Journal of Business Venturing 37 (2022) 106163



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Venturing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusvent





A personal adversity model of justifying the costs of entrepreneurial action: The case of oil thieves in the Niger DELTA

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Entrepreneurial action
Harm
Destruction
Illegal
Moral disengagement
Agency

ABSTRACT

While entrepreneurship can generate economic and social benefits, it can also be a source of negative outcomes. We need to gain a deeper understanding of how individual entrepreneurs interpret their context and engage in entrepreneurial action that can generate substantial negative outcomes. In this paper we shed light on the entrepreneurial process at the micro-level by exploring how bunkerers—oil thieves—engage in, justify, and persist with entrepreneurial action that, while generating some benefits for the entrepreneurs and the local community, causes substantial destruction to the local environment, community, and the entrepreneurs' health. By inductively generating a personal adversity model of justifying entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes (for the local community and environment), we provide new insights into (1) the link between aspects of entrepreneurship under adversity and substantial costs (and some benefits) experienced by local communities already facing adverse conditions, (2) how entrepreneurs' claim varying levels of agency in the same justification of the same action and its negative consequences, and (3) how entrepreneurs entangle the self and others to justify their actions and its costs.

1. Executive summary

While entrepreneurship can build economic and social wealth, it can also be a source of destructive outcomes. At the macro-level, the allocation of entrepreneurial effort to destructive entrepreneurship depends on the economic and societal conditions. At the micro-level, there is an opportunity to understand the dynamics underlying the talent allocated to entrepreneurial action within a set of economic and societal conditions and how entrepreneurs engage in, justify, and persist with activities that cause substantial damage to the local community and environment. We shed light on the micro-level dynamics of how bunkerers—oil thieves—engage in, justify, and persist with their entrepreneurial action that provides some benefits to themselves and the community at substantial costs to that community, the local environment, and personal health.

Bunkerers in the Niger Delta are an ideal context for building theory to better understand a micro-perspective of entrepreneurial action, outcomes, and justification for the following reasons: (1) Bunkerers create illegal ventures that access and sometimes refine, transport, and sell oil. (2) This entrepreneurial action generates numerous and substantial non-financial costs, including environmental damage, diminished quality of life for local community members, and risks to the entrepreneurs' health and safety. (3) With the

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2021.106163
Received 6 November 2020; Received in revised form 14 October 2021; Accepted 14 October 2021
Available online 7 November 2021
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Niger Delta region rife with bunkering, there is a substantial cost to the Nigerian people through lost income to the government and a diminished natural-resource endowment.

Our findings led us to develop a personal adversity model of justifying entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes (for the local community and environment) that can contribute to our understanding of some of the costs of entrepreneurship. Individuals who experience personal adversity sometimes believe they have little choice but to initiate and run illegal ventures that generate financial benefits for themselves and some benefits to their local communities while generating substantial costs borne by others and themselves. These entrepreneurs justify their entrepreneurial action by switching between claims of a lack of agency and considerable agency and switching between claims of motivation focused on themselves and prosocial motivation. Success in justifying their entrepreneurial action enables these entrepreneurs to continue to engage in such activities, with ongoing implications for their local communities and themselves. Our findings provide the basis for three primary contributions.

First, we complement macro-level research on destructive entrepreneurship by indicating how individuals initiate ventures that generate substantial costs for others (including the local community and environment) and continue with these entrepreneurial activities. By highlighting how entrepreneurs initiate and justify such entrepreneurial action, we begin to link a specific form of entrepreneurship to substantial costs (and some benefits) experienced by local communities already facing adverse conditions.

Second, research has highlighted how individuals can try to avoid sanctions for negative outcomes by claiming a lack of agency over the action—displacing or dispersing responsibility. We extend these studies by providing new insights into how entrepreneurs claim varying levels of agency in the same justification of the same action and outcomes.

Finally, research on justifying action with negative outcomes finds that people typically de-emphasize self-interests and emphasize others' gains or discount the negativity of the outcomes. This study provides new insights into the entanglement of self and others in justifying entrepreneurial action where the others are claimed to be sharing the benefits, and the self is sharing the costs. This self-other entanglement is a new form of justification and potential moral-disengagement mechanism.

2. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is typically associated with positive outcomes for entrepreneurs (Baron et al., 2016; Douglas and Shepherd, 2002), firms (Delmar and Wiklund, 2008; Wennberg et al., 2011), economies (McGrath, 1999; Schumpeter, 1934), and communities/societies (Austin et al., 2006; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006). However, entrepreneurial action can also generate unproductive and destructive outcomes. Unproductive entrepreneurship involves "activities of questionable value to society" (Baumol, 1996: 6), and destructive entrepreneurship involves activities that expend resources to capture rents or expropriate wealth (Lucas and Fuller, 2017). Baumol (1996) proposes that the allocation of entrepreneurial effort that leads to destructive outcomes depends on the "rules of the game"—the economic and societal conditions that motivate such behavior.

Therefore, while entrepreneurship can generate economic and social benefits, it can also be a source of negative outcomes. Indeed, a small stream of recent research is beginning to recognize that entrepreneurship can be harmful (Antony et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2016; Dutta and Sobel, 2016; Vivarelli, 2013), dysfunctional (Zahra and Wright, 2016), and evasive (Coyne and Leeson, 2004). This research on the negative outcomes of entrepreneurship offers an important counterweight to the extensive literature on its positive outcomes. Given this research stream's more macro-focus on the economic and societal conditions that motivate destructive entrepreneurship, there is an opportunity to focus within an economic and social context to gain a deeper understanding of how individual entrepreneurs interpret their context and engage in entrepreneurial action that, despite generating some benefits for themselves and others, also generates substantial negative outcomes for the local community, environment, and the entrepreneurs.

Therefore, while previous research has explained that some individuals will engage in destructive entrepreneurship (Baumol, 1996; Desai et al., 2013; Minniti, 2016), we need a deeper understanding (a micro-level perspective) of how entrepreneurs engage in, justify, and persist with those activities that cause substantial negative outcomes to complement the substantial prior research on how entrepreneurs generate positive outcomes (e.g., Baum and Locke, 2004; Fisher, Kuratko et al., 2017; Wiklund et al., 2009). We shed light on the entrepreneurial process at the micro-level by exploring how bunkerers—oil thieves—engage in, justify, and persist with entrepreneurial action that, while generating some benefits for the entrepreneurs and the local community, causes substantial destruction to the local environment, community, and the entrepreneurs' health.

Central to this context of entrepreneurship is the personal adversity that these entrepreneurs face. By entrepreneurs, we refer to individuals who "discover [or otherwise identify or construct], evaluate, and exploit" potential opportunities, with opportunities being those "situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, and organizing methods can be introduced and sold at greater than their costs of production" (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000: 218, 220).[1] We describe bunkerers as entrepreneurs and their illegal venturing to access, refine, and sell oil as entrepreneurial action because these individuals are introducing a new product (locally and illegally sourced and refined oil) that is sold at a price greater than its cost of production (consistent with Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). By inductively generating a personal adversity model of justifying entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes (for the local community and environment), we offer three primary contributions.

First, entrepreneurship research has primarily focused on the benefits of entrepreneurial action (Carter, 2011; Douglas and Shepherd, 2002; Uy et al., 2013), and while macro-level research has acknowledged destructive entrepreneurship (Baumol, 1990; Desai and Acs, 2007; Desai et al., 2013), micro-level research has largely ignored the substantial costs of entrepreneurial action by

[1] The pursuit of some potential opportunities can involve illegal actions (Sutter et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020) that may or may not be legitimate (Webb et al., 2009).

proximal others. In this study, we explore the negative (and positive) outcomes of entrepreneurial action within a specific context—within a geographic location, industry, set of economic conditions, and so on. By highlighting how entrepreneurs initiate and justify such entrepreneurial action, we begin to link aspects of entrepreneurship under adversity (for a discussion, see Baker and Nelson, 2005; Shepherd, Parida and Wincent, 2020a, 2021; Shepherd et al., 2020b) to substantial costs (and some benefits) experienced by local communities already facing adverse conditions.

Second, many studies have highlighted the role of an individual's agency in driving new ventures and other entrepreneurial action (Grimes et al., 2013; McMullen et al., 2021). In the current study, we find evidence of entrepreneurs' reliance on different levels of agency as they form, refine, and use justifications of their entrepreneurial action. Specifically, research has highlighted how individuals can try to avoid sanctions for negative outcomes by claiming a lack of agency over the action and/or its consequences (e.g., a displacement or diffusion of responsibility [e.g., Bandura et al., 1996; Detert et al., 2008; Moore, 2015). We extend these studies by finding individuals justify their action by claiming a lack of agency *and* considerable agency. Therefore, we provide new insights into how entrepreneurs' claims of varying levels of agency in the same justification of the same action.

Finally, entrepreneurship studies on motivation have shown that venturing can be primarily motivated by self-interest (Shane et al., 2003; for a review, see Murnieks et al., 2020), primarily motivated by other-interest (Bacq and Alt, 2018; Mair and Marti, 2006), or organized as a hybrid that simultaneously pursues both interests (e.g., for reviews, see Battilana and Lee, 2014; Kolk and Lenfant, 2016). We provide new insights for this stream of research by highlighting how entrepreneurs' dual focus of attention (on the self and others) is also part of their efforts to justify their entrepreneurial action given the substantial negative outcomes for their local community and environment. Research on justifications and moral disengagement find that people typically de-emphasize self-interests and emphasize others' gains (e.g., Bonner et al., 2016; Kish-Gephart et al., 2014) and/or discount the costs to others (Detert et al., 2008; Tillman et al., 2017). This study's findings provide new insights into the entanglement of self and others in justifying entrepreneurial action where the others are claimed to be sharing the benefits, and the self is sharing the costs. This self-other entanglement is a new form of justification and potential moral-disengagement mechanism. Indeed, the switching between claims of a lack of agency and considerable agency and the self-other entanglement in justifying entrepreneurial action that generates negative outcomes for the local community and the environment, contributes to what Moore (2015: 200) refers to as the growing interest in how moral disengagement is initiated and "how [individuals] construe morally meaningful choices."

