you can paint, so that's us as a business group with [Ian's company] in conjunction with the

council. So he's sort of drawn on his sort of leverage that he's got with the paint company. Because he spends a lot of money with them, and it's all put then back into the economy. Well into our town...But it's about investing in our town. You know, it's benefiting our town.” (Eve)

Eatery offers specific insights into the performative aspect of entrepreneurial agency. While some participants link changes they notice in the town to Eatery, most of the interviewees perceived their impact to be through the mobile food van rather than the town-centre restaurant. Interviewees discussed how they could go for a walk and watch the sunset, then grab a bite to eat. Abby referred to the romance of the coastal location attracting locals and tourists, noting how social media has been important.

So people come from out of town...and then people sharing pictures of the food on Facebook and then people [ask] “Where is that at?” So people would then ‘come through’ [means visit]” (Abby)

This highlighted the importance of physical visibility for external recognition of entrepreneurial agency. It seems that being different to the architecture of the place makes entrepreneurial agency palpable, through visible displays of change *in-situ*.

Discussion and conclusion

Our research reveals consensus that the Town is on the tipping point of potentially breaking free from constraints imposed by the marginal geographic position and economic decline. Moreover, our analysis reveals microbusinesses as playing a crucial role in effecting this change, and explicitly trying to be part of the Town’s reimagining. While physical change is finally coming from significant government funding, “enough to make real change” (Kev), it seems that microbusinesses are helping to rewrite the negative narrative of the Town through their entrepreneurial agency. Suzie shared how happy they felt to read a news article in 2023 capturing this value being created by new businesses alongside the regeneration:

“There is no doubt that the Town will look quite different in years to come, but its transformation has already started. Many new businesses, café’s and restaurants have joined the other independent shops and eateries lining the higgledy-piggledy streets of [the Town].”

In synthesising our analysis below, we want to highlight that the perceived contribution of micro-businesses is not the traditional measure of ‘job creation’, but a performative representation of aspiration and hope for the town. We see their agency operationalised firstly through their intention and reflexive actions; and secondly through their performative practices at individual, aggregate and collective levels.

If microbusinesses, motivated solely by profit, contribute incidentally to broader local change, such action would lack true agency, which inherently involves intentional action (Bandura, 1999). Our findings reveal a nuanced picture, with entrepreneurs expressing mixed motivations (Douglas et al., 2021), encompassing in part and to varying degrees, a desire to make a positive difference to their local area. This stems from an attachment to community and place, whereby these micro for-profit firms are balancing making a living with social responsibilities (McKeever et al., 2015; Soundarajan et al., 2018). This is

indicative of hybridity that aligns with the principles of social and sustainable enterprise (Munoz and Cohen, 2018), and evidence the social responsibility of microbusinesses that care about their town. This suggests an avenue for future research to explore these dynamics further through an ethics of care perspective (Spence, 2016).

Agentic actors can learn reflexively and adapt their response (Bandura, 2001). Our study evidences such entrepreneurial agency, through the microbusinesses ability to reflexively adapt and innovate to achieve their goals (McMullen et al., 2021). Dan's decision to switch from pursuing local improvements through local political structures to direct action in the form of setting up an aspirational coffee shop; Oliver's move into property development; and the Business Group's project to address the empty shop properties all illustrate reflexivity and adaptation to the circumstances (Wimalasena et al., 2021). These examples reinforce the dynamic interplay between agency and structure.

The interviews demonstrate how an aspirational future is enacted performatively, particularly in physical and demonstrative ways. Whilst businesses like Dan's artisan coffee, Will and Suzie's quality food, and Helen's high-end gifts embody aspirational qualities, merely existing is not enough. Constructing an alternative perception of the Town necessitates outward displays that are visible to community members whose aspirations they seek to raise, and visitors and other stakeholders whose behaviours they seek to influence. Following Gibson Graham (2008; 2013), the performative practices of microbusinesses to present an alternative, vibrant vision of the Town – demonstrating that this version is a possibility - by actually showing that it is already being constructed, also requires an audience. Updated shop-fronts, enticing window displays and regenerated buildings serve as tangible manifestations that inspire raised aspirations and change perceptions of place. Dan is conscious of using building artwork to 'perform' a new image of the Town, whilst Helen and Suzie are actively trying to bring people in, exemplifying the desires of businesses to foster a perception of change. Interviewees also noted the absence of entrepreneurial role-models in the Town, highlighting the need for visible examples of success.

