Solo self-employment, entrepreneurial subjectivity and the security–precarity continuum: Evidence from private tutors in the supplementary education industry

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Abstract
Entrepreneurship is regarded by policy makers and politicians as an accelerant for economic development. Economic geography demonstrates that rather than stimulating entrepreneurship in general, policy makers should support specific forms of entrepreneurship that fuel wider growth. The paper’s original contribution is to insist that entrepreneurship research must also explore less growth-oriented, but crucially very widespread, forms of entrepreneurial activity. The paper therefore places solo self-employment – the self-employed without employees – centre stage as an exemplar of this trend. Research is presented on private tutors who run businesses from home, offering children one-to-one tuition in the burgeoning supplementary education industry. The paper scrutinises the causes, configuration and consequences of such solo self-employment as an economically marginal, but numerically dominant, form of entrepreneurship. In so doing, it makes three conceptual advances in the exploration of heterogeneous entrepreneurship. First, in examining why individuals become self-employed, the paper moves beyond classic efforts to understand entrepreneurship through binary push/pull mechanisms in models of occupational choice. Instead, the analysis demonstrates the importance of risk in entrepreneurship and paid employment, highlighting the multiple pathways into solo self-employment as opportunities and constraints coalesce in individual’s lives. Secondly, in considering how the solo self-employed think about business, the research breaks through conventional definitions of entrepreneurship.
to demonstrate that solo self-employment involves a distinctively entrepreneurial subjectivity and practices. Thirdly, by investigating the consequences of solo self-employment, the findings transcend dualist interpretations of self-employment as the realm of entrepreneurial wealth or economic precarity, highlighting instead a security–precarity continuum in immediate and long-term outcomes.

**Keywords**
Entrepreneurship, solo self-employment, occupational choice, precarity, shadow education

**Introduction**

Entrepreneurship is often regarded by policy makers and politicians as a key accelerant for economic development that stimulates innovation, efficiency, structural economic transformation and job growth (Lee and Rodríguez-Pose, 2021; Moro et al., 2020; Schneck, 2020; Szerb et al., 2019). In economic research, interest in ideal-type entrepreneurs’ potential to promote growth has often seen them take centre stage, where they are represented as ‘wholesome super heroes, innovators, as major agents of economic change, who tend to break the equilibrium through “creative destruction” (Schumpeter, 1942)’ (Bögenhold and Klinglmair, 2016: 847). Storey and Greene (2010: 15) concur that the adjective entrepreneurial is usually considered complimentary as it ‘conjures up a picture of an individual who sees opportunities and is willing to exploit them’. Nevertheless, they pose ‘a heretical question’ in asking if entrepreneurs are good for society, as critiques of Schumpeter have shown that, depending on the rules of the game, entrepreneurship can be productive, unproductive or destructive (Baumol, 1990). Academic and policy enthusiasm for entrepreneurship has endured despite such questioning, but there is increasing reflection on what exactly is meant by it (Shepherd et al., 2019) and the diversity of forms entrepreneurship takes (Bögenhold, 2019; Dey and Steyaert, 2016; Harrison et al., 2020). Regional economic research, for example, has demonstrated that differences in entrepreneurship-type matter to economic development (Szerb et al., 2019), for instance as higher levels of entrepreneurship in tradable sectors (e.g. manufacturing, financial services) does more to reduce metropolitan poverty than that in non-tradable sectors (e.g. personal services) (Lee and Rodríguez-Pose, 2021). Appreciation of this heterogeneity has prompted the conclusion that policy must move away from simply seeking to increase rates of entrepreneurship, and instead target growth in the specific forms of entrepreneurship that underpin wider economic development (Lee and Rodríguez-Pose, 2021; Mason and Brown, 2013; Szerb et al., 2019).

This paper takes debates about the heterogeneity of entrepreneurship in a radically different direction. The paper’s original contribution stems from its insistence that, in thinking about entrepreneurship, we not only need to consider what works best to stimulate economic growth, but must also rigorously explore the nature of less effective, but numerically more common, forms of entrepreneurial activity. This paper advances this intellectual agenda by challenging the lack of attention paid to the solo self-employed, ‘that is, sole traders or company owner-managers with no employees’ (Giupponi and Xu, 2020: 2), who by definition are not promoting growth by direct provision of jobs. Solo self-employment has the dual distinction of being by far the most common, but also the most under-researched, form of self-employment in all EU nations (Bögenhold, 2019). The UK, for instance, had nearly 4 million solo self-employed workers by the end of 2019 (Giupponi and Xu, 2020), all of whom take on the entrepreneurial function of risk bearing (Kim and Parker, 2020), but not all of whom will be interested in business growth (Light and Munk, 2018; Storey and
Greene, 2010). This solo self-employment matters not only because it dominates in numerical terms, but also as it is growing in most advanced economies (Boeri et al., 2020) against a backdrop of labour market change characterised (to varying degrees in different nations) by increased job insecurity, work intensification and in-work poverty (Innes, 2020; McGovern, 2020). There is an urgent need to understand why this group, who in the EU are becoming increasingly well educated (van Stel and van der Zwan, 2020), choose to work for themselves, how they think about their businesses, and what the implications are for their financial security.

Empirically, this paper addresses these questions through case-study research into solo self-employed private tutors in the UK’s burgeoning supplementary education industry. The UK has been chosen for the location of the study as self-employment rates grew here from 11.5% to 14.1% between 2000 and 2017, and the proportion of the self-employed who are solo self-employed also increased from 72.7% to 84% during the same time period (Boeri et al., 2020), and rose to 85% by 2019 (Giupponi and Xu, 2020). The education sector is foregrounded as this is over-represented amongst occupations held by entrepreneurial homeworkers (Kim and Parker, 2020), and the specific focus is placed on supplementary education. This industry offers extra tuition to school pupils in academic subjects outside of school, in the hope of increasing their academic attainment (Kim and Jung, 2019). From its Asian heartlands, this industry is now burgeoning across the globe, demand being driven higher by families concerned about young people’s ability to secure decent paid employment in increasingly bifurcated and credentialised labour markets (Bray, 2020). In the UK, the industry is now estimated to be worth up to £2 billion per annum (Kirby, 2016). Recent research shows that over a quarter of state-educated pupils aged 11–16 years in England and Wales have used supplementary education at some point in their academic career, often to aid the transition to secondary education or to support high-stake exams in these later years of schooling, with provision being dominated by one-to-one sessions delivered in the tutor’s or pupil’s home (Hajar, 2020; Holloway and Kirby, 2020). As education is a devolved service in the UK, this paper focuses on motivations, practices and experiences of solo self-employed private tutors in the most populous nation, England.