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Destructive and necessity entrepreneurship

Building on Baumol (1990), Minniti (2016: 218) defines destructive entrepreneurship as "activities that produce a welfare transfer and that, in doing so, result in a net reduction of social welfare." One example of destructive entrepreneurial action occurs in some tourism ventures. Tourism operators can harm the environmental and social inputs of local communities (Ryan, 1993), leading to locals' poor health, reduced incomes, and increased neighborhood crime (Agarwal and Brunt, 2006) such that for some regions, the social costs of tourism outweigh its benefits (Lindberg et al., 2001). Other examples include corrupt government officials (DeSoto, 1989) and entrepreneurs involved in drug smuggling, dynamite fishing, and slash-and-burn agriculture (Desai and Acs, 2007). A final example is human trafficking. Human trafficking involves millions of people each year (de Vries et al., 2020). The people trafficked are mostly girls and women for work in the sex industry, most of whom suffer through being assaulted physically and verbally (Farley and Barkan, 1998), contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Gil et al., 1996), and experiencing social isolation and loneliness (Baker et al., 2010).

Most research on the allocation of talent toward various entrepreneurial outcomes has assumed that individuals have a choice, which is not always the case (Desai and Acs, 2007). For example, entrepreneurs from least developed countries often face severe resource constraints, which means they have few strategic options (Khoury and Prasad, 2016) and are pushed into self-employment (Bruton et al., 2013; Hall et al., 2012; Khavul, 2010; Kistruck et al., 2011; Mair and Marti, 2009; van der Zwan et al., 2016) to provide an income for subsistence (Block and Sandner, 2009; Dencker and Gruber, 2015; Dencker et al., 2009), satisfaction (Block and Koellinger, 2009; Block and Wagner, 2010; Kautonen and Palmroos, 2010), and quality of life (Tobias et al., 2013).

Although recent theorizing has advanced our thinking about necessity entrepreneurship (Dencker et al., 2021: Welter et al., 2017), it is important to note that some people may feel that they have no, or little, choice but to enter entrepreneurship, including illegal ventures (Sutter et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020). Therefore, we are interested in exploring how individuals in a less developed economy come to engage in entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes for the local community and environment and how they justify continuing with this course of action.

3.2. Unethical behaviors and moral disengagement

Unethical behaviors can lead to negative outcomes. Considerable scholarly attention has focused on why people engage in unethical behaviors. For example, employees can engage in unethical and deviant behaviors that are costly to their organizations. That is, they engage in behaviors that directly obstruct their organizations' functioning, such as reducing their own and other employees' effectiveness at work-related tasks (Fox et al., 2001: 292). Such behaviors by employees include theft, sabotage, and "slacking off" (Gruys and Sackett, 2003; Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Spector et al., 2006; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012). There are numerous explanations for employees' deviant behaviors, including the perpetrators being "bad apples" (Dunlop and Lee, 2004; Felps et al., 2006), engaging in moral licensing (Klotz and Bolino, 2013; Merritt et al., 2010; Monin and Jordan, 2009), having a specific personality

(DeShong et al., 2015; Sprung and Jex, 2012), and possessing both low emotional stability (Berry et al., 2007) and low integrity (Van Iddekinge et al., 2012). Research has also found that situational and organizational factors influence the extent of employees' deviant and costly behaviors, including person-job and person-vocation fit (Harold et al., 2016), organizational culture (Aquino and Lamertz, 2004), organizational climate (Treviño et al., 1998), organizational transparency (Ferry and Eckersley, 2020), and organizational policies (Fine et al., 2010).[2]

Considerable scholarly attention has also focused on how people justify their unethical behaviors. Consistent with social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986) offers moral disengagement as an overarching framework for explaining such behaviors. People engage in ethical behaviors because they have internal moral standards that guide their conduct, and they feel distressed when they violate those standards. Indeed, anticipating these feelings of distress motivates people to avoid making decisions and taking actions that violate their moral standards. However, for moral standards to impact ethical decisions and actions, individuals' self-regulatory process needs to be activated (Bandura, 1986). Unethical decisions and actions, in contrast, occur when individuals' self-regulatory function is deactivated, which decouples individuals' moral standards from their decision making to enable unethical behaviors without self-censure and, thus, without feelings of distress (Detert et al., 2008; Duffy et al., 2012).

A steady stream of research has documented a series of cognitive mechanisms that can deactivate individuals' self-regulatory process to enable unethical behaviors; these cognitive mechanisms are collectively referred to as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986; Detert et al., 2008). These moral disengagement mechanisms differ in their locus of attention (Bandura, 2018). First, mechanisms at the agency locus absolve the person from responsibility for the negative outcome (i.e., displacing or dispersing responsibility or blame). Second, mechanisms at the outcome locus disregard, diminish, or distort the consequences of unethical behavior. Third, mechanisms at the behavior locus disengage moral standards by cognitively misconstruing a behavior to make it seem more morally acceptable (i.e., moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison). Finally, mechanisms at the victim locus reduce identification with those harmed by an unethical behavior (i.e., dehumanization and attribution of blame) (Bandura, 1986, 2018; Detert et al., 2008).

Moral disengagement has been linked with a variety of unethical behaviors, such as aggression against others (Gino et al., 2014; Obermann, 2011), cheating (Gino and Galinsky, 2012), theft (Shu et al., 2011), avoiding civic duties (Caparara et al., 2009), and workplace misconduct (Duffy et al., 2012). Recent research has found that the effects of moral disengagement on individuals' likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviors are magnified when people experience anxiety and insecurity (Chugh et al., 2014), personal distress (Paciello et al., 2013), and psychological closeness to someone who is acting unethically (Gino and Galinsky, 2012). In particular, this research stream has called upon future research has to explore more deeply the "unethical social life" (Caparara et al., 2009: 504).

In the entrepreneurship literature Qin et al. (2020) (see also Shepherd et al., 2013) explore the role of disengaging pro-environmental values in entrepreneurs' decisions to pursue potential opportunities that harm the natural environment, which can in turn negatively impact local communities. Indeed, people sometimes pursue opportunities based on "economic motivation without taking into consideration the importance of the environment for human life" (Nugroho et al., 2017: 66) and, as a result, sometimes over-exploit ecosystem resources (Bryant and Bryant, 1998; Perrow, 1997), thereby negatively impacting human health and quality of life. Further, Baron et al. (2015) find that entrepreneurs who are more motivated by financial gains are more likely to disengage their morals to make unethical decisions than entrepreneurs less motivated by financial gains.

Therefore, research has highlighted the importance of moral disengagement in explaining unethical behaviors, including some recent work on entrepreneurial behaviors. However, considering the complexity of illegal entrepreneurship (vis-à-vis the specific tasks and decisions of the ethics and moral disengagement literature), we raise the question of how these entrepreneurs facing considerable adversity engage in entrepreneurial action that generate substantial costs to the local community (and environment) and use moral disengagement to justify their initiation and ongoing operation of their entrepreneurial ventures.

4. Methods

Because there is so little research on individuals' thinking and activities (i.e., micro-perspective) when initiating and engaging in entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes for a local community and the environment (for an adjacent micro perspective see the criminology literature [e.g., Abadinsky, 2013; Paoli, 2002; Schelling, 1971), we relied on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We chose an extreme context because such contexts facilitate theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). Specifically, we chose the entrepreneurial action of bunkering.[3] Bunkerers—oil thieves—in the Niger Delta are an ideal context for addressing our research question. First, bunkerers create illegal ventures that access and sometimes refine, transport, and sell oil. Accessing oil is cheap, so bunkerers can sell oil cheaper than regular legal suppliers and profit from doing so. This bunkering generates profits for themselves and reduced oil costs for their customers. The process of accessing, refining, and transporting oil to customers

[2] Organizations can also engage in deviance, which, when adopted by a community of organizations, can led to the deviance's normalization and reinforcement.

[3] An extreme context is an environment "where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization's capability to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, and material consequences to … organization members". Based on Hällgren et al. (2018) typology of extreme context, bunkering is an emergency context because the incidents (polluting the environment and diminishing health) have already occurred and are the direct result of ventures' activities. We also consider this research context a risky context because these incidents are also likely to occur in the future.

proceeds as follows: "In order to access the oil, a small group of welders will puncture a pipeline at night, establishing a tapping point from which the group can operate" (Council on Foreign Affairs, 2015). From the tapping point, they "siphon the crude via rubber hoses up to 2 km long into barrels aboard small craft" (Reuters, 2019). Once transported to the "illegal artisanal refineries located in the Delta, [they] cook the crude into separate petroleum products. The end product yields 2% petrol, 2% kerosene, and 41% diesel" (Council on Foreign Affairs, 2015). "They then sail alongside larger vessels, allowing the contraband to be pumped ship-to-ship into oil tankers bound for export, usually to Asia—mixed imperceptibly in a ratio as small as 10% with the legitimate product" (Reuters, 2019). Although not fully knowable, one estimate indicates that bunkering amounts to 200,000–300,000 barrels of oil stolen each day (Obenade and Amangabara, 2014).

