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THE PARADOX OF AUTONOMY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP: TENSIONS BETWEEN FREEDOM AND CONSTRAINT

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Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore how entrepreneurs experience and negotiate the paradoxical tensions between autonomy and risk in their everyday business practice.
Design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative research design. Data were collected through 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs running micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland between 2020-2022.
Findings: The findings show that entrepreneurship is characterized by a paradox of autonomy, where the pursuit of independence coexist with strong dependencies on markets, clients, institutions and external events. Autonomy appears as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a stable state.
Research limitations/implications: The study is based on a qualitative sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could extend the analysis by using larger samples, quantitative or comparative studies across countries and institutional context.
Practical implications: The results suggest the need to design institutional and support mechanisms for entrepreneurs that acknowledge the paradoxical nature of autonomy and risk. Such support may include mentoring programmes, development of adaptive competencies and well-being supports, as well as initiative that recognize non-financial motivations such as meaning, mission and contribution to common good.
Social implications: The findings highlight the importance of social and institutional support systems for entrepreneurs and point to the value of promoting work models based on responsibility, autonomy and collaboration. Understanding the paradoxical nature of entrepreneurial autonomy may also inform policies aimed at improving entrepreneurs' quality of life and societal of entrepreneurial work.
Originality/value: The paper contributes to entrepreneurship research by applying a paradox perspective to the micro-level experience of entrepreneurs. It shows entrepreneurship should be understood as dynamic process of negotiant autonomy and risk though adaptive learning rather than as state of permanent independence.
Keywords: entrepreneurship, autonomy, entrepreneurial well-being, paradox theory.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Organizational paradoxes constitute a key topic in management research, highlighting complex and often contradictory tensions that may emerge in various organizational contexts. An organizational paradox refers to the coexistence of contradictory yet interrelated elements that persist over time and require organizations and individuals to demonstrate flexibility and innovativeness (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Weller, Ran, 2020). Schad et al. (2016) emphasize that research on paradoxes offers important insights into organizational tensions that may influence firm effectiveness and performance. In particular, the authors identify key dimensions of such paradoxes, such as balancing innovation and stability or decentralization versus centralization, which may coexist within organizational systems. Although research on organizational paradoxes highlights the importance of microfoundations and individual cognitive processes in coping with conflicting demands (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), these analyses focus primarily on the organizational context. There is a lack of research showing how similar mechanisms operate at the level of the entrepreneur as an individual acting outside formal organizational structures, under conditions of high uncertainty and personal responsibility for risk. In response to this research gap, the aim of this article is to present how entrepreneurs, as individuals, experience and manage the paradoxical tension between autonomy and risk in the everyday functioning of their ventures.

2. Contexts of Organizational Paradoxes

Organizational paradoxes are often identified in corporations. For example, research by Khalid highlights the importance of financial practices in the context of corporate performance, which is also associated with managing paradoxes between different approaches to financing and innovation (Idham Khalid, 2025). Pasieczny (2017) emphasizes that in difficult times organizations may force themselves to reduce costs in a pathological manner, which leads to the loss of developmental potential. Paradoxically, the perceived need to conserve resources may lead to reduced innovativeness and, consequently, to stagnation. This phenomenon illustrates how difficult decisions related to motivation may lead organizations toward long-term problems, even when they aim for short-term stability (Pasieczny, 2017). Decisions to enter into alliances with other entities may create additional paradoxes for firms. The source of tensions lies in the fact that alliances integrate entities with different goals, strategies, and operational solutions. On the one hand, firms engage in numerous alliances to secure and expand their competitive advantage and growth; on the other hand, these alliances demonstrate surprisingly low success rates (Kale, 2010). Paradoxes are also clearly visible in public

administration. In the context of public administration, a paradox may be understood as a situation in which actions intended to produce a particular outcome simultaneously lead to effects that contradict that goal. On the one hand, public administration is expected to pursue public objectives in an efficient and predictable manner; on the other hand, numerous contradictions can be observed between the intentions of reforms and their actual consequences. Paradoxical phenomena emerge both at the level of reforms and in everyday administrative practice, including strategic management, inter-institutional cooperation, and processes of digitalization. New solutions often reveal new organizational and operational dilemmas rather than improving administrative functioning. Paradoxical phenomena also appear in more specific contexts of public administration activities, such as digitalization (Khlutkov, 2024), organizational learning (Pasieczny, Rosiak, 2023), or organization–client relationships (Pasieczny, 2025). Schädeli and Ritz (2024) provide a broad macro-level perspective on paradoxes, indicating that the multiplicity of terms and approaches in the literature makes it difficult to build a shared research language. Regardless of organizational form, appropriate leadership is particularly important for individuals operating under conditions of tension and contradiction. Research on educational leadership illustrates how effective leadership can act as a catalyst for organizational commitment, which is important in the context of managing paradoxes (Othman & Busari, 2025). Managers who are able to balance different leadership styles and adapt them to changing tasks may cope more effectively with internal tensions and contradictions.

