



# Exploring future research agendas in the field of gender and entrepreneurship

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore future research agendas in the field of gender and entrepreneurship by outlining a critical overview of the current theorising regarding the influence of gender upon entrepreneurial behaviours and activities.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The discussion reviews the state of existing knowledge and extrapolates future areas for potential research.

**Findings** – Whilst there are a number of robust reviews of gender and entrepreneurship, there is much scope to add to existing knowledge particularly by employing a critical feminist stance. In addition, discrete gender critiques are vital to inform a broader and far-reaching appraisal of the entrepreneurial project dominating the contemporary socio economic context.

**Research limitations/implications** – This article is limited by focusing upon discrete themes. However, these are used as exemplars to indicate the potential for future development.

**Practical implications** – The author suggests future avenues for research development and encourages the development of more sophisticated analyses of interrelation between gender and entrepreneurship.

**Social implications** – The author suggests that a gendered critique has broader implications for exposing the bias embedded within the current theorising.

**Originality/value** – Although a review of existing research, there is a thematic development of new opportunities for research development and a call to use gender as a fulcrum to articulate a more searching and critical approach to theorising entrepreneurship.

**Keywords** Gender, Entrepreneurship, Future research, Critical review

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

There is now a growing body of literature exploring and analysing the association between gender, women and entrepreneurial behaviour with a complex and diverse range of issues included under this umbrella (Ahl, 2006; Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Ahl and Marlow, 2012). It is indicative of the development of this research field that a number of review reports and documents (Carter *et al.*, 2001; Carter and Shaw, 2006; Neergaard *et al.*, 2011) have emerged which draw out key themes and perspectives describing the state of current theorising. In addition, leading journals such as *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* and the *International Small Business Journal* have published special issues upon women's business ownership (Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Marlow *et al.*, 2009) whilst this particular journal (*IJGE*) is entirely focused upon gender and entrepreneurship. The critical defining feature underpinning current theorising is the assumption that gender is coterminous with women and as such, they form the overwhelming subjects within this research agenda. Accordingly, contemporary analyses exploring the influence



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of gendered assumptions concentrate largely upon women's entreprenuring activities and overall, this is a relatively mature research field. As such, it may be questioned if further reviews to reveal potential future research opportunities are necessary or even, helpful.

In this article however, we argue that there are opportunities to develop novel theorising related to emerging themes within the broader gender/entrepreneurship discourse. And whilst there may be a sense of maturity in the field in that, responding to Marlow's (2002) call, there is now a focus on how not if gendered assumptions affect women's entrepreneurial behaviours, considerable scope still remains to critically analyse the how aspect. Thus, the purpose of this short article is to contribute to on-going debate amongst our community regarding the future development of how gender shapes entrepreneurial ambitions and behaviours. In addition, and possibly somewhat contentiously, we also suggest that developing on-going critiques of the relationship between gender and entrepreneurship has the potential to lay a foundation for a more wide ranging critique of the role and influence of entrepreneurship in contemporary society. To achieve these aims we commence with a brief overview of existing knowledge. Having set the scene, we consider the weaknesses and biases pervading current knowledge and assumptions which, in turn, suggest future avenues for theory development and empirical research. We conclude with some thoughts on the implications of the gender critique for the broader entrepreneurial agenda.

### **Setting the scene: past themes and current concerns**

One critical aspect which does emerge when reviewing this area is a shift in the unit of analysis within extant research; so, until fairly recently, the focus has been almost exclusively upon women's experiences of business ownership generally articulated as explorations of female entrepreneurship. Consequently, the unit of analysis has been the woman herself and how she approaches, manages and engages with the field of entrepreneurship which, within the mainstream research agenda, has been represented as a neutral activity available and accessible to all[1]. In taking this ontological stance, early research efforts largely placed women as an interloper in the field who demonstrated a relatively poor fit with the established and natural incumbents – men (Carter and Shaw, 2006). Reflecting this ontology, epistemological framing uncritically used gender as a variable whereby the entrepreneurial activities of men and women were compared across a range of performance indicators with women inevitably positioned in deficit such that their enterprises were condemned as smaller than, weaker than, lacking growth orientation or pejoratively dismissed as home-based, part time, life style – indeed, almost every detrimental business term possible has visited upon the hapless female entrepreneur (Marlow *et al.*, 2009). This in turn promoted a range of policy interventions across developed economies which reflected a similar message; namely, how to “fix” the problem of the female entrepreneur (SBS, 2003). To quote more recent work by Taylor and Marlow (2009, p. 1), the underpinning subtext rested upon the regretful notion of “why can't a woman be more like a man?” and relatedly, “what can be done to make this happen”. Indeed, the liberal feminist agenda (Calás *et al.*, 2009) was a largely unrecognised and uncritically acknowledged conceptual frame for the whole debate with just a few dissenting voices such as Mirchandani (1999) and Marlow (2002).