Second, this entrepreneurial process of bunkering generates numerous and substantial costs. In particular, bunkering damages the natural environment: "Pipeline vandalism from bunkering leaves pipes especially vulnerable to leaks, spills, and major accidents … The remaining 55% of crude goes to waste, most of which is dumped into the nearby water or a shallow pit" (Council on Foreign Affairs, 2015; see also Adeola, 2000; Amnesty International, 2009). In turn, this destruction of the natural environment diminishes many locals' quality of life:

Environmental degradation is the most visible and direct impact of illegal refining and oil theft. Photographic evidence gathered at sites visited across Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers States show the terrible impacts of artisanal refining on the local environment. Vegetation is visibly affected by the resulting pollution; crude saturates the mangroves, and oil disturbs the surface water. The environmental destruction associated with illegal oil refining harms traditional livelihoods tied to the land and water. Oil pollution is a significant barrier to cooperative, integrated fish farming, one of the few businesses that could provide sustainable employment and incomes. Nigeria spent over N100 billion on the importation of frozen fish in 2010, some of which is necessary for Niger Delta communities to replace the fish they once caught. Oil theft and artisanal refining have significant health risks for those involved and the environment as well. The handling and heating of the crude oil pollute the air. The camps have a toxic feel, and the health impacts of those working there are unknown. Communities are constantly exposed to inhalation of poisonous gases, causing coughing and breathing problems. However, many are in denial about the potential medium to long-term health implications because of the short-term economic gains. (Obenade and Amangabara, 2014: 28).

Finally, the Niger Delta is a region rife with bunkering. One estimate is that bunkering is "costing Nigeria about a tenth of its crude production," with "75% of the stolen oil being exported [and] the rest … being refined in illegal 'artisanal refineries' and marketed along the Nigerian streets as cooking fuel, gasoline, and diesel" (Odalonu and Eronmhonsele, 2015: 10, 12). Therefore, bunkering generates a cost to the Nigerian people through lost income to the government and a diminished natural resource endowment. Given the prevalence of bunkering in this region and its acknowledged negative impact on the natural environment, local communities, and the country, we expected these entrepreneurs to have strong opinions about their actions. These opinions, combined with our use of local networks to build on trust with the bunkerers, should make their thoughts and actions more transparently observable to us (Eisenhardt, 1989)—well, as much as possible, given the illegality of the activities. Indeed, we were somewhat surprised by how open the bunkerers were in describing their activities and the thinking behind creating the venture, continuing with this business, and the resulting negative outcomes for the various parties.

4.1. Sampling

In this study, we decided to rely primarily on semi-structured interviews with bunkerers operating in the Niger Delta. Semi-structured interviews enabled us to capture insights into the individuals' thoughts as they engaged in their entrepreneurial action. Consistent with other studies interested in new venture outcomes (e.g., Jiang and Tornikoski, 2019; Williams and Shepherd, 2016), we decided to conduct the semi-structured interviews sometime after venture creation so that the entrepreneurs had a chance to experience the outcomes of their entrepreneurial action and others' responses to those actions and outcomes. Indeed, we were more interested in the bunkerers' ongoing justifications of their entrepreneurial action than in the process they used in creating their venture.

We used the local author's social and professional network to purposefully sample four groups. Specifically, we used the local author's local network to recruit (1) people who engaged in bunkering, (2) buyers of illegal oil products, (3) local community members, and (4) employees of a multinational oil exploration company at the three levels of management. Local contacts were important in recruiting individuals to the study because local networks often reflect trust (Shapiro, 1987), and trust is essential when interviewing people about illegal activities (Johnson and Golub, 2007; Wong, 2015), such as unlawfully accessing, refining, selling, and buying oil. This trust was also crucial in recruiting local community members as it helped them overcome their fear of reprisal from the illegal actors. Indeed, we went to great efforts to keep the identities of the participants hidden. For example, we never asked them their names or where they lived (despite the more general recognition of being locals); we assured them that every aspect of their identities would remain secret and that the data collected would not be used against them in any way. However, we did collect some information about the entrepreneurs that we can report (see Appendix 0).

4.2. Data collection

As indicated above, trust was necessary to access the bunkerers and to have them respond openly. The fact that the entrepreneurs provided clear descriptions of their illegal activities during the semi-structured interviews indicated that these respondents felt safe sharing their thoughts and actions with us. Following the recommendation of Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006: 10) for researchers to be "close" to yet "dispassionate" about the phenomena they study and the guidance of Crosina and Pratt (2019) to be rigorous and trustworthy throughout data collection and analysis, we used the insider/outsider approach.

With oil and gas expertise, the Nigerian author served as the insider to move close to the phenomena of interest. Specifically, this closeness (including his social network) signaled trustworthiness to potential respondents, thus providing us access to a mostly hidden group of individuals and enabling them to speak freely about their illegal activities. Both non-local authors acted as outsiders and ensured a dispassionate approach to data collection and analysis. Specifically, one of the outsiders of the team (1) interviewed the insider about the nature of the phenomena, (2) decided on the different groups to be purposively interviewed, (3) generated the first version of the semi-structured interview protocol, (4) performed the initial and subsequent rounds of coding, and (5) developed an initial and then subsequent models from the findings. The insider on the team (1) described the nature of bunkering in the Niger Delta and provided feedback on (2) the interview protocol, (3) the groups of people to be sampled, (4) the emerging codes and findings, and (5) the emerging model explaining the findings. The other outsider on the team performed the role of taking "the big picture" perspective to make sure the other two did not "get bogged down in the weeds." This pushing for abstraction involved probing questions about what was meant by specific constructs, how we came to learn about focal relationships, and "what it all means." This back and forth between the insider and outsiders, local and non-local, and detailed and abstract revealed differences between us as authors that triggered further discussions and re-analysis of the data before we eventually generated consensus.

We began data collection with three exploratory interviews with locals of the Niger Delta knowledgeable of bunkering that focused on determining whether data collection within the proposed groups was even possible and, if yes, how we could achieve this access and receive honest, frank answers. We also used these exploratory interviews to gain feedback on the semi-structured questions we planned to use in our various interviews. As a result of this feedback, we designed our initial data-collection effort and modified our initial interview protocol.

Between October 2019 and March 2020, the local co-author traveled back to his homeland (Nigeria) and to the Niger Delta (where he worked and lived for 15 years). Over 6 months, we conducted interviews with bunkering entrepreneurs ($n = 15$), buyers of illegal oil products ($n = 10$), local community members ($n = 8$), and oil and gas managers at the legal oil exploration company (front line staff [$n = 4$], middle managers [$n = 2$], and top managers [n = 2]). We conducted all interviews in English (the main language in Nigeria). We conducted the interviews with the entrepreneurs in two stages—the first stage in November 2019 and the second stage in February and March 2020—because we wanted to delve deeper into the illegality of the bunkerers' ventures after the first stage. These follow-up interviews provided richer information about an emerging issue of interest (i.e., Spradley, 1979) and a check (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) on the emerging findings; that is, we changed our emphasis from the illegality of their actions (because being caught by government authorities was not a substantial concern and had little impact on their decisions and actions) to an emphasis on their decision making and actions to pursue their entrepreneurial opportunity (via bunkering) given the benefits and costs of such actions and their justification of their entrepreneurial action given the outcomes.

Given the sensitive nature of the information, it is not surprising that many of the interviews were relatively short (the mean times for the interviews were as follows: entrepreneurs = 30 min, buyers = 15 min, local community members = 20 min, and oil company managers = 40 min). For all but three interviews with the entrepreneurs, we transcribed the interviews verbatim. We captured the three interviews that we did not record verbatim through the interviewer's notes of the meeting. We used this approach because these interviewees were reluctant to be recorded, and for safety reasons, we completely understood. The interviewer's notes were consistent with the other interviewees' verbatim records, although less detailed. We include a copy of our final interview protocol for the entrepreneurs in Appendix 0.

Although we initially started with the goal of interviewing nine entrepreneurs, for the reasons we explained above, we felt it necessary to "dig deeper" and conducted a second round of nine interviews with a different set of bunkerers. While the second round provided richer quotes, the information was highly consistent across rounds, and the additional interviews yielded no new insights (Charmaz, 2006)—well before interviewing the full sample. Despite earlier saturation, we included all respondents in our analysis and results. Indeed, while some categories can reach saturation before others (Crosina and Pratt, 2019), this was not the case for our analysis of the data in this study.

We supplemented our data with secondary reports. Although archival records on these illegal businesses were unlikely to exist and, if they did, were unlikely to be shared, we were able to access government documents about the oil industry in the Niger Delta, including reports on oil being stolen, environmental damage from associated oil spills, and lost revenue to the country. We also accessed oil and gas reports (for Nigeria and more broadly) and newspaper reports that provided data on interviews with government officials, environmental non-government organizations (NGOs), and bunkering entrepreneurs. We used these data to supplement and triangulate our interview data and provide a broader context for the current study. Although useful, we did not formally analyze these data because we could not vouch for their veracity. For example, government reports and interviews with government officials are likely to be self-serving and meet a political end (i.e., propaganda). Furthermore, while these reports highlighted the financial costs from the bunkerers' entrepreneurial action, we were interested in understanding the thoughts and justifications of those generating (or directly experiencing the consequences of) this entrepreneurial action.

4.3. Data analysis

For data analysis, we followed Pratt et al.'s (2006) three-stage procedure—open coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. Following Crosina and Pratt (2019), while our explanation of the coding process is linear, we highlight here that the coding process was far more dynamic and iterative. As identified above, the authors on the team played different roles that facilitated the theorizing process (e.g., insider vs. outsider, local vs. non-local, close vs. abstract, and so on). The differences among us as authors and the different roles we played enabled us to benefit from "an array of interpretive bases and histories" (Bartunek and Louis, 1996: 67).

