

How Identities and Discrimination Catalyze Global Entrepreneurship

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In 2002, twenty-one-year-old Christian Ngan left his home country of Cameroon to study in Paris. After ten years in France, working in the financial sector, he made the life-changing decision to quit his job and move back to Cameroon to start a company. He founded a brand of natural cosmetics for black and mixed-race skin. “It seems a bit weird to say,” he recalled, “but I felt like I woke one morning and my vision changed. On one side, Europe was facing a financial crisis, and I did not have a social life. On the other side, Africa was booming and my dreams seemed more feasible over there” (Douglas 2014).

Entrepreneurship plays a critical role in economic growth, particularly in developing countries, but entrepreneurs in global contexts face a broad set of challenges. Research on diversity has emphasized that factors such as race, class, gender, and nationality can act as structural barriers to professional advancement (Ibarra 1995; Thomas and Gabarro 1999; Chugh and Brief 2008) and to successful entrepreneurship (Essers and Benschop 2007; Essers, Benschop et al. 2010). Positive organizational scholarship (POS), on the other hand, focuses on facilitating favorable outcomes. From this perspective, factors such as identity and personal initiative serve as resources for professional advancement and entrepreneurial success (Frese and Fay 2001; Roberts 2005). This paper integrates the two approaches, using the case studies of three African entrepreneurs to examine how identities and structural barriers can jointly act as catalysts for entrepreneurship in global contexts.

Three entrepreneurs

The first case is that of Bimpe Nkontchou, a Nigerian woman in her late forties, trained as a lawyer in Nigeria at the University of Ife and also obtained a master's degree from University College, London. She then practiced as a lawyer for eight years for reputable Nigerian law firms. As a lawyer from an affluent background (both parents were medical doctors), she was well respected in Nigerian society. In 1995, for personal reasons, she moved to England. Initially, she believed she would be able to obtain a job at an English law firm of comparable prestige, but she quickly discovered that this was not the case, in part due to her gender, race, and nationality. As she put it, "I soon realized that the opportunities in the legal services sector in the UK for an ethnic minority female were severely restricted and that my career would stagnate even if I was able to find a job in a prestigious English law firm in those conditions." Unwilling to accept a lesser position, in 1998, she founded her own firm in England, Addie & Co. Solicitors, specializing in advising foreign investors doing business in sub-Saharan Africa. It also advises African entrepreneurs and companies doing business in both Africa and Europe.

The second case is that of Nimi Akinkugbe, a fifty-three-year-old woman born and raised in Nigeria and East Africa. After obtaining a BSc in economics from the London School of Economics, she began her career as a treasury officer in a Nigerian bank and, over the course of twenty-three years, worked her way up to West African regional director in the wealth and investment management division of an international bank. Throughout her career, she demonstrated a deep personal commitment to promoting financial literacy, particularly among women. For many years, the Nigerian banking industry suited her well, providing the flexibility she needed to balance her professional life with her family life, even adjusting her work schedule when her children were young. In 2007, however, her bank merged with a multinational

corporation, and she found her leverage considerably reduced. Corporate practices were being standardized across locations, and the influence of local Nigerian staff waned. She subsequently spent two years at another international bank, where she encountered common misconceptions and stereotypes about Africa. At this point, she decided to leave banking and become an entrepreneur. She obtained the African distribution rights to local editions of Hasbro's world famous board game Monopoly. Founding a company called Bestman Games, she launched the City of Lagos Edition of Monopoly in 2012. More than just a board game, Akinkugbe believed, the product presented the idea of money management to Nigerians in a fun and nonthreatening format. It also presented Africa in a positive way on the international platform of Monopoly.

The third case is that of Claude Grunitzky, a forty-two-year-old Togolese man. Born to a diplomat father who was a member of the Togolese political elite, Grunitzky was partially raised in privileged circumstances. He spent part of his youth in Togo and part in diplomatic circles in Washington, D.C. Although his father was wealthy, his mother was poor, so he experienced poverty when in his home country. At the age of twelve, he was sent to an elite private school in France, and it was in this environment that he suddenly became conscious of having "outsider" status, particularly due to racial difference. This caused him to seek out and become part of a subculture in which that difference was celebrated: namely, the hip-hop culture in Paris. Later he moved to London, and then to New York, continuing his involvement in that community and founding two hip-hop magazines that featured established and rising stars such as Wu-Tang Clan and Alicia Keys. By the late 1990s, he was at the center of global hip-hop media. In his book, *Transculturalism*, Grunitzky explained his mission to bridge differences by promoting a global hip-hop culture: Central to this mission, he wrote, was his ability to connect the powerless to the powerful. He slowly built and expanded his businesses beyond print media to advertising and

television. In 2010, he sold his businesses, and in 2012, he launched a new mobile venture in Togo to help poor business owners.

In all three cases, global entrepreneurial activity appears to have been stimulated by the experience of encountering structural barriers rooted in factors such as race, class, gender, and nationality in a global context. We identified three common catalysts.