A key problem with the tone of this discussion was revealed in the early 2000s with seminal work by Ogbor (2000) and Ahl (2006). Ogbor raised a broad critique of the

entrepreneurial field and particularly, the failure of prevailing literature to recognise the institutional biases embedded within the discourse in that ascribed characteristics such as race, class and gender inherently shape how entrepreneurship is accessed, understood and enacted. Ahl (2006) developed a post-structural feminist critique[2] which questioned the alleged gender neutrality of the entrepreneurial discourse. Rather, she argued that entrepreneurship is embedded in masculinity; the textual representation of the entrepreneur is inevitably male which in turn, positions women as outsiders or intruders to this field. However, as Ahl points out, much of the extant literature drawn from the “gender as a variable” approach actually failed to find many significant differences between men and women firm owners. Yet, given embedded gendered assumptions, the quest for difference persisted (and persists) with small variations exaggerated to satisfy social expectations of male dominance and female deficit.

The body of work which emerged at the turn of the twenty first century began to question the female deficit thesis centred upon female entrepreneurship and as such, was the beginnings of greater conceptual plurality with more nuanced analyses of the influence of gender upon entrepreneuring (Holmquist and Sundin, 1990; Mirchandani, 1999). This marked a move towards a greater engagement with gender theory using feminist analyses to position women as a category in the debate rather than a distinct focus upon individual women. Thus, this analytical shift marked greater engagement with theoretical criticism rather than the previous focus upon descriptive comment. However, it is worthy of note that for the most part, reflecting broader debates such as those within critical management studies, gender is a proxy for femininity (Ashcraft, 2011). Indeed, as Kelan (2009, p. 166) remarks, gender “sticks” to women in a very specific and indeed, gendered manner supporting the notion that masculinity is the default so needs no explanation or rational defence. However, it should be noted that the debate is not entirely one sided; recent work by Smith (2010) and Hamilton (2013) do recognise masculinity as a distinct analytical category through which entrepreneurial activities should be explored. Indeed, utilising masculinity in this fashion is essential to illuminate and challenge the axiomatic association between gender and women. Only by rebalancing the current gender agenda to fully and separately acknowledge the assumptions fuelling masculinity as a default setting can we challenge these presumptions and so, analytically expose how both women and men “do” gender and “do” entrepreneurship.

As a more theoretically informed debate emerged in the 2000s regarding the nexus between gender and entrepreneuring, the problem of causality has also been considered regarding to what extent gender as a variable can be effectively identified as a definitive influence upon entrepreneuring (Gill, 2011). This debate introduces notions of inter-sectionality which suggests that previous work has been embedded in generic racist and heteronormative assumptions that uncritically position gender subordination as universal and dominant within the hierarchy of disadvantageous social ascriptions. Consequently, gender theorising within entrepreneurship is in danger of emerging, at best, a blunt instrument which assumes that gender only applies to women and homogenises disadvantage whilst at worst, in making such assumptions reproduces the subordination it purports to critique.

Whilst it is apparent that the shifting analytical tone of the literature now recognises that broader socio-economic gender disadvantages critically shape women’s approach to and experience of entrepreneuring, this is rarely accommodated within policy interventions. For the most part, the notion of women needing “fixing” persists with

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separate spaces, courses and activities offered which presume that their entry to entrepreneurship originates from a fundamentally different stance from that of men. This perpetuates and embeds the notion of difference and deficit which requires assistance; moreover, it conflates agency and structure. As such, the underpinning assumption suggests that, within the entrepreneurial context, institutional structures which bound gendered systems can be challenged and undermined by personal individualised agency (Rindova *et al.*, 2009). This is unlikely; rather once again, individual women are afforded the responsibility for, and finding solutions to, systematic institutional socio-economic gendered bias. Accordingly, the argument here is not to deny gender disadvantage as a delimiting factor to female potential but rather, to position women as responsible for addressing their own subordination.

This critique is somewhat contentious and admittedly, probably works best as a theoretical debate but one which we suggest requires greater consideration. On one hand, as is argued, separating women into specific spaces within the entrepreneurial (or indeed, any) agenda with the aim of assisting them to adopt allegedly normative standards without critiquing such norms in the first instance, merely reproduce assumptions of deficit. However, given that women do experience specific gender related socio-economic barriers – reproduced in entrepreneurship, recognising this and offering protected spaces is arguably necessary to offer support, confidence and relevant advice (Brierton and Bennett, 2012). Yet, there must be some caution that gender differences are not exaggerated to the effect of emphasising and reproducing a detrimental gendered ordering which suggests alleged essential feminised qualities can be advantageously developed through entrepreneurship (such that women are deemed more naturally caring employers, better communicators or more empathetic with clients). In addition, it is not the intention to represent individual women as “victims” of their gendered ascription in being denied recognition as successful business owners or relegated to devalued poor performing ghetto’s with men elevated as uniformly high achievers. As Robb and Watson (2012) note, there are few performance differences between male and female owned businesses whilst indeed, the majority of firms are copreneurial or family ventures where the contribution of all household members is essential for business survival and success (Steier and Greenwood, 2000; Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Ruef *et al.*, 2003; Brannon *et al.*, 2013). And in addition, Wyncarczyk and Marlow (2010) emphasise and celebrate the achievements of innovative women entrepreneurs through history. Thus, the aim here is not to denigrate women but to explore the analytical tendency to map gender onto femininity as a devalued construct which presents women’s businesses in an unnecessarily and inaccurate pejorative fashion.