4.3.1. Open coding

We engaged in open coding to understand what the entrepreneurs (and those directly involved in or impacted by their actions) thought about their venturing and its benefits and costs. To maintain the respondents' voice, our open coding involved labeling chunks of data using the respondents' own labels (consistent with Locke, 2001). For example, open codes included "this is what the government should be doing," "government deception," "every man for himself," "they don't care about me; I don't care about them," "it's a small amount," and "it is my oil." At this early stage of the coding process, we cast a wide net and generated many open codes to capture the scope and richness of the interviews (first-order codes = 34). Although we began to notice differences across the groups sampled—for example, between the entrepreneurs and both the local community members and the oil company managers—we found

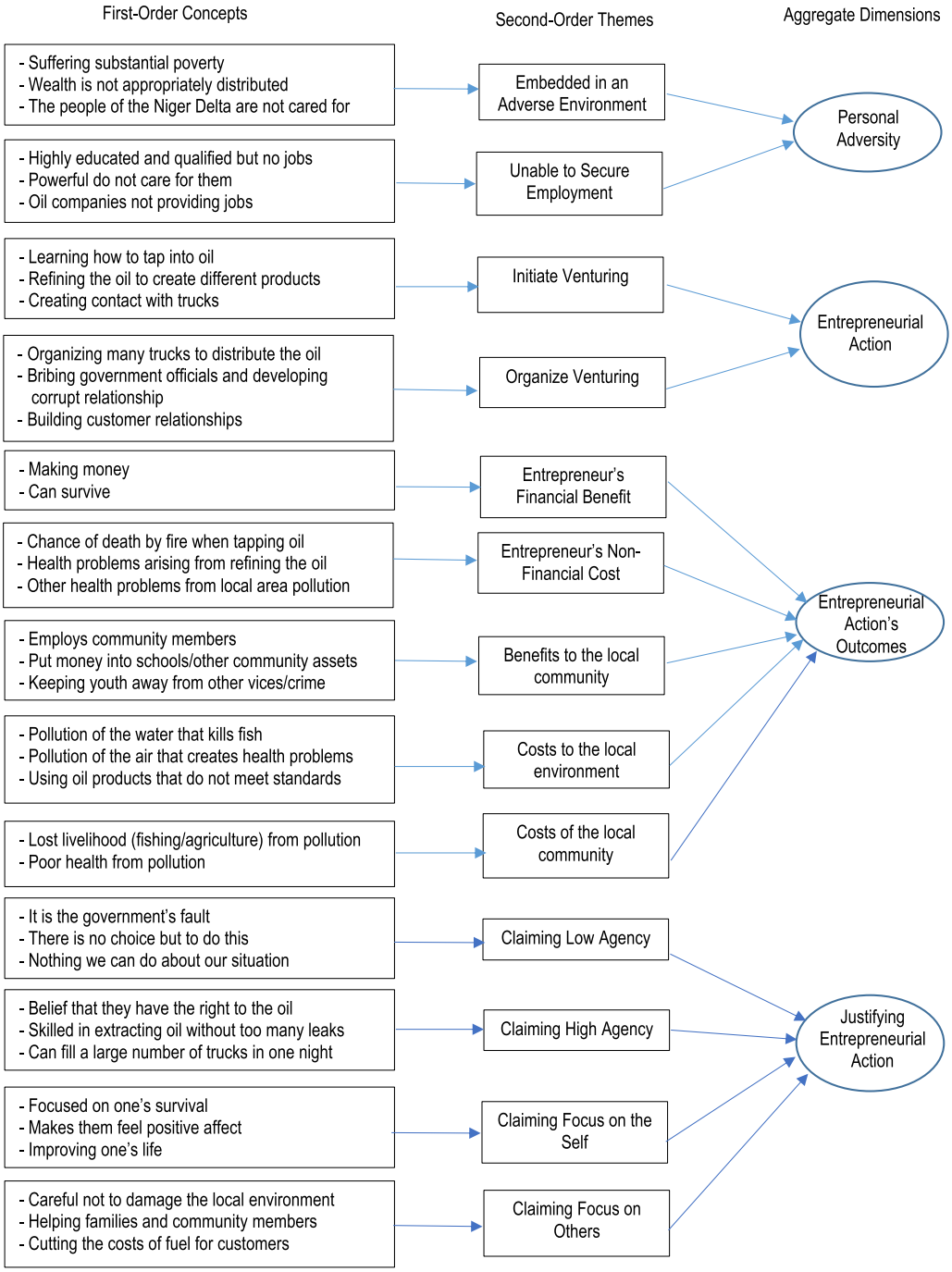


Fig. 1. Data structure.

considerable homogeneity among the entrepreneurs.

4.3.2. Axial coding

We used axial coding to begin to group similar first-order codes into more aggregated second-order themes. In engaging in this aggregation and abstraction process, we moved away from relying on the participants' voice for labeling to use more theory-based language. We combined various first-order codes about suffering from poverty, undistributed wealth, and lack of care for people in this region into "embedded in an adverse environment"; first-order codes about being highly educated yet unemployed, the powerful not caring, and oil companies not providing jobs into "unable to secure employment"; first-order codes about learning how to tap into oil pipes, engaging in refining oil into its various products, and creating contact with trucks into "imitate venturing"; first-order codes about organizing many trucks, bribing government officials, and building customer relationships into "organize venturing"; first-order codes about making money and surviving into "entrepreneur's financial benefits"; first-order codes about the chance of death by explosion, health problems from refining, and polluting the local environment into "entrepreneur's non-financial costs"; first-order codes about employing community members, investing in schools, and keeping community youth from other vices into "benefits to others"; first-order codes about polluting the water and killing fish, polluting the air and creating health problems, and using low-grade oil products into "costs to others"; first-order codes about blaming the government, having no choice, and not being able to do anything about the situation into "claiming low agency"; first-order codes about ownership rights of the oil, skilled extraction and refining, and filling many trucks into "claiming high agency"; first-order codes about being focused on survival, positive affect, and improving one's life into "claiming focus on self"; and first-order codes about caring about not damaging the environment, helping one's family and community, and cutting fuel costs for customers to "claiming focus on others."

As we engaged in axial coding, we found paradoxes between first-order codes that indicated limited agency and those that reflected considerable agency and between first-order codes that indicated a self-focus and those that reflected an other-focus. We began to theorize on these paradoxes of low and high agency and of self- and other-focus as mechanisms underlying the entrepreneurs' justifications for their illegal venturing. We describe these mechanisms in the findings section.

4.3.3. Theoretical coding

In our final coding stage, we explored how the second-order themes come together as overarching dimensions to form part of a theoretical story (Charmaz, 2006). This coding process enabled us to detect a pattern underlying the entrepreneurs' thought processes of justifying their entrepreneurial action—we abstracted the axial codes into aggregate dimensions. Specifically, we combined the second-order themes of "embedded in an adverse environment" and "unable to secure employment" into "personal adversity"; the second-order themes of "initiate venturing" and "organize venturing" into "entrepreneurial action"; the second-order themes of "entrepreneur's financial benefit," "entrepreneur's non-financial cost," "benefits to the local community," "costs to the local environment," and "costs to the local community" into "entrepreneurial action's outcomes"; and the second-order themes of "claiming low agency," "claiming high agency," "claiming focus on self," and "claiming focus on others" into "justifying entrepreneurial action."

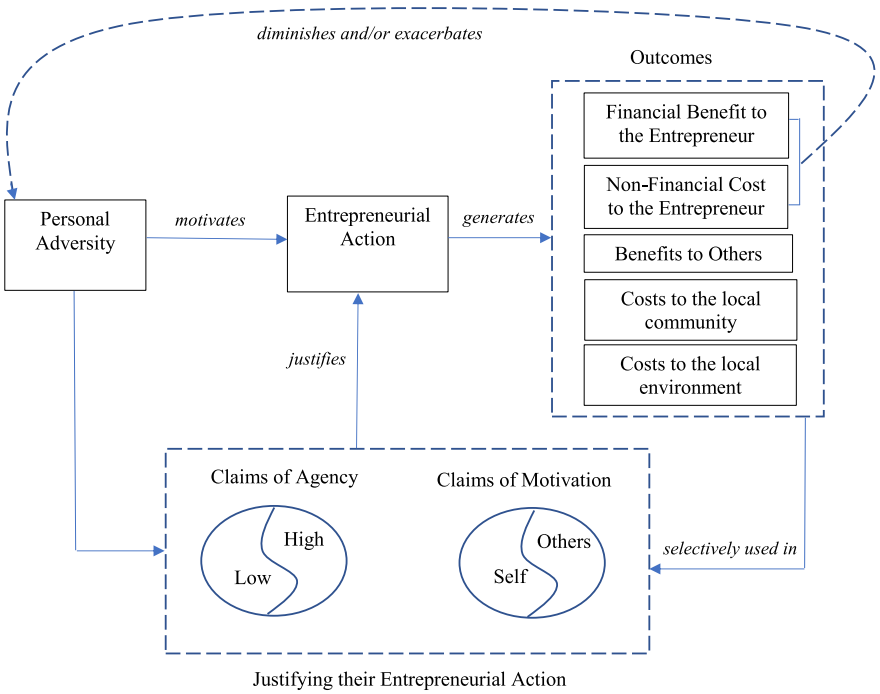


Fig. 2. A personal adversity model of justifying the costs of entrepreneurial action.