Global transitions as jolts. First, all three individuals experienced a point of transition when they either physically or symbolically moved from a local to a global context. Bimpe Nkontchou became aware of the disadvantages of her gender, race and nationality when she tried to get a job at a prestigious London law firm. Nimi Akinkugbe experienced disadvantage based on her nationality and family role when she became a local national and her influence dwindled and when the bank standardized its flexible work practices. In the last case, Claude Grunitzky became aware of the disadvantages of his race and nationality when he enrolled at an elite French school. For each, a global transition acted as a jolt. Jolts are “discrepant events that cause people to pause and reflect on their experience (Roberts, Dutton et al. 2005, 716).” In all three cases, the jolts involved movement from a local to a global context. A jolt is not merely a shift in culture. Grunitzky’s first global exposure in Washington, D.C., was not a jolt, because there, his differences were accepted. Nor was it returning as a quasi ex-pat to his mother’s modest home. It was his later global exposure that acted as a jolt because his differences put him at a disadvantage. Similarly, it was Akinkugbe’s employment experience of stereotyping and discrimination as a local national in an international bank, rather than her earlier experience as a foreign student, that served as a jolt for her. Thus, discrimination may be a salient feature of global transitions that can act as jolts.

Prior status as a buffer. Note also that all three individuals had belonged to high-status groups in their local context. Nkontchou and Akinkugbe had successful, high-status professional careers; Grunitzky's status derived from his father's. This prior experience of high status may have acted as a buffer against the discrimination they encountered, helping them refuse to internalize their current disadvantage and maintain a critical distance. Research suggests that holding onto positive aspects of one's social identity may provide a counterbalance to negative experiences (Tajfel and Turner 1987).

Combined identities as unique resources. Finally, all three individuals founded enterprises that leveraged the experiences and relationships from their supposedly subordinate identities together with their professional identities to create value. Nkontchou set up a law practice that served investors in sub-Saharan Africa and African entrepreneurs and companies. She thus turned her Nigerian and African identity into a strength in the global context where it was initially construed as a weakness. Akinkugbe chose the money-based game Monopoly for her entrepreneurial venture, which both built on and expressed her identity as a financially competent Nigerian woman, and fit with her commitment to helping Nigerian women learn to manage their personal finances. Lastly, Grunitzky used his chosen outsider identity to launch several media-based ventures to promote the world of black hip-hop, and later turned his national identity into strength when he launched a mobile-based venture to help small business owners in Togo. Indeed, Christian Ngan, in the opening example, stated that his dream was to create "a 100% African product that would make Africans proud (EM Lyon 2014)." Identities were a key resource for the global entrepreneurial activities of all these individuals.

Future scholarship can build on these ideas in several ways. First, these three points of commonality across our cases—experiencing a jolt, using previous status as a buffer, and

drawing from intersecting identities—are by no means exhaustive. Future research should investigate more global entrepreneurs across countries and industries and to understand how identity and discrimination may catalyze global entrepreneurship. Second, our case studies illustrate that race, nationality, and gender identities may combine with professional identities to infuse how entrepreneurs design and form their organizations (Battilana, Leca et al. 2009; Essers, Benschop et al. 2010; Ramarajan 2014). Future research could investigate the ways in which founders' multiple identities combine to define the existence and scope of new ventures. In particular, individuals who experience discrimination may create organizations in which social inclusion is part of their founding fabric. In this way, some kinds of global entrepreneurship may contain the seeds of resistance and social change (Golden-Biddle and Dutton 2012).

Budding global entrepreneurs can also leverage the insights from our case studies. When confronted with structural barriers and discrimination in a global context, the pressures to conform can be great. Our cases illustrate that building a sense of agency, resilience, and awareness of what one will not compromise upon is critical to global entrepreneurship. Second, forging and maintaining close relationships with those that value one's unique identities can help buffer entrepreneurs when they face challenges in global contexts. Third, global entrepreneurs should consider how to combine aspects of themselves that have been marginalized with their professional skills and experiences. By embracing their own multiple perspectives and expertise, they can find insightful and creative ideas for their organizations in ways that will be personally fulfilling and will resonate with others. Our case studies suggest that when people choose to engage in entrepreneurial activities that resonate with marginalized identities in the face of discrimination, global entrepreneurship can become a form of resistance, and those identities can

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be a source of strength, giving the entrepreneur more power and passion to succeed in their ventures.

[Callout]

For Practitioners: Building a Foundation of Resilience, Relationships, and Resourceful Identities

Structural barriers such as race, class, gender, and nationality are often obstacles to professional advancement. How can entrepreneurs in global contexts establish a foundation that will lead to successful professional outcomes?

- **Build resilience and self-awareness to resist and transform structural barriers.**

When you confront your differences in a global context, notice how you respond; learn about yourself. What aspects of yourself are you unwilling to compromise?

- **Build relationships and community.** Seek out groups and communities that value your unique identities. They will help buffer you from the negative effects of the barriers you encounter.
- **Combine identities to create value.** Each of our identities gives us unique perspectives and experiences. By embracing your own multiple perspectives and expertise, you can find creative and purposeful ideas for your organization.

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