Consequently, to progress understanding, a more nuanced and theoretically informed critique is now essential to strengthen analytical interpretation of the relationship between gender and entrepreneuring and in addition, one that recognises the inter-sectional nature of this debate. Furthermore, given the reach of entrepreneurship as a policy and practitioner issue, new pathways have to be forged to ensure theoretical advances act as a critique to broader assumptions and activities. How this might be addressed through future research avenues is now considered.

### **Moving forward – potential research opportunities and pathways**

Our first point regarding future trends is the fundamental need to move on from assumptions of homogeneity fuelled solely by a shared biology (Fine, 2010).

A long standing approach informing this strand of research relates to the overly descriptive, universal use of key constructs which fail to recognise diversity or context (Gill, 2011). In recognising that it is the socially constructed notion of gender, rather than biological sex, which shapes experiences of entrepreneuring, it is axiomatic that critical analyses of the contextualised, diverse and nuanced manner in which this notion is reproduced must sit at the heart of future work (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Accordingly, in outlining some possibilities for future avenues, we have divided these observations and suggestions into discrete sections which of course, will have overlapping themes but hopefully, also indicate distinct gaps where value can be added to contemporary debate.

### **Methodology**

In terms of the methodology employed to identify these themes, we fully admit to not drawing upon a systematic literature review or other wide scale trawl through academic articles and leading journals. As an exploratory discussion which aims to promote discussion, our aim was not to present a synthesis of literatures but to identify key themes and concerns. Accordingly, we have drawn upon existing comprehensive reviews – such as those by Carter and Shaw (2006), Achtenhagen and Welter (2011) and Neergaard *et al.* (2011) to draw out analytical themes, suggestions for future theoretical developments and issues of contemporary interest within mainstream debate which would inform and develop a gendered critique. Thus, it is acknowledged that our “reading” of this literature inevitably represents a partial view – as is the case with any review article – but this partiality is fully recognised and noted as a limitation of the discussion. And given our focus upon how gendered ascriptions ideologically position women within the entrepreneurship literature, we have drawn upon reviews of women’s experiences of business ownership. Thus, we do not axiomatically equate gender with women but deliberately adopt this focus; clearly, there is much scope to develop future critical reviews which analyse how men are represented within the entrepreneurial literature to expose and emphasise that masculinity is as much a “doing” as femininity.

To commence, we develop a critique of current theorising which draws upon several strands of analytical thought, only by progressing the conceptual framing of debate can more substantive issues be meaningfully contextualised. Having considered theoretical progression, a small number of substantive areas are discussed but these are by no means exhaustive but rather, possibilities and examples. If it is agreed that there is scope for both theoretical and empirical development in the field then quite clearly, some attention to method and methodology is necessary so this section concludes with reflections upon such issues.

### **Theorising gender and entrepreneurship**

As has been argued (Neergaard *et al.*, 2011) explorations of the relationship between gender and entrepreneurship have tended towards description, depended upon small self report samples with little evidence of theoretical advancement. To remedy this lacuna, future work must be embedded within clear conceptual foundations. So, for example, drawing upon the broad and complex field of feminist theory to move beyond merely describing the detrimental influence of gender upon women’s entrepreneuring is essential to develop explanatory frameworks. Given the diverse range of perspectives covered by the umbrella of feminist theorising there is much scope here for advancement. In addition, critically evaluating the over dependence upon liberal

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feminism[3], as a default assumption underpinning most current theorising and policy formation, is essential to reveal a narrow and bounded epistemology (Calás *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, it is difficult to consider how understanding can progress without stronger theorising informing research outcomes. In addition to developing stronger feminist critiques of the association between gender and entrepreneuring, other competing theoretical frameworks can be usefully employed to develop debate particularly regarding the scope for emancipation and empowerment.

The agentic potential within entrepreneurship to generate an “enterprising self” capable of managing and promoting an individual biography has been acknowledged as a critical constituent of the contemporary neo-liberal project (Beck, 1992; Du Gay, 2002; Ogbor, 2000; McRobbie, 2009) but how this amalgam of constructs promotes gender bias requires further attention. The emergence of neo-liberalism and the enterprise of the self are clearly complementary to and indeed, fuel the contemporary entrepreneurial project[4]. The notion of the individually created biography is not only central to the entrepreneurial debate but also to that of post-feminism[5] (Genz and Brabon, 2012). Post-feminism inspires much debate regarding its form and capacity as a critical reflection upon women’s role and place in contemporary society; it is not our purpose to discuss that here. However, a key tenet of twenty-first century post-feminism focuses upon the capacity of women to utilise their agentic power to create a preferred subject position so, becoming entrepreneurs of the self (Du Gay, 2002). It is acknowledged that the research agenda in entrepreneurship and gender studies is reaching into theoretical engagement with the conditions under which the constructed subject of the entrepreneurial self is available to women. Yet, positioning this debate to intersect with the post-feminist critique would develop greater conceptual clarity regarding the broader socio-economic and political implications of assumptions of accessibility and neutrality surrounding entrepreneurship. Accordingly, whilst there is growing recognition of the importance of the need to critically evaluate the potential offered by entrepreneurship as emancipation, how gender might shape this potential requires further critical evaluation.