Overall, the purpose of the paper is to advance the debate about the heterogeneity of entrepreneurship, shifting the spotlight from dynamic, growth-orientated entrepreneurship to its less glamorous, but more widespread, forms. In so doing, it advances conceptual thinking about how such economically borderline, yet numerically dominant and growing, entrepreneurial activities might be studied in future research. First, in exploring why individuals enter solo self-employment, the paper evaluates the value of binary thinking in the entrepreneurship literature’s models of occupational choice. Second, in tracing how the solo self-employed think about their business, the paper assesses the utility of conventional definitions of entrepreneurship and alternative understandings of entrepreneurial subjectivity and practices. Thirdly, by investigating the economic consequences of solo self-employment for individuals, the paper gauges the merit of dualist representations of self-employment as a sector of entrepreneurial wealth or economic precarity. Hereon, the paper follows a standard structure, starting with a literature review and methodology, proceeding to research results and concluding with reflection upon the contribution to knowledge.

**Entrepreneurship and the rise of solo self-employment**

Policies to stimulate entrepreneurship – the founding of an innovative, risk-taking, growth-orientated businesses in search of profit – are driven by the desire to promote economic development and employment expansion (Moro et al., 2020; Schneck, 2020). Research into entrepreneurship has blossomed in recent decades such that some authors have argued that it is becoming a new academic subject. However, the core concept of entrepreneurship remains open to competing interpretations, both conceptually in terms of what counts as entrepreneurship and
methodologically in how it might be measured (Bögenhold, 2019; Light and Munk, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2019). On the one hand, reflection on the heterogeneity of entrepreneurial forms has caused considerable interest in how and why some types of entrepreneurs succeed in producing high-growth firms and how policy might best support these ‘gazelles’ that are crucial in promoting wider economic development (Lee and Rodríguez-Pose, 2021; Szerb et al., 2019). On the other hand, a vibrant but less dominant thread seeks to expand the core focus of the field by considering types of entrepreneurship that lie beyond this core, such as micro-firms, diverse forms of self-employment and not-for-profit social enterprises (Bögenhold, 2019; Dey and Steyaert, 2016), as well as the ways individuals’ social position differentiates entrepreneurship (Harrison et al., 2020).

Although stimulating classic growth-oriented entrepreneurship remains important, the nature of contemporary economic change makes it vital that greater attention is now given to more economically marginal forms of entrepreneurship. This imperative results from significant 21st century shifts in the nature of self-employment (Boeri et al., 2020). Self-employment is a diverse category, including as it does ‘very privileged positions – entrepreneurial billionaires – as well as very marginal ones, coexisting in the same category at the same time’ (Bögenhold, 2019: 134). Between 2000 and 2017, solo self-employment has risen as a proportion of all self-employment in 19 of 26 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Boeri et al., 2020). This shift towards solo self-employment matters as while ‘all self-employment involves the entrepreneurial functions of risk-bearing’ and reduced social protection (Kim and Parker, 2020: 6), the rewards are not evenly spread. Rather, self-employment increases societal inequality through income polarisation, as the self-employed with employees are more likely to be amongst the upper echelons of income earners, while the solo self-employed average lower hourly incomes than paid employees (Schneck, 2020). These differential outcomes raise interesting questions about why individuals opt into these heterogeneous forms of entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship research commonly frames moves into or out of self-employment as a labour supply decision (Boeri et al., 2020; Bögenhold, 2019). Most interest has been centred on entrepreneurs who found businesses that employ others, with occupational choice models being used to understand why some people become entrepreneurs when others opt for paid employment. Early research emphasised individual risk-tolerance versus financial returns, but later work also considers non-financial issues such as desire for flexibility, and emphasises that the choice ‘does not take place in a spatial vacuum’ as location of suitable customer base, availability of local social networks, and the burdens of commuting can also matter (Kim and Parker, 2020: 3). It is significant that in treating entrepreneurship, often empirically measured as self-employment, as a choice, this model ‘does not allow for demand-driven determinants of self-employment’ (Boeri et al., 2020: 171). For example, it does not consider the role of employers who force de facto employees to take self-employed status, or explore in depth the lack of alternatives available to some solo self-employed people (Boeri et al., 2020; Vallas and Schor, 2020). This is problematic as solo self-employment has risen against a backdrop of labour market change in the Global North. This saw both an increase in highly paid and highly skilled work, and a rise in low-paid low-skilled jobs, while the centre of the employment hierarchy was hollowed out in the shift away from manufacturing and towards services (McGovern, 2020). Well-paid workers have been financially cushioned, but nevertheless experience increased fear about job insecurity, as well as heightened work intensity. Low-paid workers not only experience labour market insecurity and more pressured work environments, but also face difficulties earning a living wage in the face of zero-hour contracts, agency working and a lack of full-time employment opportunities (Choonara, 2020; Green, 2021; Innes, 2020). Greater attention is now required to consider why individuals move into these increasing, but economically more marginal, forms of entrepreneurship.