As part of this theoretical coding, we discussed how these theoretical dimensions tell a cohesive theoretical story of the phenomena witnessed, coded, and analyzed. As described earlier, our (the authors') different backgrounds and roles generated differences, and as we resolved these differences, theorizing progressed. We eventually arrived at a framework that accurately represents the word and spirit of the phenomena we studied and provides an extension to current theorizing. We present our data structure in Fig. 1.

5. Findings

As illustrated in Fig. 2, our findings led to a personal adversity model of justifying the costs of entrepreneurial action. Individuals who experience personal adversity sometimes believe they have little choice but to engage in entrepreneurial action that generates financial benefits for themselves and some benefits to their local communities while generating substantial costs borne by others (the local community and environment) and non-financial costs for themselves. These entrepreneurs justify their entrepreneurial action through claims of agency (switching between low and high agency) and claims of motivation (switching between self-based and others-based). Success in justifying their entrepreneurial action enables these entrepreneurs to continue to engage in such activities with ongoing implications for their local communities, environments, and themselves.

5.1. Personal adversity

Although they live in an oil-rich country, the majority of Nigerian people live in poverty. Indeed, 44% of the population (Quartz Africa, 2018) lives below the poverty line of $1.90/day (World Bank, 2020). This contrast between the abundant oil resource and the people's poverty is greatest in the Niger Delta. People of the Niger Delta suffer great poverty (Joel, 2008), which in turn causes suffering in many forms, such as adults suffering cognitive problems, socio-emotional issues, and both physical and mental health problems (Haushofer and Fehr, 2014; Wyk and Bradshaw, 2017) and children also suffering psychological, social, and physical problems (Diez Roux and Mair, 2010; Hair et al., 2015).

Our interviews highlight how these individuals faced considerable adversity before becoming entrepreneurs, and it was this adversity that *motivated* them to enter the bunkering business. The motivation of adversity is indicated by the following comment by Odili (entrepreneur): "Because in this, our country, Nigeria, you don't have anything. You graduate from the university, and as a graduate, there is no job. For me, this [bunkering] is the only means for now because I can do this for survival." Indeed, the lack of employment opportunities is one of the key reasons Nigerians face adversity. For example, Kalio, an entrepreneur, told us,

> I have taken my CV to so many places looking for a job. They always tell me there is no job, yet they employ [other] people every day. So, I just looked for a way to help myself and my family because I cannot suffer and go to school, and after graduating, there isn't a job for me to do.

Facing considerable adversity such that they need to fight for their survival, the bunkerers demonize the powerful, including the government and foreign oil companies. These powerful entities are demonized for ignoring their responsibilities and for deceiving and neglecting the people. The bunkerers believe that the government's incompetence, deception, and neglect have led their local environment to experience great hardship and thus requiring the bunkerers to fight for their survival.

First, both the government and foreign oil companies work together to generate substantial revenue. As a middle manager at the legal oil company (Manager 2) explained to us, "The nation owns the oil reserve. There are agreements between the government and the oil companies on investments and profit-sharing. The government has the larger share." The government and the press report that Nigeria generates 1.65 million barrels/day (OPEC, 2019), equating to approximately $76 million/day. In the Niger Delta, oil companies produce 1.6 million barrels/day, which equates to roughly $73.7 million/day (Climate Scorecards, 2019). However, the Niger Delta locals do not believe this wealth is being distributed to the people appropriately, and they primarily blame the government for this unfair distribution. This blame on the government is reflected in the following quotes by Eze:

> But the government is not making jobs available for the youths that are graduating from schools. So, people graduate from school and still come to sit at home unemployed. If you steal, you will be killed. So, the government should provide jobs for the Nigerian youths, especially those from the Niger Delta area.

Second, related to the government not doing what it should, the entrepreneurs also believe that the government deceives them. The entrepreneur Odili explained that he believes the government sells the oil for more than it says: "The government sells their own, and they come back to tell us, the citizens, that one barrel is sold for some chicken change, and they keep deceiving us while we know what is involved in the market." Another entrepreneur—Kalio—described the way the government deals with the oil in the following way:

> After all, people in government are stealing this money that is generated from the Niger Delta oil extraction business, yet they don't give us anything. We are all here suffering while they are flying their private jets and couldn't care less about us. So, this is my right, and anything that wants to happen, I am also ready for it. As they are sitting in government, their children are schooling abroad, and once they finish studying, they get good jobs. I am done with school, and there is no job for me, so I have to find a way to help myself.

In line with descriptions of the government, one entrepreneur named Toby described the oil companies as "stealing our oil in a way that the federal government does not even understand. They are taking multiples of what they declare and using our oil to enrich their countries."

Finally, based on the prior points, individuals of the Niger Delta believe that the powerful do not care for them, so they reciprocate this lack of caring with apathy and sometimes anger. For example, when we asked about whether he cares for the oil companies, Odili

told us the following: "Those of us here know what we are doing [bunkering], so if they give me a big machine to operate, it won't take me much to learn how to operate it. But they won't employ us; they won't engage us. So, I am not concerned about them." A worker at the legal oil company acknowledged the grievance over the lack of care:

> There are negative impacts that, in some cases, are not the intended outcomes but happen by nature of the society we live in and our operations and societal impact. By societal impact, we need to understand that the oil and gas industry cannot operate in isolation of the general environment and behavioral patterns of the people in the communities where our operations are located. There are so many expectations for the government by local communities as the communities feel they should be part of the process.

The bunkerers' frustration about the lack of employment stems from the financial hardship it causes, the indignity of being educated yet unemployed, and the powerful not changing the "unacceptable" status quo. For example, buyers of the bunkerers' products acknowledge the entrepreneurs' motivations to engage in this business as a way to survive (Buyers 2, 5, and 6), and a community member (8) described individuals' entry into bunkering as self-help.

5.2. Outcomes of entrepreneurial action

The entrepreneurs we interviewed are pursuing the opportunity of illegally accessing oil from pipes, sometimes refining the oil, and then selling the various oil-related products. The pursuit of this opportunity is costly to specific aspects of the natural environment, the community, the Nigerian people, and the entrepreneurs themselves.

First, in pursuing their opportunity, the entrepreneurs destroy aspects of the local environment. Indeed, oil spills sometimes occur when the bunkerers puncture pipes to access the oil, and these oil spills have a devastating impact on the local natural environment. For example, an environmental report on the Niger Delta describes the area as "one of the most polluted places on earth" (Amnesty International, 2018). When we asked Toby—an entrepreneur—about these oil spills, he told us the following:

> Yes, we have had such problems a couple of times. After taking the oil, we try to seal the drilled portion of the pipe back, but at times, we still experience some spill because we don't have the right expertise for that. But we are improving on how we do these things, and the spills are reducing.

Tamuno, an entrepreneur, told us of similar incidents:

> Sometimes we experience a spill due to not following normal safety procedures. We are not really trained on that, so whenever we experience spills, we just leave the spot and go to another place. After government intervention in the abandoned area, then we can go back there.

Bunkering also negatively impacts "the river and contaminates our fish" (Ogbonna, entrepreneur). Igwe (entrepreneur) noted that there is "pollution in the environment … Water will be polluted, and fish will die," and Obi (entrepreneur) explained, "I am concerned about the environment and my family." Middle Manager 2 of the legal oil company also told us about the environmental impact caused by the bunkerers pursuing their opportunity:

> The end products of these refineries don't meet the international specs of such products. They present a danger to the users and lead to a lot of fire incidents and danger to equipment. The byproducts are not properly managed and are returned to the environment, leading to pollution. When they are caught, the refining equipment becomes metal waste … The economic benefit derived from it does not measure up to the danger they present.

Second, unsurprisingly given the substantial damage to the environment, the pursuit of this opportunity causes some destruction to the local community. For example, Community Member 1 explained that he believes "the waste products affect the natural environment, [and] our waters are also contaminated. Rivers are no longer safe for use; crops and trees are no longer growing well … It makes the local natural environment unbearable because of pollution." Indeed, the community members we spoke to explained that the pollution affects their health (Community Members 1, 2, and 5), "destroys the basic means of livelihood of the Niger Delta people … [and destroys] the rivers and the farmlands" (Community Member 2; also Community Members 3, 5, and 6), increases the scarcity and cost of food for locals (Community Member 3), and leads to community unrest (Community Member 5). Further, the entrepreneurs acknowledge that bunkering can lead to environmental damage that harms the local community. For example, when asked about the negative impact on the environment from his bunkering business, Chukwudi told us,

> Yes, I know that there are negative impacts on the environment because if you look, you will see that we have an oil spill on our land, on the river, and it also affects our fish and crops. That is why, for me, I am careful with how I extract this product from the pipe.

Finally, although the entrepreneurs benefit financially from bunkering, they put their health at risk in accessing and refining the oil. As one oil executive told us, "In places where they break into pipelines, they have a lot of accidents, leading to fire and several deaths" (Middle Manager 2). Refining the oil also endangers the entrepreneurs' health, as revealed in Kalio's description of the refining process:

> Well, I have a reservoir tank where I take the crude oil first. From the reservoir tank, the crude oil goes into the burning pot, where we heat it up to a very high temperature. When we heat it up, the level of temperature gives a particular product depending on the exact product we want to get. As we heat up the pot, we keep taking samples from the product and testing it to know if we have attained the level of a particular product. It's not as if there is a thermometer to measure the temperature.