Further opportunities to challenge narrow theoretical constraints lie within critiques of the association between gender, women and entrepreneuring. As noted above, there is a normative assumption that gender refers to femininity and within the context of entrepreneuring, this is narrowed down to women’s business ownership (Mirchandani, 2005). This narrow and limiting assumption effectively renders both the performance of masculinity and how men challenge or reproduce such performances invisible and unexplored (Hamilton, 2013). Indeed, as the default position in this debate, masculinity loses a tangible identity and is not considered a “doing” but just something that “is”. In effect, the gendered position of those who constitute the majority population within entrepreneurship has been rendered invisible. So, we have not questioned to what extent most self-employed men identify with the masculinised stereotypical entrepreneurial role which is seamlessly attached to them by virtue of gender. Thus, recognising and unpicking articulations of masculinity and its generic application warrant discrete analyses and conceptual critique (Connell, 2005). Indeed, questioning the reality of the nature of the masculinity of the field may be the first step to revealing the rather more mundane and ordinary, rather than heroic, nature of entrepreneurship. In so doing, a further contribution to gender studies may emerge as we illuminate the constructed fictive entrepreneur as a masculine chimera to which the female must aspire, is condemned for never reaching but, in essence, this is a goal which does not and



never will exist. In effect, gendered constructs within entrepreneurship are subordinating forces with analytical substance but no associated empirical characterisation. Thus, in addition to developing more sophisticated epistemological approaches to illuminating the interface between entrepreneuring and gender, there is clearly space for greater philosophical debate to ensure that a reflexive critique regarding the assumptions which underpin this relationship assume a prominent position.

To conclude thoughts on the future of gender theorising in the entrepreneurial context, we have critiqued the axiomatic acceptance of a unitary gender analysis (focus upon women/femininity) suggesting this needs to encompass the binary stance (feminism/masculinity; men/women) but this does not recognise the queer agenda. Whilst there is some work in the entrepreneurial field which explores gay entrepreneurship (Galloway, 2012) this has not been developed as a sophisticated contribution to queer studies. Accordingly, the manner in which heteronormativity dominates and more so, that it is uncritically accepted as a normative stance is both remarkable and profoundly depressing as a symbol of the narrow and bounded understanding and reach of entrepreneurship.

### **Inter-sectionality**

As has been suggested above, one profitable avenue for future research lies within clearer recognition of heterogeneity and so, a shift away from generic gendered presumptions but also, in stronger critiques of how gender intersects with other social ascriptions. Within the broader feminist debate, the intersection of gender with race, class, sexuality et cetera is an established and much discussed aspect (Bowden and Mummery, 2010). Indeed, those such as bell hooks have developed powerful critiques of the middle class racist assumptions which have normatively informed both first and second wave feminist argument (Hooks, 1981). Accordingly, contemporary discussions (Genz and Brabon, 2012) acknowledge and explore how current iterations of feminist theory position gender as just one symbol and cipher of subordination. This more reflexive critique has yet to be acknowledged as a recognised element of the gendered entrepreneurial discourse and interestingly, suggests some fracturing between the theoretical and policy based strands of thinking. Policy initiatives focused upon women of colour and those from ethnic minority groups have been generated within developed economies. Whilst these may arise largely from more instrumental objectives regarding economic participation in the context of poor employment prospects, they have, nevertheless, recognised diversity within the gender debate. Cross country differences in research in relation to gender and business ownership which takes into consideration the intersection of institutions, gender and race has been limited with Minniti (2009, p. 557) commenting that, “studies have been sparse with respect to the issue of why racial and ethnic minority women are underrepresented among self-employed females”.

As noted above, theoretical development in this field has been constrained by the tendency for gender to be used as a generic term within the majority of mainstream theorising (Calás *et al.*, 2009). It is acknowledged that hyper-reflexivity in drilling down to individualised micro performances of gender is probably not helpful as an introductory framing to every exploration of women’s experiences of business ownership. Yet, recognition of the problem of universal definitions of gender is required to progress our understanding of how ascribed characteristics intersect to generate differential matrices of disadvantage. A complementary thread of analysis accompanying the notion of inter-sectionality is that of context.

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### Context

Welter (2011) notes the importance of context in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities and behaviours. Specifically, she draws attention to institutional influences and constraints which limit – or facilitate – entrepreneurship; for example, the porous nature of institutions within previously socialist economies and the manner in which these are infused with corruption at local and national levels. In addition, Welter suggests that how gender is articulated within the entrepreneurial debate has to acknowledge context so, within transitional economies, stereotypical assumptions regarding the position of women as domestic labourers critically shape the strategies they employ to claim legitimacy as entrepreneurial actors. The importance and influence of context is exemplified in work by Al-Dajani and Carter (2010) and Al-Dajani and Marlow (2012) which explores the empowering potential of entrepreneuring activities for migrant Palestinian women. Thus, within a context of patriarchy, deprivation and social stigma these women use entrepreneurship to address some aspect of their own and their communities embedded disadvantage. However, context is not a construct which only applies to those economies and situations which differ from the presumed norm of Western developed nations; adopting this stance is both discriminatory and blinkered in that it suggests a dominant model to which others should aspire. Consequently, adopting a more critical appraisal of how context is positioned within current theorising around gender and entrepreneurial behaviours offers potential to progress debate whilst acknowledging that competing and contrasting contextual influences require clearer recognition.