Indeed, it is noteworthy that solo self-employment – which constitutes the majority of self-employment in all EU nations (e.g. Germany 56%; UK 85%) – has received remarkably little
academic attention (Bögenhold, 2019; Hipp et al., 2015). Recent research shows that in the UK the primary reason the solo self-employed give for engaging in this type of work is flexibility, followed by the ability to work at home, although overall 12% of the self-employed had no other choice (Boeri et al., 2020). Their ranks often cross-cut with the UK ‘entrepreneurial homeworkers’ identified by Kim and Parker (2020), 85% of whom are solo self-employed. They earn less than other self-employed groups, are more likely to work part time, and are over-represented in the education, health and social work sectors. Across Finland, Italy, the UK and the USA, the more precarious status of solo self-employed individuals is evident in that they: have lower incomes; are more likely to be working part time due to slack business conditions; and have a greater likelihood of liquidity constraints (Boeri et al., 2020; Giupponi and Xu, 2020; Tammelin, 2019). This marginal position leads Boeri et al. (2020: 192) to conclude that ‘[s]olo self-employment appears to be an intermediate category between employment and unemployment. It shares important characteristics with underemployment’. This important conclusion holds true at a societal level, but while all forms of nonstandard work, including solo self-employment, have been viewed through the lens of precarity, cautious analysis of individual experience is essential, as this need not always be the case (Giupponi and Xu, 2020; Hipp et al., 2015), not least as the proportion of solo self-employed workers who are highly educated is increasing in Europe (van Stel and van der Zwan, 2020).

This growing body of solo self-employed workers who create work for themselves, but unlike ideal-type entrepreneurs not directly for others, raises interesting questions about the nature of these more marginal forms of entrepreneurship. Two qualitative studies in Israel and Italy suggest that the highly educated solo self-employed do not regard themselves as entrepreneurs, as they have a passion for their work rather than an interest in business growth. Notwithstanding the insecurities of solo self-employment, neither do they see themselves as precarious workers, as there are others worse off than themselves (Kapelinsky and Shoshana, 2019; Murgia and Pulignano, 2019). However, research in the creative sector in Germany and the UK demonstrates that while the skilled solo self-employed rarely frame themselves as entrepreneurs, they may nevertheless be constituted as entrepreneurial subjects in the ‘psychic life of neoliberalism’: for example, they may regard their self as the business, embrace risk and seek perpetual self-improvement in order to flourish (Scharff, 2016: 107). These entrepreneurial subjectivities and practices can matter too for ‘unskilled’ solo self-employed workers. Entrepreneurship is largely seen as a characteristic of the architects of the platform economy, not those who, for example, source ride-hail or delivery work through them. Nevertheless, platforms require gig workers to assume risk and many are entrepreneurial in their efforts to subvert platform algorithmic control (Vallas and Schor, 2020) to their individual, though not collective, advantage (Barratt et al., 2020). This suggests the solo self-employed have a complex, but nonetheless important, relation to debates about the nature of entrepreneurship.

The aim of this research is to advance debates about the heterogeneity of entrepreneurship, bringing economically more marginal, but numerically dominant and growing, entrepreneurial practices into the limelight through a focus on the strikingly under-research category of solo self-employment. To achieve this, the paper provides a case-study focus on the supplementary education sector. Considerable attention has been paid in the broader social science literature to the lack of equity in access to private tuition (Ho et al., 2019), and into studies of its efficacy in raising attainment (Cole, 2017), but economic questions about how the industry works in practice have received radically less attention. There is a very small literature exploring franchising in North American learning centres (Aurini, 2004, 2006), management and employment in East Asian cram schools (Dierkes, 2010) and the potential for teacher corruption when they tutor their own pupils in post-Soviet and Global South contexts (Kobakhidze, 2014). However, aside from a few recent studies which start to explore its marketing (Briant et al., 2020), the economic geography of private one-to-one tuition remains unexplored. The opportunity to do so is a valuable one, as
it is an example of solo self-employment that sits neatly between the poles of highly skilled freelancers in the creative industries (Mould et al., 2014) and low-paid gig work (Barratt et al., 2020) that are dominating this nascent debate, as tutors are most often sole traders who deliver a personal service to individuals not firms, and whilst platforms can be an important source of work, tutors are not generally low-paid gig workers.

The paper addresses three research questions which probe the entrepreneurial nature of solo self-employment through a focus on private tuition. Firstly, it asks why individuals decide to become tutors: this allows reflection on the motivations and the degree to which binary models of occupational choice might usefully characterise the path to solo self-employment. Secondly, it considers how tutors approach the business of tuition: this facilitates an explication of whether the solo self-employed see themselves as entrepreneurs, or whether they have an entrepreneurial subjectivity or practices. Thirdly, it investigates how tutors experience self-employment: this allows exploration of the heterogeneity of the category of solo self-employment, and the degree to which the entrepreneurial risk of self-employment is rewarded with financial returns or the experience of precarity. The subsequent section outlines the rigorous methodology employed in the study.

**Methodology**

This paper focuses on the causes, configurations and consequences of solo self-employment. The difficulties of conducting research on an education industry that operates primarily out of public view are well recognised (Bray, 2010). Undertaking a representative questionnaire survey of tutors was not possible, as the industry has no entry requirements, no register of participants and is devoid of regulation. To provide an in-depth exploration of private one-to-one tuition as an economic practice, a qualitative approach was therefore adopted involving 20 semi-structured interviews with tutors. Interviews have been shown to be useful in economic research as, while participants cannot be expected to have complete self-knowledge, ‘[w]hat people say is, nevertheless, important evidence as to how they think, and how they think is probably closely linked to actual decision making’ (Bewley, 2002: 349).

The sampling of tutors was purposive. Initially, we sought six tutors from each of three English regions with high (London = 43.8%), medium (East Midlands = 27.5%) and low (North West = 13.5%) levels of tuition usage (at some point in their academic career) amongst pupils aged 11–16 years in state education. To cover different parts of the market, we ensured: (a) three tutors in each region were qualified teachers and three were not (Aurini, 2006); and (b) each trio included a maths, English and science tutor, as these are the curriculum subjects most commonly tutored in England (Holloway and Kirby, 2020). An aim in qualitative sampling is often to reach saturation in the stories told (Baker and Edwards, 2012); to this end, we also interviewed two further tutors, who met our original criteria, as they offered additional perspectives. In total, eight interviewees sought full-time employment as tutors, while 12 worked part time (including alongside semi-retirement, other paid employment/entrepreneurship, or higher education).