5.3. Justifying entrepreneurial action that causes harm to others

5.3.1. Entrepreneurs' claims of agency

Although recognizing some of the destruction generated by their entrepreneurial action to the local community directly and indirectly via environmental damage as well as the personal risks to their health and safety, the entrepreneurs justify their actions by switching between claims of low and high agency (see Table 1 for evidence). Agency refers to "being in control of one's actions and their consequences" (Demanet et al., 2013: 574). The entrepreneurs claim they have low agency in terms of securing legal employment. Consistent with the notion of blaming the government and the oil companies for their adversity (in the personal adversity section above), the entrepreneurs justify their entrepreneurial action by indicating that they have no other option but to create ventures to bunker oil. For example, Tamuno pointed out the government directly:

> This question is for the government to answer because we have so many graduate youths that are unemployed in the community. If they are gainfully employed, they will not be doing this business. The government should do something about unemployment. Imagine people graduating from school for years without being employed. Some of these graduates are supposed to be working with the oil companies, but this is where they find themselves because no one will employ them.

However, despite claiming limited agency for their activities and consequences, the entrepreneurs also claim considerable agency over their activities and consequences. While claiming that they initially could not help stop leakages, the bunkerers also claim they have expertise in preventing such leakages from occurring: "When I started the business newly … it used to be disastrous, but now we know how to take care of it. We are taking care of it; we are very careful with our operations" (Odili, entrepreneur). Indeed, with experience tapping into the pipes, they have likely gained expertise in avoiding spills (but not avoiding other sources of environmental damage).

While the entrepreneurs know they are breaking the law, they are confident in successfully avoiding such sanctions. Indeed, while they are careful not to be caught (e.g., operating at night), they actively engage in corruption. In paying bribes, the entrepreneurs can continue their illegal venturing, but these payments undermine the rule of law (i.e., contributing to a corrupt system [see Boettke and Coyne, 2003, Boettke and Coyne, 2009; DeSoto, 1989). The following statement by Obi (entrepreneur) in response to our question about whether he is worried about being caught illustrates the bunkerers' approach to avoiding government sanctions:

> Certainly, I worry about being caught. That is why we put every arrangement in place so that the "cat will not run out of the cage"—you understand what I mean … I am sure you are a Nigerian. So, you know how the system runs. You pay money and free yourself. The business we do gets us good money, so we use part of [that money] to free ourselves when we are caught.

Indeed, for this task of avoiding sanctions, the entrepreneurs exhibit the greatest sense of agency.

Finally, the entrepreneurs claim high agency in collecting, refining, and selling the oil. For example, Toby indicated the expertise required to collect the oil, and Odili explained how he obtained his knowledge about how to refine the oil best:

> The first thing is to crack the pipe with our tools. W*e have special tools* for doing this. Then we connect our long hose from that pipeline to where we want to receive the crude oil in our containment. That will be as much as I can say about the process. *It is confidential.*
>
> Toby, entrepreneur, emphasis added

Table 1
Claims of agency in justifying destructive entrepreneurship.

Claiming low agency	Claiming high agency
"But there is *nothing we can do about it* because this is the only way we can help ourselves, seeing the situation of things in the country" (Igwe, entrepreneur). "If any oil company or government employs me now with good remuneration, I will stop this business and focus on the work" (Tamuno, entrepreneur). "Because someone like me, I studied petroleum engineering and went to all these multinational companies for employment. I was *not given* employment. There was *no chance for me* to even attend an interview" (Ogbonna, entrepreneur). "Because they [the federal government] led us to this condition that we have found ourselves because *they made us unemployed.* So, what do you expect us to do as unemployed youths?" (Chukwudi, entrepreneur). "*If the government can create* job opportunities for graduates from Niger Delta, I think this business will die a natural death. Because everybody will be involved in clean and legal jobs" (Obi, entrepreneur). "So, people graduate from school and still come to sit at home unemployed … So, *the government should provide jobs* for the Nigerian youths, especially those from the Niger Delta area" (Eze, entrepreneur). "We only need *our leaders in this region to stand up* for our right and challenge the federal government … This is the only way I can make money right now, and I don't have any issues with that" (Obi, entrepreneur).	"Yes, there are [oil] spills sometimes, but *we can* always handle it" (Chidi, entrepreneur). "Why I feel it is okay for me to take oil is because the oil belongs to me. It is my property. *Nobody has the right to tell me* how to make use of my property" (Obi, entrepreneur). "*I find a way* to seal back the pipe so that even if it is going to leak, the leakage will not be much. So, I am concerned about the environment because I also live here" (Kalio, entrepreneur). "So, *we have people that have the skills* required for the tapping. If we don't involve these people, we cannot do the operations successfully" (Chukwudi, entrepreneur). "In this business, we also work with information. *I have worked* in the oil and gas industry before … *I can make* up to six trucks in a night. Each truck holds 33,000 l" (Obi, entrepreneur).

> I take the oil to my local refining point [local refinery] where I have my reservoir tank and my burning pot. The burning pot is where I heat up the crude oil to get my different products. The burning pot is exactly *the same way we produce* palm oil in the village. We burn the crude oil in the pot to get our products from it.
>
> Odili, entrepreneur, emphasis added

Therefore, in justifying their venturing, the entrepreneurs switch between claims of low and high agency over their entrepreneurial action and its consequences. These claims of different levels of agency are often interwoven in the same justification. For example, Chukwudi (entrepreneur) explained that because he lacks agency in generating wealth legally, but then he also referred to his capacity to have an impact on the situation:

> I can start mentioning communities and local governments that you can visit now to see that the government is not doing anything. Nothing is working, and that is why you see us getting ourselves involved in this crude oil business because for us, when we extract this product, refine [it], and sell it, we make sure we provide those things that we have the capacity to do for our people to feel the impact of what we are doing positively because if we wait for the government, they will not do anything.

Similarly, Igwe (entrepreneur) explained how he was powerless to find employment but had a background that gave him competence for his venture: "[It] is very okay for me to take the oil because since I graduated from school, I suffered unemployment. And since *I come from an oil-producing community,* I realized that this is one of best available jobs I can engage in" (emphasis added).

These claims of both low and high agency are also used about a similar task, as illustrated in the following quote by Odili (entrepreneur) about his agency over environmental damage:

> I care about the environment, and that is why I don't want to allow any spillage. *I use my pressure valve so that there won't be any spillage. I am being careful* because I know the disaster it can cause. For the gas and byproducts of my burning pot, there is *nothing I can do* for that. So that's not my business for now. We just pour it inside the water, and it flows away. If the fish in the river die, we will manage the imported frozen fish in the market since the government really wants the Niger Delta to go down. (emphasis added).

5.3.2. Claims of motivation

The entrepreneurs' justifications for their actions involve a self-focus and an other-focus (see Table 2 for additional evidence).

Table 2
Claims of motivation in justifying destructive entrepreneurship.

Self-interested focus	Other-interested focus
"This is my own office. It is a game of survival" (Obiora, entrepreneur). "Yes, but since there is a high level of unemployment in the country, we do this to help ourselves out" (Ikechukwu, entrepreneur). "It may not be [a good way to make money], but we have to do it to survive" (Okey, entrepreneur). "I feel good because that is what gives me joy. Because I can't go and steal, and the government can't even help us, so why should I feel bad? I feel good. I feel very okay" (Odili, entrepreneur). "Because it [the oil] is found in my community, and I am unemployed. With this [bunkering], now I make good money" (Amadi). "I don't feel bad. I don't feel bad because naturally the oil belongs to me. It is my property because I am a bona fide son of the Niger Delta. So, it is my property. It is my right … So, I don't feel bad at all for taking … I have to find a way to help myself" (Kalio, entrepreneur). "To some of us, nothing is wrong with taking the oil because it is better than going into robbery. So, this is what we can do for now to foot our bills and take care of our families" (Tamuno, entrepreneur). "It's better than kidnapping and stealing. There's no job, and men must survive" (Chidi, entrepreneur). "At times, I am scared because of security issues. But I also feel confident to work when I remember the money that I make from it" (Obi). "You know how the economic situation of the country is. It's not actually the best way, but we need to survive, and we must do something for us to survive. So, for now, that is what we do to survive" (Tamuno, entrepreneur).	"We care about the community, and that is the same reason why we avoid spillage … The people are our people. They are our mothers and fathers. So, we don't want anything to happen to them too. The truth is that we are being careful, but we must survive" (Tamuno, entrepreneur). "It is impacting the community positively. I am empowering and employing people. Like the boys I am helping now, the government is not feeling their problems; we are the ones that know what we can do to help them" (Ogbonna, entrepreneur). "So, we have to do it to help our families, our loved ones, and even the people around us. You also know how the street is now, so if we help our people, they won't go into social vices. So that is how it is for now" (Odili, entrepreneur). "It impacts the community positively because the government is not even taking care of the communities. So, the only way we can help the community is by engaging the youths by giving the products to them to go sell and bring some returns to us. By that, we are helping the community because we are helping people whose families have given up on them" (Odili, entrepreneur). "I do [care] about the local community, and as I said before, we give out to the community from the proceeds of this business, and that is why we can continue to stay here and do our business—because we take care of them" (Toby, entrepreneur). "Yes, I know there is environmental pollution or fire outbreaks [from our illegal operations]. But it is also good that where the pipes are located are not close to where people live" (Eze, entrepreneur). "Our government, after taking the oil, they sell it out cheaply in the crude form. Then they process it outside Nigeria and sell the refined products to us Nigerians at higher prices. So, refining it locally is helping the country to cut costs" (Ikechukwu, entrepreneur). "Yes, of course I do care about the local community … There are many people that I am sponsoring in school. I also renovate the primary school buildings, and I provide pipe-borne water for the community … Sometimes, too, we donate money to the health centers to buy medicines and take care of the old people" (Kalio, entrepreneur). "The positive part of it [bunkering] is that from the proceeds of this business, I try to make everyone happy. I make my people happy. Whenever I come to the community, I make everybody happy" (Kalio, entrepreneur).