### Finance

Given the attention which has been afforded to the interface between gender and finance, it might be supposed that there are few novel options remaining under this particular umbrella. After all, we are well versed in the arguments that women are reluctant borrowers, demand lower levels of finance and make limited use of angel and equity finance (Freel *et al.*, 2012) – it should be noted however, that similar observations can be applied to nearly all business owners. Indeed, analysing the use of finance with gender as a dependent variable is not very helpful as issues such as business age, sector and growth interface with gender in a complex fashion (Fairlie and Robb, 2009). That is not to discount the influence of gender but rather, to recognise the complex manner in which it positions women-owned firms in certain sectors and influences growth trajectories and ambitions *et cetera* has to be acknowledged and factored into relevant debates around finance. These certainly are being recognised within current theorising but there are however, some further and possibly novel areas of debate which might fruitfully be progressed.

Thus, there has been much celebration of micro-finance schemes as particularly suitable for self-employed women (Roodman and Morduch, 2009); such low risk restricted financial provision accords with stereotypical gendered assumptions regarding women's natural preference for small scale limited funding. This proposition is worthy of critical examination as a self fulfilling prophesy such that further empirical work exploring the limiting impact of such schemes is essential. As Desmedt (2010) found, micro finance offers a false promise of enterprise; there is a suggestion of unbounded potential within the entrepreneurial discourse but this is constrained by the very limitations of the funding and related scalability. In particular, micro finance is positioned as an almost evangelical force



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for good in offering women, particularly those in developing nations, entrepreunering opportunities such that they might address their own and localised poverty. Exploring the broad implications of this – that globalised structural poverty can be addressed by micro funding of female enterprise and, that women can and should take responsibility for poverty alleviation – offers considerable potential to critically appraise the gendered assumptions which underpin this debate.

Alternatively, greater explorations of the strategies and experiences of those in developed economies who do pursue funding to grow their firms would be fruitful to explore prevalent assumptions surrounding the pursuit and management of such funding. In addition, to what extent the masculine dominated equity industry and angel network adopt or reflect gendered assumptions within lending decisions is certainly worthy of further analysis. Carter *et al.* (2007) have developed a nuanced critique of gender bias within bank lending decisions; a similar investigation of the relatively unknown arena of equity funding would be both informative and novel.

### **Social entrepreneurship**

Social entrepreneurship is regarded as a new and emerging field of enquiry and as such has been subject to both empirical and theoretical attention (Osberg and Martin, 2007). However, despite Haugh's (2005) calls for more gender aware studies of social entrepreneurship, to date there appears to be relatively little academic attention paid to this issue (Teasdale *et al.*, 2011). Some tentative evidence from UK samples infers that women might be more likely to engage in social entrepreneurship as opposed to commercial entrepreneurship (Harding, 2006). This evidence is based on women's greater propensity (and time) to volunteer in comparison to their male counterparts (DiMaggio and Louch, 1998), which is predominantly grounded in societal expectations related to caring, femininity, maternal sentiments and feelings (Bowden and Mummery, 2010). However, the more selfless and caring disposition of women is an essentialist and reductionist explanation for greater levels of women's entrepreneurial activity within the social context. For instance, does this position man within the social enterprise context, by default, as being less caring, less concerned with the social objectives of the organisation and therefore, inherently more attracted or driven by the entrepreneurial aspect of social entrepreneurship? This does not appear to be the case as paradoxically, these men tend to be portrayed as social heroes. The hero discourse is not new in entrepreneurship literature (Anderson, 2005) but this heroic nature is exaggerated in the context of social entrepreneurs. Dees (2004, as cited in Chell, 2007) talks of "unsung heroes", "alchemists [...] [with] magical qualities [...] [who] build things from nothing". Furthermore, such individuals may be considered as deviant in the academic literature but this relates to social deviance, an unwillingness to accept the status quo and a potential to bend the rules or engage in unethical activity for the sake of a higher cause: in other words, a "Robin Hood" positioning of male social entrepreneurs. This construction saves the male social entrepreneur from being considered as lacking in comparison to the hegemonic male of commercial entrepreneurship. So, rather than being affiliated with the more feminine "social" qualities or aspects of social entrepreneurship, he remains reflective of Schumpeter's hegemonic male subject exercising creative destruction of societal inequalities whilst fulfilling protector and provider roles.

When gender is factored into the social entrepreneurship agenda, rather familiar assumptions surrounding the gender binary re-emerge with a focus on the association

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between gendered characteristics and social motivations (McAdam and Treanor, 2012). Thus, research whereby gender is used as a lens and not merely as a variable is required to overcome the current social entrepreneurship discourse; so, we need to move on from exploring whether there is something essential which forms a conceptual bridge between the feminine and the social. More productive themes might instead focus upon analysing the form and intent of women's socially entrepreneurial activity, in terms of incidence, sector and scale, whilst also offering insight into the multiplicity of women's backgrounds, experiences and motivations in engaging with this activity. In this way, the nature of women's contribution and impact in this sector can be illuminated and better supported.

