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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Ahl, H., Nelson, T. (2010)

Moving forward: Institutional perspectives on gender and entrepreneurship.

International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship, 2(1): 5-9

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17566261011044259>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Link to publisher's version: <http://doi.org/10.1108/17566261011044259>

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hj:diva-12942>

INTRODUCTION

Moving forward: institutional perspectives on gender and entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to propose a re-directed and purposeful attention to the design of research on gender and entrepreneurship moving forward.

Design/methodology/approach - The paper questions the value of more studies on the men v. women binary and encourages research on the institutions supporting the gendered construction.

Findings - The paper suggests a re-framing of gender (to include men, women, femininity, masculinity, etc.) both in topics investigated and in building the cadre of scholars engaged. It asks for discrimination of gender from biological sex in language use and believes that dialogue will be improved if the word "gender" is maintained as a socially constructed phenomenon directed at distinguishing the norms around "what women do" and "what men do". Researchers, too, must necessarily confront personal pre-existing ideas and language shaped by the norms and habits of one's upbringing and daily life in societies that are not acute observers of gender in action.

Originality/value - The paper assesses trends in research on gender and entrepreneurship and recommends ideas regarding new directions to create better research and application in practice, teaching, and training.

Keywords Gender, Women, Entrepreneurialism, Research

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The impact of gender on society is difficult to identify, bring to light, discuss, and respond to. When we, as a community of scholars, work to understand and push forth the public and private issues of gender as they relate to the aspirations, logics, approaches, obstacles, and outcomes of entrepreneurial behavior, we tread interesting ground. Issues of gender in business touch on some of the most hallowed and controversial topics of society including sex, marriage, religion, and family structure. Yet, the possibility of entrepreneurship, as enabled by individual action and wider systems, is one of the most important social, cultural,

political, and economic issues in terms of impact on individuals and their families and communities, regardless of culture or nation.

And if the critique of this deeply social and value laden institution of gender were not enough of a struggle for researchers, the task is made that much more difficult as we are forced to become added subjects of our own inquiry. As we think and write and talk about gender and entrepreneurship, we find ourselves caught up in our own pre-existing ideas and language shaped by the norms and habits of our upbringing and daily life in societies that are not acute observers of gender in action. Because the dialogue among us on gender is underdeveloped, our conversation can be awkward and sometimes evidences Babel-like tendencies: we use the same words, but our understanding of their meaning varies; there are so many points of view that often the best we can do is identify the elephant in the room. As a case in point, consider the use of the words sex and gender in entrepreneurship academic writing. Many authors use these two words interchangeably to signal female and male persons. Other scholars, in contrast, see the distinction of sex and gender as key: gender connotes the institutionalized understandings and practices of masculinity and femininity. As a result of such basic differences, we lose clarity as a community and our potential to build a shared understanding of gender and entrepreneurship is impinged. This is why we are committed to this special issue and to further articulation of scholarship in this journal.

For we know that because institutions are socially constructed they are also subject to change: without repeated actions of a consistent kind, intended or not, an institution will not survive. Therefore, a link from scholar to practitioner, from theory to practice, from idea to policy, is possible through the maintenance work we all engage in around the meaning and viability of the institutions that define us. In "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990), constructions of masculinity and femininity are reified because they are repeated over and over again. In "doing entrepreneurship", these reifications influence practice and theory as entrepreneurs, policy makers and scholars employ gender constructions repeatedly and often, invisibly. As a result of this thought infrastructure, we believe the study of the intersection of institutions is rich and important work, and that it should be extended. The nation, the state, religion, welfare and other regulatory systems, language, data, and statistics as means of research, are all examples of institutions that intersect with entrepreneurship so as to have consequences for men and women entrepreneurs, and thus society.

As editors of this special issue exploring gender and entrepreneurship with an institutional perspective we seize the opportunity to make three calls for action. First, let us attend to what we study. We urge entrepreneurship researchers and publication outlets to consider the usefulness of another study contrasting empirical findings on entrepreneurship with men/women as a binary independent variable. What can we learn moving forward from more of such inquiries? How meaningful are new findings based on this model? How much do we lose by not considering variance within groups or across groups based on other than biological sex? We propose instead more research on why there are differences between men and women's entrepreneurial behavior taking into account the social forces that impact

entrepreneurial development, ergo more study of institutions as the independent variable, as well as other approaches that move us forward.

Second, let us attend to how we speak. Our gains in mutual understanding will improve if we take care with the use and application of words (e.g. sex, gender, men, and women) as well as the way we use those words in examining and discussing entrepreneurship. Sex and gender are not synonyms. For everyone at least after Judith Butler (1990) the use of the word gender can be seen as a linguistic marker for a social and political dialect of academia; language is not neutral. Let us move forward on these ideas. We highly recommend the work of Robin Tolmach Lakoff (2004) who blazed a trail on gender and language. Lakoff tells us that the way we talk about women and the way women talk about themselves are both critical pieces to understanding gender in society. Other classic sociolinguistic works that examine the structure and function of language in a social context include Fishman (1985) and Gumperz and Hymes (1991). Such attention to our words and meaning, and continued extension to other disciplines to enrich our own, will boost our community dialogue and public discourse.