Consistent with their adversity, the entrepreneurs stress their suffering from being highly educated yet having only limited employment opportunities and how they feel personally deceived by the government and foreign oil companies. Therefore, they justify their venture initiation by focusing on their situation and their need to survive—a self-focus. For example, Kalio (entrepreneur) justified his entrepreneurial action in terms of satisfying personal needs:

> I don't feel bad. I don't feel bad because naturally, the oil belongs to me. It is my property because I am a bona fide son of the Niger Delta. So, it is my property. It is my right … So, I don't feel bad at all for taking … I have to find a way to help myself.

Although recognizing some of the destruction that bunkering causes to the local community, the entrepreneurs turn to an other-focus to justify how their ongoing venturing benefits the local community in terms of (1) looking after the community, (2) creating employment, and (3) reducing the occurrence of other vices. For example, one entrepreneur—Ikechukwu—compared the benefits to the community to those of the government: "Our government, after taking the oil, they sell it out cheaply in the crude form. Then they process it outside Nigeria and sell the refined products to us Nigerians at higher prices. So, refining it locally is helping the country to cut costs." Consistent with the argument that bunkerers are helping the community through their illegal venturing, Chukwudi, an entrepreneur, told us,

> There are many people that I am sponsoring in school. I also renovate the primary school buildings, and I provide pipe-borne water for the community. Since the federal government refuses to do those things, we do the little we can do from our proceeds in this business. Sometimes, too, we donate money to the health centers to buy medicines and take care of the old people.

The entrepreneurs also reported how they create employment: "I have six graduates in my father's house, and four out of six are into this business" (Obi, entrepreneur); "We involve them [the local youth] in the business and help them make some money" (Odili, entrepreneur); and "Some of the youths that work with us are able to put food on their tables from this job. So, they are happy. If it was affecting them negatively, they would have stopped our operations here" (Toby, entrepreneur). Indeed, the entrepreneurs often referred to how their employees feel "happy" (Toby, entrepreneur; Ogbonna, entrepreneur) and "empowered" (Tamuno, entrepreneur; Igwe, entrepreneur). Furthermore, some of the entrepreneurs believe their illegal venturing is beneficial because it stops themselves and their employees from engaging in other vices, such as street crime, which they claim are even more costly than the bunkering. For example, Odili, an entrepreneur, told us that due to his entrepreneurial action, "we are keeping them [the community youth] away from social vices and criminality, such as robbery and kidnapping, which has become the order of the day in Niger Delta."

Finally, the entrepreneurs focus on the self and others in their justifications of their entrepreneurial action and its negative outcomes for others; justifications reinforce the status quo of bunkering and the associated entrepreneurial action. For example, Chukwudi (entrepreneur) intermingled a focus on others' needs and a focus on himself (positive emotions):

> So, we are doing these things by ourselves because if we don't do it, we won't be able to *help our children and our brothers* that cannot go to the places to get the oil. So that's what we do. It is very okay for me to do it because *I derive joy* from it. (emphasis added).

Both Toby and Kalio intermingled a focus on their personal needs and a focus on the community (positive emotions):

> I couldn't have stayed idle and jobless since then, so I need *to help myself*. And I am not the only one benefitting from the business, even *the villagers are benefitting* because that's the only way they can put food on their tables. That's the only way *they can smile* … And even when they give out money for remediation, it doesn't get down to the community. So, we are justified to do what we are doing. What is the essence of going to school if I can't get a job?
>
> Toby, entrepreneur, emphasis added

> I have created job *for myself*. I even employ people working for me, and these people are well paid and happy. This is a very good job for me. *I am benefitting* from it, and I don't have issues. I give to everybody I need to give to, and I go with my own, so there are no issues; *everybody involved is happy*.
>
> Kalio, entrepreneur, emphasis added

Therefore, the entrepreneurs justify their entrepreneurial action and its negative outcomes for others by switching between claims of low and high agency and between claims of a focus on the self and others. In the next section, we discuss these findings and their implications.

6. Discussion

Based on our findings, we theorized the initiation, justification, and persistence of entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes for the local community and environment (and some benefits to the entrepreneur and the local community) by individuals facing personal adversity. We show how, for our informants, justifying their entrepreneurial action is not necessarily about denying the costs of their entrepreneurial action or their role in generating those costs. Instead, they switch back and forth between claims of a lack of agency and considerable agency and entangle the focus on self and others to justify their entrepreneurial action. These justifications allow the bunkerers to continue their entrepreneurial action despite its costs. Theorizing the dynamics of continued entrepreneurial action generating negative outcomes for others is important because it highlights how entrepreneurship is a tool. While scholars typically focus on how entrepreneurs use this tool for good, they can use it in ways that lead to bad outcomes—substantial costs borne by local communities, the natural environment, and entrepreneurs. In highlighting the initiation, justification, and persistence of such entrepreneurial action and outcomes, we provide new insights into entrepreneurship costs.

First, although the contexts facilitating the destructive capabilities of entrepreneurship have been acknowledged in the entrepreneurship literature at the macro level (Baumol, 1990, 1996; Desai et al., 2010), our primary contribution is highlighting, at the micro-level, how individuals facing personal adversity can think and act in ways that enable them to initiate and continue entrepreneurial action that generates substantial costs for their local communities, the natural environment, and themselves. Thus, at the micro-level, the negative outcomes from entrepreneurial action are not just about an individual being pushed by adversity into an opportunity that is costly to others (and to him- or herself) or blaming others for the adverse situation he or she finds him- or herself in, or creating and managing an illegal venture, or minimizing the destruction while exaggerating the positives of his or her actions. A micro-perspective covers all of these thoughts and activities in venturing iteratively.

Overall, we provide insights into the micro-dynamics of how entrepreneurs initiate ventures that can generate substantial costs for the local community and environment (and themselves) despite some benefits for themselves (and the local community). Indeed, by highlighting how adversity motivates individuals to engage in entrepreneurial action that generates some negative outcomes for the local community and environment and is used to justify such venturing, we begin to offer a link between adversity-driven entrepreneurship (e.g., Hall et al., 2012; Khoury and Prasad, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2021, 2020a; Shepherd et al., 2020b) and entrepreneurial action's negative outcomes for local communities and the environment. Although adversity may lead to necessity entrepreneurship, the bunkerers in this study did not pursue the subsistence forms of entrepreneurship typically associated with necessity entrepreneurship. Therefore, we do not offer a degrading commentary on necessity entrepreneurship (as pointed out by Welter et al. (2017)).

Second, we complement the research on the micro-dynamics of the benefits of entrepreneurship by offering new insights into the role of agency in the entrepreneurial process. Previous entrepreneurship research has focused mostly on entrepreneurs' high agency (Grimes et al., 2013; McMullen et al., 2021) and how the entrepreneurial context provides independence (Blanchflower and Oswald, 1998) and autonomy (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011). Even in the necessity context, entrepreneurial action enables agency beliefs (Dencker et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2020b). We complement this research by explaining how the entrepreneurs we studied switched back and forth between claims of high and low agency in justifying their entrepreneurial action despite generating substantial negative outcomes for the local community and environment (and their own health), to which we now turn.

Central to our model is the notion of switching back and form between claims of a lack of and considerable agency. These beliefs occur in entrepreneurs' minds as they form, refine, and use justifications for their entrepreneurial action and negative outcomes. Highlighting both low and high agency beliefs is theoretically important because it extends arguments on agency in moral disengagement. Research on moral disengagement has focused on claims of a lack of agency to justify actions inconsistent with a positive moral code to avoid sanctions (by self and/or others). For example, moral transgressions have been explained in terms of an agency locus of dispersing responsibility (e.g., "I only performed my task and many other people had to perform tasks for my actions to have a negative implication", and displacement of responsibility (e.g., "I had no choice but to follow orders" (Bandura, 2018; Detert et al., 2008; Moore, 2015). Another approach to moral disengagement is an outcome locus in which people claim agency yet deny, ignore, or discount the costs of the action (Bandura, 2018; Detert et al., 2008; Moore, 2015). Although studies have found the use of these different moral disengagement mechanisms, they have not explained their use in combination to justify a specific action.

This study provides new insights into the use of both a lack of agency and considerable agency by the same individual justifying the same action. We found that these individuals used a lack of agency to justify the initiation of the activity (e.g., out of necessity, they had no choice but to act given the dominant, adverse forces of the environment). They also used agency to justify their ongoing engagement in the activities (given that they had already started the venture). On the one hand, this combination provides the entrepreneurs cover because they cannot be blamed for something they had no control over. On the other hand, they had agency over their life, which seemed to keep at bay feelings of helplessness and provided a sense of meaning to their lives (that would not be available had they lacked agency). While we explain the combination of a lack of agency with considerable agency in justifying entrepreneurial action that generates negative outcomes for the local community and environment, we suspect that this combination and justification has important implications for future research on constructing meaning in highly adverse living and working conditions.

Third, we complement recent research on combining motivations to help others and the self through creating (Kibler et al., 2019; Williams and Shepherd, 2016) and organizing the ongoing management of a new venture (e.g., hybrid organizing [for a review, see Battilana and Lee, 2014) by highlighting how individuals use claims of these motivations to justify their entrepreneurial action and the resulting substantial costs of these entrepreneurial activities. Although the motivations to benefit others and the self can involve trade-offs that are difficult to manage (Battilana and Lee, 2014); Mair et al., 2015; Pache and Santos, 2013), we found that the entrepreneurs we studied had little trouble claiming both a focus on the self and a focus on others, at least when it came to justifying their entrepreneurial action and the negative outcomes for the local community and environment. It appears that it is easier for entrepreneurs to use this dual focus to justify their venturing than to organize such motivations within their ventures structurally.