### **Education**

Entrepreneurship education has emerged in recent years as increasingly important within the matrix of pedagogical provision provided by universities and to a lesser extent, secondary education. As such, the impetus for this rests with the notion of promoting more enterprising attitudes amongst younger people regardless of whatever career they pursue but also, to position business creation as a desirable and feasible option. In effect, the student body are being alerted to the necessity of creating the "enterprising self" whilst the persona of the entrepreneur is afforded enhanced status and positioned as a desirable and accessible subject being. However, work by Jones (2011) has revealed the gendered bias which pervades current approaches to entrepreneurship education. In essence, this bias is reproduced upon a number of levels – how the entrepreneur is represented and displayed within current teaching programmes, how students absorb and reproduce popularised notions of who is and who can be an entrepreneur and also, the nature of the activities they undertake to "learn" about entrepreneurship. Such bias neatly fits with the contemporary masculinised discourse of entrepreneurship to recreate a narrow, confirmatory and closed sense of the possibilities within entrepreneurship. Given the vital importance of future enactments of entrepreneuring where the role and status of the entrepreneur is feted throughout society, almost as a modern day hero, excluding potential heroines is problematic. Thus, one of the global concerns regarding entrepreneurship remains women's under-representation yet, it would appear that the subtext embedded within the education process is that of bias and exclusion. Consequently, greater critical engagement with how entrepreneurship is portrayed and articulated within the university curriculum is of much interest.

The substantive issues outlined above are only a few examples where potential lies for future exploration; in addition, we might add gendered succession in family firms, women as high technology venturers, relationships between gender and firm growth, the influence of gender upon internationalisation, entrepreneurship as a life course event rather than a life time career et cetera. However, a key element to this debate lies with how knowledge is progressed through empirical investigation and so, we explore this in a little more depth.

### **Researching gender and entrepreneurship**

As has already been noted above, as the literature regarding gender and entrepreneurship developed there was a notable tendency to position gender as a variable with the focus upon measuring gender differences. The ontological perspective underpinning much of this work uncritically presumed upon entrepreneurship as gender neutral and in addition,

reflecting stereotypical assumptions, women's businesses would under perform. As Ahl (2006) noted, this assumption fuelled a self fulfilling prophecy as researchers presumed upon female deficit, sought it out and exaggerated it if necessary to satisfy social expectations. Whilst gender as an issue was recognised, prevailing ontological and epistemological stances embedded the notion that women could only be included on the research agenda as an adjunct of men and moreover, assumptions of "lack" critically shaped the empirical enquiry. It is noted however, that whilst gender as a variable can be useful for global overviews of populations and should feature in analyses of large data sets, associated outcomes require reflective critique to avoid limiting and gender biased interpretations. Indeed, recent work such as that of the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* (Hart and Levie, 2011) demonstrates far greater gender reflexivity. Consequently, quantitative analyses of the relationship between gender and entrepreneuring are critical to illustrate change and associated trends over time yet, how these outcomes are represented and interpreted must be sensitive to embedded gender bias. Much scope exists in offering critical evaluations of normative approaches within the positivist tradition to advance current understandings of the "bigger" picture.

As such, there are still relatively few convincing theoretically robust quantitative analyses exploring differing facets of the gender/entrepreneurship relationship. Upon reflection, it is interesting to muse whether the lack of positivist, quantitatively based data analyses are symptomatic of broader gender divides within the methodological spectrum such that there is a stereotypical association between femininity and softer, qualitative approaches. This, of course, reflects wider debates regarding female exclusion from mathematics, statistics and associated data analytical techniques (Fine, 2010). That said, there are now an increasing number of quantitatively based papers authored by women published in top rated journals (for example, the special issue of ET&P, 2012). It is interesting however, that there is a greater preponderance of male or mixed sex author teams (Robb and Watson, 2012; Greene *et al.*, 2013; Klyver *et al.*, 2013; Saridakis *et al.*, 2014) involved in such papers. It might be speculatively considered whether this reflects the growing legitimacy of the whole gender/entrepreneurship agenda such those men with quantitative analysis skills are now more prepared to explore this field. Yet, what message does it convey to suggest the link between male involvement, quantitative analysis and legitimacy is to be seen as positive? There is a debate here which requires further exploration and discussion.

Much of the existing work on gender and entrepreneuring reflects an interpretative qualitative approach utilising small self-report samples reflecting feminist traditions of research which seek to illuminate the lived experiences of women (Golombisky, 2006). This in itself has been useful to offer a fine grained overview of how women engage with entrepreneuring behaviours but there has been some tendency for fairly limited description to ensue (Neergaard *et al.*, 2011). So, as Calás *et al.* (2009) argue, to progress debate, analyses clearly grounded in feminist theory are essential to develop informed conceptual critiques of the relationship between gender and entrepreneuring. Accordingly, adopting a feminist gaze articulated through and within preferred methodological stances that position women as worthy research subjects in and of themselves will act to robustly dispute embedded ontological assumptions. In addition, greater methodological rigour will engender a stronger analytical depth and theoretical contribution from small scale interpretative work. In addition to developing a more critical utilisation of both quantitative and qualitative data informed by

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feminist analyses, there would be much scope in focusing upon longitudinal work. This might be through periodic data gathering, building life history narratives or through detailed and ongoing case study construction. There is a dearth of longitudinal studies which explore how women's experience of entrepreneuring changes over time – this is particularly important given current work on the life course. Indeed, there is much scope for methodological development within the current research agenda which will add breadth to our knowledge, embed feminist perspectives as explanatory analytical tools and consequently, contribute to current theorising.