Third, let us attend to who takes part of the conversation. The general scholarly community in entrepreneurship, for a variety of reasons, has come to see work on gender as work concerning women done primarily by women. It is not unusual to find conference sessions about gender and entrepreneurship under the headline "women and minorities", as if women are a minority and gender constructions do not concern men. The organization of our research communities thus reflects the general gender order of society, recreating a male norm also in our research process. Our view is that gender is perhaps the most pervasive organizing principle in society and therefore relevant for all areas of investigation - including that of how we organize research. There is much to be gained from a wide and inclusive discussion. To this point, we are glad to include Robert Smith's work on masculinity in this special issue as well as Fiona Wilson and Stephen Tagg's paper on the views of men and women entrepreneurs on each other, and we encourage much more of this for a richer intellectual stew.

We also acknowledge the leadership of our other authors Elisabeth Sundin, Malin Tillmar, Lene Foss, and Kristina A. Bourne. Each in her own way has made a great contribution to what we know and how we study entrepreneurship. As a result of their work, this special issue is not only conceptually rich but also empirically rich with quantitative and qualitative techniques, some unusual, employed. All of these authors are concerned with the intersection of gender and entrepreneurship, but they study this with different institutions as the focal point of analysis. .

Kristina A. Bourne, using case analysis, provides an incisive analysis on how the Swedish welfare state - the most gender equal in the world according to the World Economic Forum - is still not able to deal with issues of hierarchical ordering in a straight-forward manner. On the contrary, policies intended to break down gender barriers seem to reproduce asymmetrical gender systems as well as other systems of inequality. Swedish support to women's entrepreneurship follows traditional lines, largely recreating a gendered labor market structure. Class, gender, and ethnic divisions are thus reinforced rather than eliminated. The

stability of the institution gender seems to override any hopes for an improved gender order through entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship - and women's entrepreneurship is never neutral or a-political.

Robert Smith's paper points to the importance of further detailed analysis of how the masculine archetype impacts and shapes the opportunities to engage in entrepreneurship for both men and women. Discussing the construction of the entrepreneurial identity as archetypically masculine using narrative analysis of the bestselling novel "City Boy" as a base, Smith considers machismo, heroism and excessive risk taking as well as hedonism, arrogance, overconfidence, and greed as constitutive elements. Analysis shows that Bad Boy entrepreneurship is not just an invention of the stockbroker's life in London's City, it is a deeply embedded archetype which will have implications for any discussion of entrepreneurship, irrespective of context.

Elisabeth Sundin and Malin Tillmar explore the consequences for women's entrepreneurship of new public management in a Swedish context. By outsourcing tax-money financed elderly care from government to private businesses and giving customers the right to choose which firm he/she preferred, municipalities hoped for cost savings and the blossoming of many small provider agencies. They were especially keen to give women in this sector a chance to start their own businesses. The outcome was anything but - five large, male owned businesses ended up providing 97 percent of care hours. The authors explain these outcomes in terms of the nature of the market and the service, which is more along the lines of a "think-big" than "small-scale" logic, but also in terms of a masculinization of the elderly care sector when it meets this sort of market structure.

If entrepreneurship is indeed a masculine concept, Fiona Wilson and Stephen Tagg provide surprising news. They asked business owners how they construe other business owners they knew, without providing them with any pre-defined alternatives. Using a very interesting research technique, repertory grids, the research delivers amazing variation, and hardly any gender stereotypes appeared. Business owners did not call themselves heroes, or even entrepreneurs. This study seriously questions the comparative binary approach of research which tends to reproduce the idea of men and women and their businesses as essentially different. It calls our attention to the institution "research" and its role in either challenging or reproducing hierarchical understandings of gender.

Finally, Lene Foss' analysis shows how entrepreneurship research on networking reproduces gender stereotypes - and suggests alternative research approaches. Her paper identifies several hegemonic statements underlying the investigated hypotheses of research articles, e.g. that some network characteristics are more closely associated with the one gender than with the other. Specifically, she advises against traditional cross-sectional survey studies that have these problems inherent in them. Foss advocates a feminist standpoint perspective and giving the respondents a voice, which reduces the risk of (mis)interpreting research results from pre-defined categories.

We welcome your comments on this special issue and hope to see your work, adding to this conversation, published in future editions of *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*.

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Acknowledgements

The authors thank their linguist colleague, Jeff Gross, for sharing his ideas on the relevance and impact of language in building scholarly dialogue. The authors also acknowledge Susan Marlow's strong contribution to the shape and scope of this special issue, and thank her as well for her reviewing and intellectual talents.