Recruitment was undertaken online: tutors with relevant profiles were identified through LinkedIn, Facebook, Gumtree and tutoring websites, and approached about participation. The interviews were conducted via telephone or video calls. Although some concerns have been raised that these means of communication might inhibit interviewee rapport, like other previous studies we did not find this to be a significant issue (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). The interviews lasted on average 2 h 20 min and ranged from 91 min to 3 h 21 min. All research, whether quantitative or qualitative, raises questions about how honest participants are with themselves and the researcher, though the guarantees of anonymity, and the immediate opportunity interviews offer to probe contradictory answers, mitigate this risk (Bewley, 2002). Nevertheless, the interpretation of all research data should involve critical reflection.
The research was subject to ethical clearance and risk approval from Loughborough University. All interviewees were: provided with information about the research and their rights as participants, gave informed consent, were guaranteed anonymity (unless disclosure was required for safeguarding) and their data was securely stored (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Full transcriptions were produced by audio-typists who signed confidentiality agreements. In excerpts used later in the paper, interviewees have been allocated a pseudonym and an associated code to indicate whether they sought full-time (FT) or part-time (PT) self-employment in the supplementary education sector (recognising that business conditions might hamper their objectives). An ellipsis in a quotation indicates that superfluous words have been removed for brevity.

The interview transcripts were subject to systematic multi-stage qualitative analysis to ensure the rigorous interpretation of the data. The process began with a close reading of the interviews to refamiliarise the authors with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) before the data was coded in NVivo using a branching tree system. The primary boughs (or nodes in NVivo) reflect our three research questions about the causes, configurations and consequences of solo self-employment. Secondary branches run from these, each focusing on different themes that contribute to the overarching bough (e.g. ‘why be a tutor’ branches into ‘pressures in teaching’, ‘alternative opportunities’, ‘flexibility’, ‘income’, ‘social value’, etc.). These branches support tertiary twigs containing further sub-nodes as required (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). The coding reflected both deductive reasoning – as interviews were scrutinised for themes that had emerged from the literature review – and inductive reasoning – as codes were applied to issues raised by participants but not previously anticipated by the researchers (Reichert, 2014). The benefit of using NVivo is that it facilitates slicing (i.e. multiple codes applied to complex parts of the data) and always makes the context of the quote evident (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). In the subsequent analysis, codes from individual accounts were compared to consider dominant themes, as well as countervailing views and silences in the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These were then analysed in the light of wider research to explore how they cast light upon the business of private tuition. It is to an analysis of these interview data that the paper now turns.

The causes, configuration and consequences of solo self-employment in the supplementary education industry

Becoming a tutor: beyond binary understandings in occupational choice

Entry into entrepreneurship is commonly framed as a labour supply decision (Boeri et al., 2020). Early research modelled workers’ occupational choice between self-employment or paid employment in terms of attitudes to risk versus financial returns, while later work added nonmonetary factors such as flexibility (Kim and Parker, 2020). This produced a dualistic characterisation of entrepreneurs as risk takers in terms of propensity or skill (seeking self-realisation and financial rewards), and paid employees as risk averse in nature (opting for secure, if lower, wages in less autonomous work environments) (Brachert et al., 2020; Stewart and Roth, 2001; Storey and Greene, 2010). This research into the occupational choices of qualified teachers working as private tutors exposes the limits of this binary ‘embrace or avoid’ characterisation of risk. Risk is not simply something teachers must assume financially if they become solo self-employed tutors. It is also something they seek to escape as they leave paid employment in a profession which jeopardises their physical, mental and/or social well-being:

There’s almost a burnout with teachers. I think that the new regime is just get them qualified, work them like a dog for five years, burn ‘em out and then they’ll go off and do something else, and obviously keep
that churn going...I was about 40 and I got pneumonia. I mean, which 40-year-old gets pneumonia?...it was basically the stress and the run-down of the job. (Adam-PT)

I left [teaching] because I was in a leadership position...funding was very, very tight, it was putting more pressure on individuals...staff turnover was, high. It was a lot of stress...there were four of us on the leadership team, two of those were on the sick, and it had an impact on me eventually...I can’t tell you how much happier I am [tutoring]...I wished I’d done it sooner...I feel like my four children were neglected at times when I was having to cope with my workload from school...trying to fulfil you know ridiculous criteria...because of Ofsted [Government inspectorate]. (Clare-FT)

In this instance, salaried employment in the teaching profession, which has recorded the most severe work intensification of any profession, is also seen as a risky choice, as the decline in job quality has produced a well-documented drop in teacher well-being (Green, 2021). Although it is vital that entrepreneurship research continues to recognise the risks taken by business founders (Brachert et al., 2020; Stewart and Roth, 2001; Storey and Greene, 2010), it must also move beyond the characterisation of paid employment as a safe alternative, as poor job quality too may present alternative physical, mental and social risks that ultimately shape individuals’ occupational choice.

Although research into why individuals choose entrepreneurship often foregrounds dynamic opportunity-based rationalities, a wider literature has also emerged that recognises that self-employment might be necessity driven, as people are forced into it through a lack of paid-employment opportunities (Bögenhold, 2019; Hipp et al., 2015). The experiences of non-teachers indicate that both pull and push factors can be important in the move into self-employed tutoring, with three different pathways emerging in this study. Firstly, a number of university students see self-employed tutoring as an opportunity to earn higher wages, whilst also escaping the inflexible schedules of service-sector paid employment (Kim and Parker, 2020):

[T]utoring it’s really flexible, so I can fit it around my time, whereas with [chain store]...they will give me the hours, I don’t get to choose...it’s [tutoring] a lot more money as well, so I could do less hours, which will give me more time to focus on my degree. (Esme-PT)

