

State of the Art Review



Is Time Up for The Hero Male Entrepreneur? A Review of Enterprise Discourse and its Effects



Dr Lorna Treanor
University of Nottingham
Lorna.Treanor@nottingham.ac.uk

Dr Sally Jones
Manchester Metropolitan University

Professor Susan Marlow
University of Birmingham

SOTA Review No 34: March 2020

The contemporary stereotypical entrepreneur is typically characterised as a middle-class, middle-aged, white male (McAdam, 2012) leading a high-growth, high turnover enterprise. In reality, most UK businesses are home based, micro or small firms owned and managed by families, partners or teams, very few of which will ever exhibit sustained growth (Anyadike-danes, Hart and Du, 2013). This stereotype is also highly gendered, with ideal entrepreneurial characteristics closely reflecting those ascribed to men and masculinity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

The portrayal of the typical entrepreneur as a high-performing male suggests women do not fit the preferred entrepreneurial prototype (McAdam, 2012) as they lack essential characteristics such as aggression, risk taking and competitiveness. This argument forms a popular and policy rationale for why women are significantly less likely than men to create and lead new entrepreneurial ventures. Thus, women are encouraged to 'step-up' to this prototype by undertaking training and emulating role models to become more self-confident, ambitious and risk tolerant to unleash their entrepreneurial capabilities (Deloitte, 2016). In becoming more like the prototypical 'hero male entrepreneur' (Marlow, 2014) women will be able to create more new ventures, enhance their productivity and contribute to employment and wealth creation. This SOTA review considers the evidence that exists on the effects and implications of a masculine entrepreneurial discourse across entrepreneurship education, enterprise policy and practice.

Background

Language is powerful. It can subliminally influence our attitudes and actions and notably, language is gendered. Whilst sex denotes a biological category [male, female, intersex] gender is a social ascription that has no substantive form but is used upon a universal basis to shape human behaviour informing the construction of gendered roles and social identities (Coates, 2004). It has been acknowledged in psychology and feminist literature that words such as assertive, powerful, ambitious and confident suggest masculinity because of widely held gender stereotypes associated with men and women. Similarly words such as submissive, gentle and caring tend to be associated with the feminine (McAdam, 2012). Likewise, the language often used to describe entrepreneurs – bold, assertive, strategic, resilient, determined – draws on language associated with masculinity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). These societal and cultural cues about the typical entrepreneur, and the suggested behaviours of successful entrepreneurs (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018) can therefore combine, producing a discourse of entrepreneurship that privileges, “particular forms of masculinity” (Hamilton, 2014: 703). It has been shown that this is evident across entrepreneurship research and education, the media and policy documents (McAdam, 2012; Jones and Warhuus, 2018; Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Ahl and Marlow, 2019).

Evidence

Evidence of the Effects of Masculine Enterprise Discourse: Higher Education, Policy and Practice

Research shows that highly educated individuals are more likely to start more sustainable value added businesses than those with lower levels of educational attainment (Schøtt, 2009). Women are increasingly pursuing higher education (Eurostat, 2016) and we might subsequently assume that women would be increasingly likely to participate in entrepreneurship courses, which are widely available at university. However, evidence suggests that this is not the case (Petridou *et al.*, 2009). Access to entrepreneurship education is growing, with schools, colleges and universities offering courses in the practicalities of venture creation and critically evaluating the contribution of entrepreneurship to society (Jones, 2014). However, it is argued that entrepreneurship itself, and subsequently entrepreneurship courses are framed as masculine (Duval-Couetil *et al.*, 2014; Jones, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Jones and Warhuus, 2018), which may explain why fewer women than men choose to take entrepreneurship courses at university. It has been found that “socially constructed gender career stereotypes” shape the choices of the different sexes in relation to who takes entrepreneurship courses (Duval-Couetil *et al.*, 2014). A masculine discourse of entrepreneurship could subsequently act as a barrier to those who do not see themselves reflected in the stereotypes informing this discourse, including many women. This is because masculinised language is *more* relevant and accessible to men, given their socialisation into masculinity and the broader masculinisation of entrepreneurship (Jones and Warhuus, 2018). Research evidence also questions the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education for women; indeed, it has been suggested that women may be *less* interested in pursuing entrepreneurial careers if they undertake entrepreneurship courses (Westhead and Solesvik, 2016).

Similarly, research has also shown that policy documents are informed by a masculine entrepreneurial discourse and associated performance expectations (Wilson and Tagg, 2010; Jones, 2014; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). The underpinning gendered assumptions position women at a deficit – they ‘lack’ entrepreneurial know-how or motivation or are reluctant risk takers (Deloitte, 2016). This rationale has trickle-down implications for the provision of Government funded business start-up provision which has been critiqued for encouraging women to behave like ‘honorary men’ when approaching new firm creation (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). This is highly detrimental to women’s entrepreneurial efforts as it fails to acknowledge structural barriers to attainment, such as discrimination, the inflexibility of self-employment, sectoral channelling into lower value feminised industries with marginal returns and a lack of welfare benefits (Jayawarna et al., 2019). Rather, the assumption is that women just need to use their agency to ‘try harder,’ using the stereotypical hero male as their role model (Marlow, 2014). However, an assumed male norm silences these issues as they are not relevant to the ‘typical [male] entrepreneur’.