Paradoxes are also present in entrepreneurial activity. They manifest themselves, among other things, in approaches to risk. Although entrepreneurs are often perceived as individuals with a high propensity for risk-taking, research indicates that risk is selective and contextual in nature. Entrepreneurship requires a willingness to take risks; however, it is simultaneously based on pragmatically limiting risk to domains perceived as associated with opportunities rather than threats to personal values or security (Kubiciel-Lodzińska et al., 2025). A similar paradoxical character is revealed in the domain of autonomy, where the pursuit of independence coexists with the necessity of cooperation and engagement in team-based activities (Gelderen, 2016; Van de Ven et al., 2007). Entrepreneurs often experience a paradox consisting in the simultaneous need for independence (autonomy) and full commitment to running their businesses. On the one hand, autonomy is a key motivator for establishing one's own venture; on the other hand, its realization requires continuous dedication and submission to the demands of the market, clients, or business partners (Foley et al., 2018; Gelderen, 2016). Research shows that autonomy is not given once and for all but undergoes dynamic changes depending on the stage of the firm's development, relationships with clients, and financial circumstances (Gelderen, 2016). The literature also highlights the paradoxical nature of entrepreneurial motivation, in which entrepreneurs pursue both individual and collective interests, for example by combining the pursuit of autonomy and economic success with an orientation toward the common good, meaning, and social responsibility (Brzozowska, 2025). Entrepreneurship is

therefore not based solely on individualism but also on cooperation and the building of relationships, which requires reconciling conflicting aspirations toward autonomy and community (Van de Ven et al., 2007). The concept of ambidexterity (the ability to combine exploration and exploitation) is crucial for understanding how entrepreneurs cope with paradoxes. Entrepreneurs must constantly balance the search for new opportunities with the effective use of existing resources, which generates cyclical tensions and requires the development of so-called "paradoxical leadership" (Audretsch, Guerrero, 2023; Klonek et al., 2021). However, a high level of multitasking may limit the ability to switch effectively between these activities (Klonek et al., 2021). Paradoxes are not an obstacle but rather a source of innovation and development. The ability to accept and manage tensions fosters creativity, adaptability, and the long-term success of enterprises (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Weller, Ran, 2020). Developing "paradoxical thinking" enables entrepreneurs to cope more effectively with uncertainty and environmental complexity (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Pinelli et al., 2025).

3. Research Methodology

The choice of a qualitative method was justified by the exploratory nature of the research question posed: **How do entrepreneurs experience and cope with the paradox of autonomy and risk in the everyday functioning of their ventures?** This method enables an in-depth analysis of subjective experiences, narratives, and meanings that entrepreneurs attribute to their work in conditions characterized by the coexistence of conflicting demands of freedom and responsibility for risk (Kostera, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022 with 40 Polish entrepreneurs running micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises across Poland. The sample was intended to be as diverse as possible in order to capture a wide range of experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes on average. Twenty-three men and seventeen women participated in the study. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded. The analysis of the empirical material was inductive in nature and began with open coding, in which labels were assigned based on what emerged from the statements, without imposing predetermined theoretical categories. In the next stage, the codes were organized into lower-order categories and combined into themes reflecting paradoxes, in accordance with the principles of thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

Self-employment vs. Corporation – The Paradox of Unfulfilled Expectations. Many respondents had previous experience working in corporations and, when deciding to establish their own businesses, held specific hopes and expectations. The paradox lies in the fact that corporations, while promising security and predictability, often turned out to be impersonal and unstable, whereas running one's own business, while providing a sense of agency and meaning, requires continuous sacrifice and adaptation to unpredictable conditions.

> I worked as a director, earned good money, paid taxes. Then illness strikes, and after nine months the law allows the employer to dismiss a sick employee… Suddenly you receive 70% of the national average salary instead of 70% of your own salary. That felt like a huge injustice to me. I concluded that I had to take care of myself because neither the state nor the employer would do it. (…) By creating my own business, I can be guided by reason, intelligence, and skills… If you work for yourself, there are no limits—only common sense. [R1]