Specifically, while self-interested motivation may drive action that generates negative outcomes for others (e.g., Gino and Pierce, 2009; Kish-Gephart et al., 2014), justifications for those actions rarely invoke benefits to the self. Rather, justifications emphasize the benefits to others and discount the costs to others (e.g., framing using euphemistic language and advantageous comparison [Bandura, 2018; Moore, 2015). We found that justifications actively involved benefits to the self, given the adversities in which these individuals were embedded, and described benefits to the self in ways intertwined with benefits for the local community. Therefore, while there were distinctions between the self and others, many justifications entangled the two such that they experienced the same outcomes. This entanglement of the self with the other in justifying entrepreneurial action that generated negative outcomes for others somewhat inoculated the entrepreneurs from the action's negative implications because they had "put themselves in the same boat" as those others. This justification represents a new mechanism of moral justification. It appears that the justifiers' adverse living conditions and those of their local community provided the context for an unbreakable bond (if at least rhetorically) to either blame the individual for

self-interested action or separate them from the action's costs.

Overall, our findings reveal that the entrepreneurs we studied claimed opposing levels of agency for the same action and had a dual focus (an entanglement of self and others), which they used to establish broad justifications for their entrepreneurial action that enabled them to continue with activities generating substantial costs to the local community, environment, and themselves.

6.1. Implications for practice

This study offers some important practical implications. Indeed, poverty is especially pervasive throughout the world. The World Bank (2020) estimates that 736 million people live in poverty worldwide, a substantial portion of whom make up the populations of less developed economies, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (77% in poverty), Tanzania (35% in poverty), and Nigeria (46.7% in poverty) (Quartz Africa, 2018). The World Bank (2020) also asserts that "of the 736 million living in extreme poverty worldwide, half live in just five countries; India, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh." This poverty is often exacerbated, especially in less developed economies, by corrupt governments that exploit natural resources while providing few returns to their citizens. This combination of poverty and low respect for the rule of law generates considerable animus among citizens. These adverse conditions motivate individuals to engage in illegal venturing to save themselves but generate substantial costs borne by the natural environment, local communities, and entrepreneurs and further undermine the rule of law. This study highlights how a lack of government transparency can lead to feelings of deception, lack of respect for the rule of law, and the reinforcement of corrupt systems. Thus, making transparent the government's decisions and actions concerning a nation's natural resources may have significant flow-through effects for the natural environment and local communities. This study also has practical implications for protecting the natural environment and improving locals' living conditions—the two are intertwined. Indeed, as locals come to recognize the link between nature and their quality of life, they likely become less tolerant of the few who engage in entrepreneurial action that diminishes them in one way or another. No one implication is a silver bullet, but hopefully, as we shine more light on the micro-dynamics of justifying entrepreneurial action that generates substantial costs to the local community and environment, we can inform the engagement of countervailing actions to redeploy entrepreneurial talent to more productive purposes.

6.2. Limitations and future research

While we believe in our research's strengths, this study has some limitations, as all studies. Consistent with other inductive studies, we provide richness and realism to our theorizing efforts, yet the challenge is statistical generalizability. Although statistical generalizability is not the purpose of this or other inductive studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994), we cannot claim that all entrepreneurs who engage in entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes for others rely on moral disengagement. If they do use moral disengagement, we cannot assert that they do so in the way explained in this study. However, we maintain that our study offers analytic generalizability; that is, we provide a theoretical model—abstracted from our data—that can be applied and tested in other contexts (Crosina and Pratt, 2019; Yin, 1994). We hope that future research applies and extends our personal adversity model of justifying entrepreneurial action that generates substantial negative outcomes for the local community and environment. These research efforts could explore our findings' transferability to similar contexts (Stake, 1995), such as to other less developed countries where entrepreneurs engage in illegal venturing to exploit the same or different natural resource–related opportunities. Future research can extend some of this study's boundary conditions to broaden or refine (via contextualization) our theoretical model by exploring contexts varying in levels of economic development, corruption, rule of law, and illegality.

Related to our specific design, we captured entrepreneurship at one point in time, but the length of time each participant engaged in this illegal venturing up to that point varied. Although our purpose was to understand entrepreneurs' justification of their ongoing activities, entrepreneurs' thoughts and actions related to such venturing are likely to change after they initially decide to exploit their underlying opportunities. Indeed, we found some differences in our informants' thoughts and actions as they moved through the entrepreneurial process. Future research can use a longitudinal design to follow individuals' progress through the entrepreneurial process and when they recognize the various negative consequences of their actions. However, we appreciate the challenges of such a longitudinal design, especially when dealing with illegal activities. It can be dangerous.

Finally, previous research has found that people facing poverty make bad decisions that exacerbate their adverse positions because their attention (a limited resource for all people [Simon, 1947) is so focused on immediate financial issues to provide for their basic needs that there is insufficient attention available to focus on longer-run issues (Mani et al., 2013; Shah et al., 2012). Perhaps this attention-allocation explanation could explain entrepreneurial action that causes such substantial negative outcomes for others. Individuals in poverty are so focused on meeting their immediate basic needs that they fail to consider the long-run costs to their communities (and themselves) from their entrepreneurial action. Although we found that the bunkerers focused on themselves, we also found evidence that they were not ignoring others (e.g., they thought about the community benefits of their illegal venturing) and that they considered the long-run costs of their venturing even if it was to justify their entrepreneurial action. Perhaps the poverty explanation of attention allocation applies to venture initiation in this case but is less applicable to ongoing venturing because these entrepreneurs had lifted themselves out of poverty (they no longer focused on satisfying their immediate basic needs). We hope that future research explains how an entrepreneur's attention allocation may lead to negative consequences and how attention allocation may change throughout the entrepreneurial process.

7. Conclusion

Although there is considerable research on how individuals come to engage in entrepreneurship and how individuals facing chronic adversity are motivated to engage in entrepreneurship to escape their adverse conditions, an assumption underlying this research is that entrepreneurial action is a tool for good. Thus, despite recognizing that some in an economy engage in entrepreneurial action with negative outcomes for others, we do not sufficiently understand how and why people initiate, justify, and persist with such entrepreneurial action. We hope that by elucidating the micro-dynamics of justifying entrepreneurial action that has substantial costs borne by the local community (and some benefits) and environment, future research will provide new insights into entrepreneurs' thoughts and activities that are not available to scholars who focus on entrepreneurship exclusively as a tool for good.

Author statement

Dean did the most, then Moses and then Joakim. The data is valid. The paper nor the data have been used or displayed elsewhere.

Appendix A: interviewed bunkerers (names changed to protect anonymity)

Bunkerer	Personal details	Bunkerer	personal details
Amadi	**Age:** 36 **Gender:** Male **Education:** College **Years in oil bunkering:** 13	Igwe	**Age:** 46 **Gender:** male **Education:** college **Years in oil bunkering:** 20
Ogbonna	**Age:** 39 **Gender:** Male **Education:** College **Years in oil bunkering:** 14	Eze	**Age:** 36 **Gender:** male **Education:** high school **Years in oil bunkering:** 15
Chukwudi	**Age:** 38 **Gender:** Male **Education:** College **Years in oil bunkering:** 15	Obiora	**Age:** 36 **Gender:** male **Education:** high school **Years in oil bunkering:** 16
Obi	**Age:** 48 **Gender:** Male **Education:** College **Years in oil bunkering:** 24	Ude	**Age:** 39 **Gender:** male **Education:** primary school **Years in oil bunkering:** 16
Odili	**Age:** 40 **Gender:** Male **Education:** College **Years in oil bunkering:** 15	Chidi	**Age:** 40 **Gender:** male **Education:** primary school **Years in oil bunkering:** 18
Kalio	**Age:** 39 **Gender:** Male **Education:** College **Years in oil bunkering:** 13	Ikechukwu	**Age:** 44 **Gender:** male **Education:** college **Years in oil bunkering**: 18
Toby	**Age:** 42 **Gender:** Male **Education:** College **Years in oil bunkering:** 16	Okey	**Age:** 48 **Gender:** male **Education:** college **Years in oil bunkering:** 20
Tamuno	**Age:** 37 **Gender:** Male **Education:** High school **Years in oil bunkering:** 16		

Appendix B: interview protocol for entrepreneurs

1. Do you sell crude oil or the refined products?
2. Can you please explain how you access the crude oil?
3. What is the procedure to tap into the pipes and take out crude oil?
4. How much oil do you get out each time you do this?
5. Once you take the oil, what do you do with it?
6. Where do you take the oil, and how do you transport it?
7. Do you refine the oil?
8. How do you refine the oil?
9. How much do you sell the unrefined and refined oil for?
10. Is this a good way to make money?
11. How do you feel about taking this oil and selling it?
12. How long have you been doing this business?

13. Are there any problems with spillage or weakening the pipelines associated with taking the oil?
14. Who thinks they own the oil, or who do you think owns the oil?
15. Why do you think it is okay for you to take the oil?
16. Do you worry about being caught?
17. What happens if you are caught?
18. Have you ever been caught?
19. What do you do so police will not catch you?
20. Do you identify as Nigerian?
21. If so, how can you explain this business as it is taking away revenue from Nigeria?
22. Are you concerned about the environment?
23. Are you concerned that your operations can have a negative impact on the environment?
24. Do you care about the local community?
25. Does taking the oil impact the community positively or negatively?
26. Do you care that so many people taking the oil can impact the big oil companies?

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