### **Concluding remarks**

Within this short and exploratory reflection upon future research possibilities within the field of gender and entrepreneurship, the ambition has been to identify potentially fruitful themes to progress theoretical development and illuminate new empirical opportunities. In so doing, we are aware that this discussion is somewhat contradictory as one of the noted current short-comings of the contemporary agenda is the conflation of gender and femininity and the resulting exclusion of men and masculinities and ignorance of queer studies in this debate (Smith, 2010; Hamilton, 2013; Galloway, 2013). And as such, this article reflects this bias given the focus upon women; however, we have indicated the needs to reflexively critique this tendency and extend and expand upon biased interpretations of gender. That said, we cannot ignore that women's experiences of entrepreneurship dominate the debate and this prevalence is unlikely to shift in the near future. Accordingly, it is appropriate to explore how the influence of gender, as experienced by women in the context of entrepreneurship might progress in the future.

It is evident from this text that women, who as a universal group are representative of the notion of gender, have been positioned as a discrete and separate category within the contemporary entrepreneurial discourse. In contemplating such developments, we begin by denying a homogeneous view of women which refutes diversity and ignores agency (Earle and Letherby, 2003). Rather, we consider women to be a heterogeneous group and as such acknowledge that ethnicity, culture, class, age, location and education will all influence women's experiences of business ownership. Yet to date, there appear to be embedded assumptions that the amorphous female entrepreneur is white, middle class and operates her firm within a developed economy. This is despite broader evidence that those in developing economies and marginalised and excluded women are probably more likely to engage with formal or indeed, informal enterprise as an accessible form of economic participation (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2012; Danish and Lawton-Smith, 2012). Consequently, as reflexive researchers, we all have a responsibility to contextualise our future research wherever the setting may be and so, not privilege a Euro/UK-centric basis as normative.

Attention has also been afforded to women business owners as a special and distinct category whose alleged shortcomings in managing their firms can be addressed and conversely, their essential feminine qualities celebrated. On one hand, contemporary critiques (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; McAdam, 2012) demonstrate that many alleged shortcomings are a manufactured reflection of social assumptions and expectations and in fact, there are few gender based firm performance differences – yet, the deficit model persists. Hence, given the normative model of masculinity, this requires women to emulate the behaviours of men but, in order to retain and respect the gender binary – fundamental to social ordering – not too much like men. So, women

business owners are a conundrum which evokes a paradox. To encourage and exploit their potential to contribute to the contemporary entrepreneurial project, it appears that they must be equipped with the appropriate skills which reflect those inherent within men yet, critical research suggests there are more within firm similarities (driven by sectoral, age, size, market influences) than differences. Accordingly, there is a status afforded to the normative entrepreneur to which women must aspire but in fact, can never reach as it is largely mythical. However, in drawing our arguments together we are wary of a sense of gender denial; this is not the intention. Rather, gender subordination occurs when women are presumed to be different (weaker); that these weaknesses are axiomatically exhibited within entrepreneurship and so require special fixing. Such assumptions are clear articulations of gendered disadvantage which must be recognised in future research.

On the other hand however, we see assumed essential aspects of femininity mapped onto women business owners; thus, social feminist arguments suggest women can use innate sociability, empathy and caring traits to the benefit of firm performance. We have noted such assumptions in debates regarding social enterprise. This is a potentially dangerous tendency as it maps the constructed notion of gender onto the biological categorisation of sex which in turn, acts as an essentialist explanation for difference (and related disadvantage). Socialisation influences which generate gendered differences are not denied; they form a fundamental element of this debate however, to presume upon essentialist theorising is a dead end for future research as it implies that rather than critiquing assumptions within the prevailing discourse, the task is to elevate the social valorisation of feminine traits and so, eliminate associated subordination. This appears a very long term project.

However, in drawing together these arguments, we would suggest that exploring and analysing gender is critical not only to expose how men and women are positioned within the contemporary entrepreneurial agenda but also, the broader implications of this biased positioning. In effect, entrepreneurship is feted as an open site of egoistic market activity in that it allegedly represents the expression of autonomous agency where opportunity is not bounded by normative institutional constraints (Calás *et al.*, 2009). As such, it is presented as “de-institutionalised” (Heintz and Nadai, 1998) as an individualised agentic project. Thus, attainment and achievement in this field is popularly represented as an outcome of individual effort and applied determination (Radu and Redien-Collot, 2008); as such, entrepreneurship is deemed to offer a meritocratic field of socio-economic possibilities within the contemporary post-modern project (McRobbie, 2009). This representation has been revealed as simplistic and mythical; critical analyses of the entrepreneurial discourse suggest that the contemporary image of the successful entrepreneurial character is persistently male (Ogbor, 2000; Ahl, 2006; Taylor and Marlow, 2009). This arises from the gendered affiliation between stereotypical masculinity and entrepreneurial attributes (aggression, competitiveness, risk taking) (Eddleston and Powell, 2008). The mapping of masculinity onto entrepreneuring produces and reproduces a gendered site of activity and identity. Thus, entrepreneurship is defined in contradiction; an open, meritocratic site of economic agency which is however, embedded in masculinity.