> Our work is also very irregular. There are periods like now when I can work from eight to four, roughly speaking. But there are also periods when we work sixteen hours a day. I remember the end of last year: we go to Warsaw to shoot a project. We leave Kraków at five in the morning, set everything up by nine, finish shooting at seven in the evening. We get back to Kraków around eleven or midnight, repack everything. Then we get up at four in the morning and start another three days of shooting. There are such periods, and at those times you definitely feel tired and think that you could just quit and take a regular job. On the other hand, I can work in the way I want. I mean that the style of work is just as important to me—many things depend on me. I am not afraid of things depending on me, and I am not afraid of responsibility either. I probably would not switch to a salaried job, at least not at this stage of my life. [R5]

> Recently I had an interesting offer to return to a corporation, but I think it would be impossible. After years of being my own captain and helmsman, it would be very difficult to hear again: 'Do it this way because that's how it has to be,' even though I know it could be different. [R15]

> After a few years of running my own business, I feel much more relaxed than when I was in a corporation, even though the company itself generates more responsibility and I cannot simply separate my private life from my professional life. [R22]

> On the one hand, a salaried job would probably be more structured and less stressful, but on the other hand running a business from home gives me the comfort of being with my children and the feeling that I am doing something good for the planet. [R31]

The analysis of the cited statements reveals a coherent yet multidimensional picture of the experiences of individuals transitioning from corporate employment to entrepreneurial activity. A key theme is disappointment with the institutional and corporate order of work, which becomes an important impulse for changing career paths. Respondents describe corporations as impersonal structures, highly formalized and insensitive to individual crisis situations, such as illness. At the same time, entrepreneurship is not perceived as an escape from work but rather as a qualitative transformation of it. Working "for oneself" is demanding, intense, and irregular, often leading to both physical and psychological fatigue. Descriptions of long working days, project-based work, and the necessity of continuous adaptation to changing conditions (e.g., the pandemic and lockdowns) confirm findings from the literature indicating that entrepreneurs more frequently experience stress, work overload, and blurred boundaries between professional and private life (Baron et al., 2016; Stephan, 2018). At the same time, this variability is sometimes interpreted not as a disadvantage but as an inherent feature of work that provides a sense of meaning and agency, as well as a stronger feeling of social usefulness and purpose. Respondents point to the possibility of being closer to family, acting in accordance with their own values (e.g., environmental concern), and having a tangible impact on their surroundings. The literature confirms that for many entrepreneurs non-financial motivations, such as meaning, mission, or contribution to the common good, are as important as income (Shepherd, Patzelt, 2011).

Independence vs. Embeddedness – The Paradox of Autonomy. A frequently cited motivation for starting a business is the desire to satisfy the need for independence. However, practice indicates that entrepreneurial independence may be significantly constrained.

> Polish regulations, on the one hand, limit certain possibilities, but on the other hand running your own business also brings many benefits… The state works like a company, it needs resources in order to redistribute them. If someone does not want that, they can always work as an employee. [R19]

> When entering a startup, you have to know it may fail. It is a game in which we all agree to this, including investors. We have business hypotheses and we test them; some fail. If everything systematically fails, you have to ask yourself whether it makes sense to continue. [R28]

> The birth of my child made me realize that I needed greater flexibility. I wanted to decide for myself how much time I spend with my daughter and when I work, which is why I started thinking about opening my own bar. [R37]

> Running a startup is, for me, an extreme emotional rollercoaster. On the one hand you win a competition, receive funding, everyone says it is great, and on the other hand you know that the market and the first big client will verify everything anyway. (…) In the startup world everyone pretends everything is great, because they have to. There is no space for saying: I have problems, something didn't work out. Entrepreneurial life, for me, is moving from one failure to another with short moments

> of success. I am no longer ashamed to say that something failed, this is what the job looks like. [R13]
>
> My family used to say: fine, fine, do it, but you will also have a normal job, right? [R26]
>
> I had the comfort of knowing that my parents would not abandon me or let me starve… but at the same time I would feel terrible if I had to ask them for help. [R22]
>
> Is an entrepreneur independent? That is not true… when you are an entrepreneur you depend on a much larger group of contractors and suppliers. [R34]
>
> The pandemic was the engine and driving force of this board game—the lockdown forced people to spend time with their families, which accelerated the development of the idea for the game despite the overall drop in the company's turnover. I realized that for me this lockdown was somewhat of a business opportunity… everyone froze their budgets, but I prepared educational materials for clients—which led to the return of clients and new contracts. [R9]