Second, graduates of different ages were simultaneously pushed and pulled into tutoring. Tim-FT embraced tuition by necessity in his 50s after losing his computer contracting career to global outsourcing and the great recession. Thomas-FT took to it temporarily when he did not immediately secure a management consultancy job post-graduation, but remained as it was ‘a sustainable full-time job’ with a flexible workload that ‘isn’t too intense’. Lewis-FT and Nina-PT, by contrast, had secured graduate opportunities, but did not enjoy them, so left for more rewarding tutoring work. Although all now recognise some benefits to tutoring, like cram school owners elsewhere in the shadow education sector (Dierkes, 2010: 30), the lower status of the work means none had initially envisioned it as their ideal career:

I feel it is one of those professions where you have to be unlucky in your first career before you accept it. Why is that? Because it is not a glorified profession in the way that being a lawyer or a banker is. And given that the tutors I know have been to the top universities, often had an excellent school career...you’d want to ideally aim for the corporate world first. (Lewis-FT)

Finally, two individuals with health problems were attracted to the flexibility of tuition as they were unable to hold down regular 9–5 paid employment and preferred home-based work (Kim and Parker, 2020):
I’d been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome and that’s why I left that [graduate engineering] job and I started doing tutoring…to work within the kind of confines of the condition that I had at the time… I actually started off doing one hour a week! (Owen-FT)

I had my issues with kind of depression and anxiety…panic attacks going to work. I didn’t want to leave the house…So for them [clients] to come to me do one-to-one…that’s what I could manage at the time. (Kate-FT)

In the wider literature, attention to opportunity or necessity driven rationalities has tended to produce a bi-polar focus on dynamic entrepreneurs versus precarious self-employed workers, but this trio of pathways extends recent calls to consider the heterogeneity of self-employment, and redirects attention to the centre ground where push and pull factors may coalesce (Bögenhold, 2019; Bosma et al., 2020) to shape how individuals’ trajectories emerge through their positioning in dynamic labour markets.

Economic interest in occupational choice inevitably constructs entrepreneurship and paid employment as binary either/or options, but there is now increasing attention to hybrid entrepreneurship that muddies this distinction. Hybrid entrepreneurs engage in self-employment and salaried employment at the same time (Bögenhold, 2019; Kim and Parker, 2020), sometimes using this as a safe route to ‘pure’ or ‘full’ entrepreneurship (Kurczewska et al., 2020: 293). In this study, we see both temporary and long-term hybridity in the cross-over between school teaching and private tutoring. Two examples illustrate this trend. On the one hand, Tasha-FT tried self-employed tutoring alongside paid employment as a teacher, before building on her experience to work full-time in her tuition business. On the other hand, Ava-PT envisages hybrid entrepreneurship as a long-term option. She found the full-time workload in a high-performing school too much (Green, 2021), so opts to work part time in school to enjoy the classroom and keep up-to-date, but combines this with private tutoring in which she is ‘definitely making a lot more on the tutoring side, hands down’. However, new forms of hybridity also emerge, as undergraduate students seek to use rewarding, self-employed tutoring to support their studies in a context of growing student indebtedness (Clark et al., 2019), with some seeing it as a pathway to salaried employment as a teacher:

I actually find giving tuition far more rewarding then I ever did working behind the bar…I’m looking at becoming a secondary school teacher of English…I figured that actually doing that as opposed to bar work…would certainly set me apart from other people…with job applications…pursuing further education…gaining qualified teacher status. (Phoebe-PT)

These experiences demonstrate that not only can the pressures of school teaching steer individuals into private tuition, but private tuition can support others in education, leading some towards teaching, and both occupations may be combined at the same time. These dynamics highlight the importance of both multi-directional, and hybrid, linkages between the changing worlds of paid- and self-employment, rather than binary either/or choices between the two.

The tuition business: from entrepreneurship to entrepreneurial subjectivity?

Characterisation of ideal-type entrepreneurs as risk takers who produce social and economic change through business growth (Bögenhold and Klinglmair, 2016) might well be applied to the architects of the new platform economy (Vallas and Schor, 2020), which in the supplementary education sector allows tutors to advertise their services to potential tutees online. However, while the solo self-employed take on financial risk, we know that the smallest of small business are the least likely to be growth orientated (Storey and Greene, 2010), and this has prompted debate about
whether small-scale operators should be viewed as entrepreneurs as ‘they rarely introduce innovations, hire employees, or grow their businesses’ (Light and Munk, 2018: 437). This study shows that there is indeed trepidation amongst solo self-employed tutors about business growth. Amongst the hybrid entrepreneurs, one full-time teacher, Abraham-PT, is currently delivering individual tuition to raise capital so he can establish a tuition centre. However, more in this hybrid category characterise tuition as supplemental work (Vallas and Schor, 2020), meaning growth is not their primary concern. Elimu-PT, who tutors to support his medical degree, explains:

[P]art of me is like, I could make this more...professional...push up my prices...but then...I think there’s only so much time off I can devote to this because...it’s a side thing which helps me pay my rent and helps me go on holiday...the main thing for me is always like medicine.

More surprisingly, this reticence is shared by ‘pure’ solo self-employed tutors with burgeoning individual demand. They are cautious about growth, not only because the potential income must be offset against the costs they have so far avoided as a home-based business (Reuschke, 2016), but also due to increased workload that comes with managing staff:

I have thought about extending my business, and I’ve looked at premises...I don’t think I’ll actually be any better off and I don’t really want to be dealing with people...not turning up for work or...the problems that may arise from it...so I’m just really looking to improve...things as an individual...I could probably work from eight till ten every day if I wanted to. But...I’ve got a life as well...I’m not totally financially driven...I don’t need to earn the money to pay the mortgage anymore. (Clare-FT)

This notion that business growth might be limited by tutors’ desire to live a balanced life rather than be ‘extraordinarily successful’ in financial terms has been seen in other studies of professional solo self-employed workers (Kapelinsky and Shoshana, 2019: 174), but here it is also notable that it is paired with a distinctive commitment to quality provision:

I could have expanded quickly...gone into a premises and I’ve chosen specifically not to do that...that’s just not the way, if you’re an actual proper tutor...some of these places are charging massive amounts of money and then putting kids in classes where they’re doing exactly the same work as everyone else...probably to my own financial detriment, I’m a bit more moral than that...I’m quite happy making a living, I just don’t want to water down what I know I can give. (Tasha-FT)

In this sense, neither the ‘hybrid’ or ‘pure’ solo self-employed workers conform to the classic image of an entrepreneur (Bögenhold and Klinglmair, 2016; Light and Munk, 2018), as growth is seen as undesirable by many for personal and professional reasons. Indeed, some tutors are actively uncomfortable with the notion of combining education with entrepreneurship. The resultant boundary work (Kapelinsky and Shoshana, 2019) sees entrepreneurs constructed as money-centred, an orientation that – despite the widespread marketisation of education (Ball and Youdell, 2008) – is deemed to be at odds with the educator role:

[I’m an] Educator. For me, if that’s not my primary motivation...then I’m not in the right job. I’m not here to make money out of the business...I’m here to educate, because that’s what I love...But not an entrepreneur? Oh God no, because I think an entrepreneur you’re making money or trying to change the world as a whole...Whereas education, like I’d say, that intimacy, that growth of an individual...They’ll go on and live the rest of their life. You’d played a small part in that. (Kate-FT)

This disjuncture between business and education in the eyes of some, and their distaste for entrepreneurship, reflects the constructions of educators as principled agents of social change, wherein
achieving professional or even semi-professional status often implies a “moral” component … signaling an adherence to the practice of social betterment and public service’ (Aurini, 2004: 476). This commitment to social betterment is more akin to idealistic representations of social entrepreneurs as the ‘proverbial embodiment of ethical virtuousness’, than images of the ‘prototypical business entrepreneur’ (Dey and Steyaert, 2016: 628), and while none of the tutors interviewed ran social enterprises, four did indeed enact ethical practices in offering reduced rate, or free, tuition to those who might otherwise miss out.

However, the ideal-type image of entrepreneurs as risk-taking mavericks has meant other forms of entrepreneurship have been marginalised in academic research and public discourse (Bögenhold and Klinglmair, 2016; Storey and Greene, 2010). This neglect means that solo self-employed workers have been left without a collective narrative through which to understand their experiences (Murgia and Pulignano, 2019), and it is vital we focus attention on them to consider alternative forms of entrepreneurship. In the English tuition industry, the wider context of neoliberal governmentality (Dey and Steyaert, 2016; Murgia and Pulignano, 2019), which emphasises individual responsibility and self-reliance, has shaped the emergence of an entrepreneurial subjectivity (Scharff, 2016). These educators, like teachers and graduates of tuition centres in Asia where the supplementary education industry is more highly developed, act as entrepreneurial subjects (Deuchar and Dyson, 2020; Gupta, 2019), proactively enhancing their own welfare by creating work for themselves:

I always see myself as like my own personal project basically. I’ve been trying to get it out there…I think I found something I was good at and I found that it worked for me…I see that as quite entrepreneurial because I found a way to make money. (Nina-PT)

I’ve…worked out the exact place to advertise myself to yield high-income clients. (Thomas-FT)

These entrepreneurial subjectivities are not something which tutors simply adopt, they emerge through their business practices in contexts shaped by wider market and power relations (Dey and Steyaert, 2016; Gallagher, 2014). In the tutoring industry, these entrepreneurial behaviours include generating business by selling their appeal to the parents through reference to prestige in mainstream education, a strategy which sounds eminently logical but contrasts with tuition centres who tend to market on their difference from schools (Aurini, 2006):

I tell them things like I am a qualified teacher, I’m working in a grammar school…I’ve done my PGCE at [Oxbridge] I have a…degree from [top university]…and I also…give a bit of background to my tutoring experience…I think that parents like seeing that kind of thing…They want them [their children] to go to good Universities so I think parents like to see that their tutor has also been successful…I think that if they see that a teacher works at a good school, they automatically assume that the teacher is very good. (Ava-PT)

Moreover, mobilising local social capital matters in home-based business success (Kim and Parker, 2020):

I…spent an afternoon meeting all the maths department there [local school]…and now…if they have any kids that need any help, they’ll hand over my phone number…which is nice! (Julia-PT)

This is then supplemented by introductory sessions, ongoing personalised teaching practices, and feedback to parents through which tutors bend themselves to the needs of the market (Aurini, 2004; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2020):
[After the lesson, I invite the parent in and I kind of go through what we’ve done and then ask the kid to demonstrate what they’ve learned… I want to show that their money is being well-spent… it’s like a customer service thing (Adam-PT).

Some enjoy the business side of the job more than others, so there is diversity in our sample; however, whereas Kapelinsky and Shoshana’s (2019) solo self-employed workers in diverse professional employment (e.g. lawyers, psychologists, designers and curators) argued they disliked and were poor at marketing themselves, most tutors in this study regarded competence in tutoring and business skills as essential. As Phoebe-PT succinctly argues: ‘They are sort of like Yin and Yang, I can’t do one without the other’.

**Tutoring outcomes: the security–precarity continuum in a heterogeneous market**

The category self-employed covers both entrepreneurial billionaires and precarious workers (Bögenhold, 2019) and it drives income inequality as the self-employed with employees earn more, and the solo self-employed earn less, than paid employees (Schneck, 2020). Unsurprisingly therefore, solo self-employment is often viewed through the lens of precarity (Boeri et al., 2020). Tutoring is interesting in this regard, as it is part of the growth in solo self-employment amongst well-educated workers (van Stel and van der Zwan, 2020). The highest paid tutor in this study demonstrates that in industries seeking to establish professional, or semi-professional, status (see George (2013) on life coaching), it is possible to step outside this precarity narrative and achieve financial security in solo self-employment. Thomas began by charging £20–40 per hour, but:

> about three years ago… I’d start off at [£]100 in September, to build up a half timetable, then increment it to [£]130 where I built up a three quarters full timetable, then I’d increment it to [£]150 to build up a nearly full capacity timetable. And then, when I was at virtually full capacity, I used to stick it at [£]170 on the basis that… if a student wants a lesson at [£]170, I’m sure I’d find a way of manipulating my time (Thomas-FT).