While microbusiness agency in the town is largely exercised through individual personal agency (Bandura, 1999), our findings suggest that microbusinesses recognise the limitations of individual efforts – how the Town needs a 'critical mass' of small businesses to create real change. They support each other in unison rather than collectively to achieve this – through small acts like shopping locally, staggering opening hours, sharing on social media, supporting new start-ups, lobbying the council and supporting the Business Group. This does not go as far as 'collective agency' as there is no evidence for co-ordinated action (Bandura, 1999). We understand this as 'aggregate agency' whereby the businesses are working to the same broad goals, but with no formalised aims or co-operative guidelines. Aggregate agency recognises that individual intentions to stimulate broader change for the Town are integral to a proactive and self-reflexive entrepreneurial agency (Lipman and Aldrich, 2016), but that achieving transformation requires several like-minded people to take action.

Aggregate agency is distinct from the broader concept of distributed agency, as in recognising intention it recognises entrepreneurial agency (Lipman and Aldrich, 2016; McMullen et al., 2021). This is important in tying local transformational changes to

entrepreneurial action, and points to the benefits of local regeneration schemes proactively engaging with microbusiness, to stimulate and deliver economic, social and physical development. Moreover, aggregate agency might represent a latent potential for more focused collaborative action, whereby harnessing this into a collective agency might lead to greater, more impactful action (Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2014).

Aggregate agency also forms part of a broader distributed agency, that recognises the complex interactions between businesses, the community and the physical environment, whereby agency is linked to the collective assemblage of microbusinesses (the owners, their business, the premises, customers etc) rather than individuals. Dan's vibrantly refurbished café, Helen's window display and her inclusion in a high-end list of stockists, the Eatery's mobile food van and associated Facebook posts all have a performative affect on perceptions of the town (Callon, 2007). These non-human entities themselves interrelate with the entrepreneur's actions, the customers, visitors and other stakeholders to create change in the town.

The physical regeneration is another example of a non-human entity interacting with micro-business agency. This is evidenced by the influence of regeneration on Helen's decision to locate in the town, and Oliver's active role in refurbishing buildings as part of the programme. The importance of visible changes reinforces how hope for the Town is contingent upon government regeneration, which in the past have resulted in 'white elephants' with updated buildings left standing empty before falling back into disrepair. Recognising the importance of business in effecting changes related to regeneration, the council has partnered with the Business Group, which is a form of both proxy and collective agency (Bandura 1999) as group members act collectively to meet their shared goals, and act on behalf of local businesses. The Business Group illustrates the dynamic interplay between agency and structure, having formalised its position within council structures and now directly shaping the regeneration plans, their collective agency shaping formal institutional structures at the local level. Moreover, their interrelations with landlords, refurbishing shopfronts, the painting scheme and community engagement reflects a distributed agency in effecting change. Further exploration the similarities and differences between aggregate, collective and distributed agency drawing on with Callon's work on 'agencement' (Callon, 2007), could elucidate the distributed nature of microbusiness agency across human and non-human actors, offering deeper insights into the contingent mechanisms driving local change.

This research has limitations that require consideration and provide direction for further study. Given the highly contextualised nature of the data that provides in-depth local insights, generalisability to other contexts, such as urban areas or non-UK regions is limited, pointing to future research in different contexts. Secondly, although qualitative data is particularly suited to capturing the nuanced impacts of microbusinesses on local development, incorporating quantitative metrics such as job-creation or economic growth rates could provide a broader perspective. Third, this analysis focuses on positive influences on local transformation, missing negative impacts and challenges faced by these businesses, which we have identified, particularly surrounding how entrepreneurial agency was exercised contingently with structures of community. Lastly, the study's focus on

transformation over time suggests that a longitudinal approach, tracking progress and impact over several years, would bring valuable insights.

Our research highlights the transformative potential of microbusinesses in reimagining and regenerating towns. By emphasizing intentional, collective, and aggregated performative actions, microbusinesses emerge as key players in not only driving economic growth through (self-) employment creation, but also in fostering social and aspirational change. It suggests that practical support for microbusinesses to demonstrate their impact and raise the profile of their businesses in the community, would not only benefit individual businesses, but could also contribute to aspirations and hope for constrained places. Moreover, our multifaceted view of agency offers a framework to understand how microbusinesses contribute to place more generally.

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