An important counterpoint to corporate experiences among some entrepreneurs is the strongly emphasized need for autonomy. Respondents repeatedly stress that the ability to make independent decisions constitutes one of the main benefits of entrepreneurial activity. Autonomy is indeed one of the key factors of intrinsic motivation and well-being at work (Deci, Ryan, 2000), as well as one of the strongest predictors of entrepreneurial satisfaction, even in conditions of higher risk and responsibility (Benz, Frey Bruno, 2008). The respondents perceive entrepreneurship as a tension between the need for independence and the influence of the social environment, particularly family, which simultaneously serves as a source of support and normative pressure (Aldrich, Cliff, 2003). Respondents also challenge the myth of entrepreneurial autonomy, emphasizing the structural dependence of entrepreneurs on clients, suppliers, and market conditions, which aligns with network-based perspectives on entrepreneurship (Hoang, Antoncic, 2003). Experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic reveal entrepreneurship as highly dependent on external phenomena that simultaneously generate threats and new business opportunities, confirming the adaptive and opportunistic nature of entrepreneurial action under crisis conditions (Kuckertz et al., 2020). Institutional regulations and market uncertainty therefore make entrepreneurship appear not as a state of full independence but rather as a process of continuously negotiating autonomy in relation to the environment.

Expectations vs. Reality – The Paradox of Illusions. Entrepreneurs in the early stages of their activities are characterized by enthusiasm, which is later verified by reality.

> At first I thought this business was a golden shot, and later that it was a complete failure and nobody would want to use it. (…) That's what I like about being an entrepreneur—if I feel I should slow down, I just take time off. But on the other hand, these decisions are crucial and difficult to reverse. [R26]

> If I once had some trust in the government or public institutions, I have now reached a point where my trust… Whatever is said by any representative of the broadly understood government is absolutely zero. [R15]
>
> We cannot afford to hire anyone, so we do everything ourselves. Sometimes our nights are so sleepless that the children start moving in their beds and we are only just going to sleep. (…) We had to invest all our savings to make the offer more attractive… but we had no idea how long the pandemic would last or whether customers would buy anything at all. [R3]

The respondents' statements illustrate a process of transition from initial optimism to a more realistic evaluation of entrepreneurial activity, in which enthusiasm is verified through market experience. The literature indicates that excessive optimism and belief in a "golden opportunity" are typical for the early stages of entrepreneurship, and their correction constitutes an element of the learning process and the reduction of cognitive biases (Hayward et al., 2006). Respondents also reveal a loss of trust in public institutions, which reinforces the necessity of relying on one's own resources and decisions under conditions of uncertainty. The statements also emphasize awareness of the personal and financial costs of decisions, confirming the central role of risk and responsibility in entrepreneurship (McMullen, Shepherd, 2006).

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the experiences of the surveyed entrepreneurs shows that starting one's own business, regardless of previous professional experience, is associated with a profound redefinition of work, responsibility, and autonomy. Regardless of their corporate experience, entrepreneurs indicated that autonomy in business entails intensive work, continuous adaptation, and responsibility for risk and decision-making. In both groups, self-employment does not reduce burdens but rather transforms them into other, more demanding and uncertain forms.

The central conclusion is the paradox of autonomy: entrepreneurs value the possibility of making independent decisions and relying on their own judgment; however, they remain dependent on clients, suppliers, legal regulations, and unpredictable external phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Autonomy is not absolute but negotiated within networks of dependencies and conditioned by the surrounding environment, which requires entrepreneurs to constantly balance freedom and risk.

The process of verifying initial optimism constitutes another important element of the entrepreneurial experience. Early enthusiasm and belief in rapid success gradually give way to a more realistic assessment of market opportunities, personal costs, and institutional constraints. The loss of illusions regarding public institutions and the necessity of relying on one's own

resources strengthen awareness of risk and the irreversible consequences of strategic decisions, which is typical of the early stage of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial learning process (Hayward, Shepherd, Griffin, 2006; McMullen, Shepherd, 2006).

Despite the high financial, emotional, and family-related costs, entrepreneurship provides a sense of meaning, agency, and the possibility of acting in accordance with one's own values. Working "for oneself" is perceived as more authentic and meaningful than working within hierarchical structures, and the possibility of exerting a real influence on one's environment constitutes an important motivator. The paradox of autonomy does not lead to its negation but rather to its redefinition: autonomy consists in the conscious management of dependencies.

The study is based on a qualitative sample of 40 entrepreneurs, which provides rich insights into individual experiences but limits the generalizability of the findings. The results should therefore be interpreted as exploratory and illustrative rather than representative of the broader population of entrepreneurs. Although the qualitative approach enabled an in-depth understanding of how entrepreneurs experience and negotiate tensions between autonomy and risk, the relatively small and context-specific sample may not capture the full diversity of entrepreneurial contexts. Future research could extend this analysis by employing larger samples and quantitative methods that would allow for testing the identified patterns across a broader population. Comparative studies conducted across different countries and institutional contexts could also provide valuable insights into how cultural, regulatory and economic environments influence the paradox of autonomy in entrepreneurship.

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