This argument has a number of implications; despite an assumption that entrepreneurship heralds a new form of gender neutral opportunity seeking economic behaviour, it reproduces the gender binary. Thus, women are particularly vulnerable within the contemporary entrepreneurial project. Although encouraged to engage

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with new forms of socio-economic participation which ostensibly reflect individualised post-feminist opportunities, a gendered entrepreneurial regime persists which reproduces subordinated heteronormativity. Consequently, this ostensibly open and agentic site of activity which purports to be accessible to all willing to pursue their individual ambitions is a masquerade which potentially positions women as deficient members of a gendered out group. And even for those who demonstrate the most diligent agentic efforts to become business owners, as noted above, they remain forever defined as other – the female entrepreneur. Consequently, future research endeavours must engage with the wider debate; there is a responsibility to position the gender critique as one which has the potential to challenge the foundations of current theorising in the broader field of entrepreneurship theory and research.

As a short overview, this discussion inevitably has many limitations; we have concentrated upon relatively few discrete areas for future exploration. These themes are however, offered as exemplars from the wider discourse and are not meant to be exhaustive. In addition, the whole notion of innovation – its relationship to entrepreneurship and the generally gender blind stance which prevails has not been acknowledged. This whole area is worthy of a dedicated critique given the spill-over between technology, science, innovation gender and entrepreneurship which is beyond the scope of this article but certainly requires attention. One particularly intriguing limitation is the dependence upon work authored largely by women to explore the experience of women under the general banner of gender. It is notable that women dominate this field which in itself may be deemed limiting and may indeed contribute to its general de-valuation as a feminised debate applicable only to women. It is noted that similar debates about “female ghettos” have been conducted in critical management studies (Ashcraft, 2011). Thus, the debate here is limited by reliance upon a female perspective; whilst acknowledging the counterpoint that as men dominate in almost every field, it is no bad thing for having enclaves for women; we would concur with this point. However, to introduce alternative perspectives, if only for critical purposes, a more diverse range of authors, author teams and explorations of the articulation of femininity and masculinity within entrepreneurship would be productive. Having called for greater methodological reflexivity and pluralism, contemporary approaches such as critical realism, have not been recognised but again, there is probably scope for a dedicated article upon gender, entrepreneurship and methodological approaches. As such, this comment is the “tip of an iceberg” which aims to point towards potential opportunities whilst not making claims to be encompassing or a definitive statement.

Whilst noting limitations, our ambition here has been to reflect upon future possibilities for researching gender and entrepreneurship and in addition, arguing that this general critique has a wider potential to expose the embedded ontological bias at the heart of current entrepreneurial theorising. It is emphasised that the intention is not to represent women as individual victims or suggest they do not attain within the field of entrepreneurship; as Wynarczyk and Marlow (2010) explore at length, women have made a substantial contribution to innovation and entrepreneurship through their venturing – and this is evident through history. However, such achievements are often obscured by the ideological influence of gendered ascriptions which act to map devalued stereotypical assumptions of difference upon the interpretation of such achievements. Highlighting and celebrating such achievements whilst expanding our understanding of gender to the enactment of masculinities and male entrepreneuring is critical to progress debate.



## Notes

1. It is noted that policy agendas have focused very specifically upon encouraging women's enterprise recognising their minority status.
2. Post-structuralism is a highly complex analysis relating to post-modernism which, simplistically, explores how discourses are constructed and reconstructed through language and behaviour with hierarchical and power systems to support these constructions. In terms of gender, women and enterprise Ahl (2006) explored how the entrepreneurial discourse was embedded in masculinity and how this influences our view of women.
3. Liberal feminists argue that men and women are equal but do not have equal socio-economic opportunities to fulfil their potential. Thus, ensuring female emancipation through access to education and the labour market plus, the removal of institutional constraints, discrimination and sexism will enable women to progress in contemporary society. This analysis does not address the issue of how standards of equality are devised or the influence of tacit, cultural and stereotypical sources of subordination. See Bowden and Mummery (2010) for a critical evaluation.
4. Neo-liberalism focuses upon individualism such that the individual actor is responsible for her/his welfare, wealth creation and well-being. The state has a minimal role and inequality is positive and good as it acts to motivate individual achievement – see the body of work by the Chicago economists such as Friedman (1962).
5. Post-feminist analysts suggest that given the enfranchisement of female rights in developed economies it is now the responsibility of the individual woman to pursue and demonstrate her achievements and as such, collective feminist lobbying movements are now out-dated and un-required. See McRobbie (2009) for a critique.

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