He invests the profits in the stock market, and is considering a property portfolio, as he is: ‘aiming for financial independence… in the sense that if I then chose to do nothing for the rest of my life, I’d have enough money from rent and interest’ (Thomas-FT). He, like other tutors we interviewed who earn £60–75 per hour, demonstrate that those in non-standard work are not always at the bottom of the economic pile (Hipp et al., 2015), as ‘not all solo self-employment is precarious’ (Tammelin, 2019: 230).

Tutor’s hourly rates in this study, however, spanned a wide scale. The majority tend to charge between £14 and £50 per hour, a range that itself produces very varied financial outcomes, leaving some comfortable and others stretched, not least as some rely on it as their sole income whereas others use it to supplement other paid employment/business income, pensions/savings or student loans, and many do not work full-time hours. By contrast, the two lowest income tutors charge £8 and £10 per hour and work for a maximum of 5 h per week. Like other well-educated solo self-employed workers in sectors such as IT, the media, translation and copywriting/editing (Murgia and Pulignano, 2019), neither regard themselves as being victims of precarity. Technically, this hourly rate matches the £6.35 minimum wage for their under-21 age group if travel and preparation are minimised, though achieving this does not guarantee a living wage (Hirsch, 2018). This position is only sustainable as they are not financially independent, with both living at their parental homes whilst at university. The young women use this privilege to enact an ethic of care (Dey and Steyaert, 2016): one insists she keeps charges low because ‘I don’t want to be increasing the inequality between the rich that can hire a tutor and can get excellent results and the poorer families that can’t’ (Isabella-PT), a claim that might be sceptically received were it not that both women
also provide some free tuition to children who cannot afford to pay. In economic terms, their position is extremely weak, but local social capital means they are experiencing a particularly middle-class form of precarity, and notably one they anticipate will end on entry into graduate employment. This diversity of experiences demonstrates that binary representations of entrepreneurial success or economic precarity do not do justice to the heterogeneity of solo self-employment (Bögenhold, 2019; Kapelinsky and Shoshana, 2019), and instead reveals the importance of a security–precarity continuum spanning high-, medium- and low-income tutors.

Knowledge of the existence of this security–precarity continuum in the supplementary education industry must, however, be informed by an appreciation of how it is shaped by space and time. Spatially, tutors’ capacity to earn higher wages is dependent on region and locality within it, as place fundamentally shapes the conditions of entrepreneurship (Gallagher, 2014; Kim and Parker, 2020). Notably, all the tutors earning over £40 per hour were based in London, with those in North and West London charging more than those in south of the river. All tutors earning <£25 per hour worked in the North West or East Midlands. This pattern reflects regional differences in the price of tuition seen in other nations (Šťastný, 2017). Indeed, this differential was inspiring one for East Midlands tutor to move to the capital:

I am planning to move there over the next month or so… I wanted to go somewhere where I make more money tutoring…I’ve seen adverts for people charging up to a 100 pounds, 120 quid an hour…I’m charging £20 per hour. So it’s quite reasonable for the Midlands…I’m going to try £50 per hour [in London]. (Nina-PT)

Temporally, the market also varies considerably across the year peaking in the spring before nationwide high-stake examinations. This seasonality is more keenly felt in provincial regions where tutors think parents’ lower anxiety about education contributes to later uptake of exam-focused tuition, and where the market for school entrance exams (Hajar, 2020) that helps sustain London tutors is less developed:

The demand in London was fairly consistent and it would be for tutoring over the year, building to the period before exams. In the countryside it was more in the run up to exams and not so much year-round…which is not so good from a business point of view, and [is] partly why I moved back to London. (Verity-PT)

These temporal variations mean tutors not only have to balance their uneven income across the year, many, particularly those outside London, also have other ‘side gigs’, for example taking on exam marking as ‘it’s nice to earn extra money to get you over the summer when you don’t have as many students’ (Margaret-FT).

Moreover, the issue of security–precarity is not simply shaped by space and time in the current moment, but also over the life course. A key issue for solo self-employed workers in other research is that it does not give them access to social protection (Murgia and Pulignano, 2019). Some of our tutors, who are using this as stop-gap employment to fund their studies, or who are using it as a supplementary income (Vallas and Schor, 2020) after redundancy or in (early) retirement, do not see this as problematic. Amongst those tutors for whom this is a primary, long-term source of income, only a minority have income protection insurance and financial planning to support them in their old age. One tutor cites lack of social protection as a reason to leave the sector:

[T]hat’s one of the reasons why I don’t think I’d stay tutoring forever…it is difficult to manage the kind of self-employed side of things, you know like pensions is one…being sick is another. So it’s not
necessarily...long-term illness, often it’s just things like worrying about getting the flu...and being out of work for say two weeks and...that costing you hundreds and hundreds of pounds. (Owen-FT)

However, he and others continue to work in tutoring and – like most self-employed people in the UK, where enrolment in private pension schemes has dropped from 48% in 1998 to 16% in 2018 (Crawford and Karjalainen, 2020) – have no long-term financial protection in place:

I don’t have a pension. I never thought about it. Uhm maybe I should...I’m just living life and earning money and just kind of going with the flow...that’s what you think about when you’re old and I don’t need to worry about that now. I know how naïve and silly that sounds. (Kate-FT)

Some tutors are advised to take pensions, but some don’t believe the returns are justified by what you have to invest in a private pension...I feel like planning too extensively often has a way of backfiring. (Lewis-FT)

Precarity, this shows, is not simply something that affects a minority of tutors now; the lack of social protection may leave greater numbers, though not all, in a precarious position in the longer term if they face ill health or require retirement income.

Conclusion

This paper has advanced debate about the heterogeneity of entrepreneurship. Its point of departure is that current attention to high-growth firms’ vital role in stimulating economic development is necessary but not sufficient, and that researchers must also investigate apparently less effective, but numerically dominant, forms of entrepreneurial activity. This agenda has been pursued through a focus on entrepreneurship’s most common, but also most under-researched, form, solo self-employment (Bögenhold, 2019; Hipp et al., 2015) which is growing in most advanced economies in the context of labour market change (Boeri et al., 2020; McGovern, 2020). The solo self-employed all assume the entrepreneurial function of risk bearing (Kim and Parker, 2020), but not all are driven by the goal of business growth (Light and Munk, 2018). They account for 85% of self-employed workers in the UK (Giupponi and Xu, 2020), and attention here has centred on private tutors, as the education sector is over-represented amongst entrepreneurial homeworkers (Kim and Parker, 2020). The results illuminate the experience of these regionally differentiated, home-based businesses in the global supplementary education industry (Bray, 2020; Holloway and Kirby, 2020), providing detailed insights into why tutors opt into solo self-employment; how they think about business; and its implications for their economic security. In so doing, the paper makes three conceptual advances that develop new ways of thinking about, and researching, the heterogeneity of entrepreneurship.

Firstly, in exploring why individuals enter into this type of employment, the paper has exposed the limits of binary thinking in the classic entrepreneurship literature that deploys models of occupational choice (Boeri et al., 2020). Three binaries have been shown to constrain thinking about the emergence of solo self-employment in practice, demonstrating a need for researchers to transcend these boundaries in future analyses. To begin, the dualist feting of entrepreneurs as risk takers, and implicit denigration of paid employees as risk averse (Kim and Parker, 2020), has been shattered by the recognition that, while solo self-employed tutors do indeed take on financial risk, many qualified teachers make this move as they seek to escape the grinding physical, mental and social risks to their well-being driven by work intensification in schools (Green, 2021). Rather than employ a binary embrace/reject approach to risk, future research must consider how individuals evaluate multiple, often competing, types of risk that exist in both entrepreneurship and paid employment in a labour market characterised by changes in job quality (McGovern, 2020). Moreover, the two-fold
distinction between those who opt into entrepreneurship to grasp an *opportunity*, and those who do so out of *necessity*, has been fundamentally challenged (Bögenhold, 2019; Bosma et al., 2020). The multiple routes into tutoring demonstrate that we need to avoid framing entry into entrepreneurship in oppositional terms as push and pull factors co-exist in dynamic labour markets and intersect to shape the complex decision-making strategies of individuals moving into solo self-employment. Finally, the multitude of boundary crossings which saw teachers move into tutoring, student tutors planning a move into teaching and numerous people combining paid employment in schools (and elsewhere) with self-employed tutoring highlights the importance of hybridity (Bögenhold, 2019; Kurczewska et al., 2020). *Entrepreneurship* and *paid employment* do not simply stand in binary opposition to one another, and economic researchers must therefore do more to explore the hybrid nature of entrepreneurship, recognising its two-way relations between, and combination with, the shifting world of paid employment.

Secondly, in considering how people think about the business of private tuition, the paper advances our understanding of the heterogeneity of entrepreneurship, and the nature of some of its more economically marginal, but numerically dominant, forms. The paper shows that solo self-employed tutors are not, for the most part, classic entrepreneurs. Few tutors were keen to grow their businesses to the point they would need employees (Light and Munk, 2018; Storey and Greene, 2010); instead, they were happy to make a reasonable living, without being tied down by running a more challenging business (Kapelinsky and Shoshana, 2019). Indeed, some felt that entrepreneurship is anathema in education as here professionalism is imbued with notions of public service (Aurini, 2004). This does not mean, however, that entrepreneurship and solo self-employment are analytically separate categories, as most tutors did adopt an entrepreneurial subjectivity (Deuchar and Dyson, 2020; Gupta, 2019; Scharff, 2016), not only seeing themselves as a project on which they could work, but more importantly engaging in entrepreneurial practices to recruit and retain clients. Although there are relatively few ideal-type entrepreneurs (Bögenhold and Klinglmair, 2016) to be seen amongst these solo self-employed tutors, there is significant entrepreneurialism. This demonstrates a need to rethink the conceptual boundaries of entrepreneurship, ensuring that the field not only scrutinises exceptional success, but also examines how entrepreneurial subjectivities and practices shape its more ordinary and pervasive formations.

Thirdly, the paper progresses calls that we move beyond the contrasting framing of self-employment as either the sphere of entrepreneurial billionaires or precarious workers (Bögenhold, 2019). Solo self-employed tutors included those living a comfortable life that offered the prospect of financial independence without the need to work, and those whose earnings could not possibly offer them financial independence even when in work. In between these poles, there was a range of more and less well-off tutors, depending on their position in a spatially and seasonally variable private tuition market. Greater numbers, however, had an enduring vulnerability due to the lack of social protection (Kim and Parker, 2020; Murgia and Pulignano, 2019), including pensions, that renders their position precarious in their old age. Rather than framing self-employment in dualist terms of wealth or precarity (Kapelinsky and Shoshana, 2019), this study demonstrates that we need to do more to consider the middle-ground and well as the polar opposites, reflecting conceptually on solo self-employment as an heterogeneous category that spans what has been identified here as a ‘security–precarity continuum’.

In summary, this paper has argued that research on entrepreneurship not only needs to study high-growth firms that drive economic dynamism, but also entrepreneurialism in the numerically dominant field of solo self-employment. The findings suggest three advances to conceptual thinking about the heterogeneity of entrepreneurship, including: (a) a move beyond binary models of occupational choice; (b) a broadening in the demarcation of entrepreneurship to incorporate entrepreneurial subjectivities and practices; and (c) a framing of economic outcomes in terms of a security–precarity continuum. One limitation, however, is that these insights come from a single
qualitative study of the education sector. Going forward, there is an urgent need for examination of solo self-employment in diverse sectors as interest in these extremely widespread entrepreneurial activities (Boeri et al., 2020; Bögenhold, 2019; Kim and Parker, 2020) remains the poor cousin of research on classic entrepreneurship.

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