Implications

The performance of women owned and led firms reflects the performance profile of typical UK businesses in that they are marginal performers with few growth prospects most of which are operated from home (Yousafzai et al., 2018). Research has firmly established that there are more differences between entrepreneurs within categories rather than between the categories themselves i.e. there are greater differences between women entrepreneurs than there are between male and female entrepreneurs and their businesses (Ahl, 2006). Research undertaken using a comparative approach in that sex is used as a variable to discriminate upon firm performance exaggerates differences between men and women business owners and overlooks the multiplicity of differences within categories. Despite longstanding evidence to the contrary, women entrepreneurs and their businesses are consistently labelled underperforming due to gendered assumptions (Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Yousafzai et al., 2018). Research shows that fewer women entrants into entrepreneurial activity is a reflection of various combinations of: occupational channelling (women typically being employed in low-growth, crowded sectors), the advantages of employment with regard to flexibility, welfare provision and regulations, and the lower returns to women’s self-employment, rather than some innate entrepreneurial deficit (Jayawarna et al., 2019). Persistent structural inequalities will perpetuate this imbalance.

Summary and evidence gaps

Research has shown that the contemporary popular notion of who, and what, is an entrepreneur pivots upon an image of a ‘hero male’ creating innovative new ventures that generate wealth and employment (McAdam, 2012; Swail et al., 2014). However, the majority of UK businesses, whether owned by families, couples, teams or individual men and women, are small, marginal performers and will remain so for the duration of their existence (DBEIS, 2018). Yet, the heroic, male entrepreneur championing a high-growth business remains pervasive in media portrayals, in policy papers and in entrepreneurship classrooms (Swail et al., 2014; Jones and Warhuus, 2018). This paper outlines some of the implications for women, but this construction of the normative entrepreneur also has potentially negative implications for the wellbeing of many male entrepreneurs, who may perceive a pressure to perform and behave in keeping with the

enduring alpha-male entrepreneurial norm contrary to their authentic selves (Swail et al., 2014; Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017). While further research is required, exploring how women are constrained by and can successfully challenge the masculine norm, particularly in contexts that remain traditionally masculine, it is important that a broader perspective is adopted. Further research is required exploring the influence of the 'hero male' discourse upon the entrepreneurial proclivity and activity of: male entrepreneurs, University students, marginalised and disadvantaged group members (such as refugees, disabled individuals, those from low income or ethnic minority backgrounds) and, given the multiplicity of genders recognised in contemporary society, of individuals identifying across the gender spectrum.

Sources

- Ahl, H. (2006), "Why research on women entrepreneurs needs new directions", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 30 No. 5, pp. 595–621.
- Ahl, H. and Marlow, S. (2012) 'Gender and Entrepreneurship Research: Employing Feminist Theory to Escape The Dead End', *Organization*, 19 (5) pp. 543 – 562.
- Anyadike-Danes, M., Hart, M. and Du, J. (2015). Firm dynamics and job creation in the United Kingdom: 1998-2013. *International Small Business Journal*. 33. 1. 12-27. 10.1177/0266242614552334.
- Coates, J. (2004), *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*, Pearson Education Ltd., Essex, UK.
- DBEIS (2018) Longitudinal Small Business Survey 2017: SME Employers (Businesses with 1 – 249 Employees). Dept. Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy: London. Last Accessed: 30/09/2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/710553/LSBS_2017_cross-sectional_SME_Employer_report.pdf
- Deloitte (2016), Women Entrepreneurs: Developing collaborative ecosystems for success. <https://www.womensbusinesscouncil.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/deloitte-uk-wom-entr20161.pdf>
- Duval-Couetil, N., Gotch, C.M. and Yi, S. (2014), "The Characteristics and Motivations of Contemporary Entrepreneurship Students", *Journal of Education for Business*, Vol. 89 No. 8, pp. 441–449.
- Eurostat. (2016), "Tertiary Education Statistics Report", available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics#Gender_distribution_of_participation (accessed 21 November 2017).
- Giazitzoglu, A. and Down, S. (2017) 'Performing Entrepreneurial Masculinity: An Ethnographic Account'. *International Small Business Journal*, 35 (1) pp. 40-60.
- Hamilton, E. (2014), "The discourse of entrepreneurial masculinities (and femininities)", *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, Vol. 25 No. 1–2, pp. 90–99.
- Haus, I., Steinmetz, H., Isidor, R. and Kabst, R. (2013), "Gender effects on entrepreneurial intention: a meta-analytical structural equation model", *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 130–156.
- Jayawarna, D., Martinez-Dy, Marlow, S. (2019) Women's Entrepreneurship – Self Actualisation or Self Harm? Paper to the 28th Babson Entrepreneurship Conference, Boston, USA.
- Jones, S. (2014), "Gendered discourses of entrepreneurship in UK higher education: The fictive entrepreneur and the fictive student", *International Small Business Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 237–258.
- Jones, S. (2015) "You would expect the successful person to be the man" Gendered symbolic violence in UK HE Entrepreneurship Education *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 7(3): 303 – 320.
- Jones, S., Martinez-Dy, A., and Vershinina, N. (2018) "We were fighting for our place":

- Resisting gender knowledge regimes through feminist knowledge network formation. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 26(6), 789-804.
- Jones, S. and Warhuus, J.P. (2018) "This class is not for you": An investigation of gendered subject construction in entrepreneurship course descriptions. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 25(2): 182-200.
- Marlow, S. and Martinez-Dy, A. (2018) 'Is it Time to Rethink the Gender Agenda in Entrepreneurship Research?', *International Small Business Journal*, 36(1), pp. 3-22.
- Marlow, S. and McAdam, M. (2013), "Gender and Entrepreneurship", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 114–124.
- Marlow, S. and Swail, J. (2014) 'Gender, Risk and Finance: Why Can't a Woman be More Like a Man?', *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 26(1/2), pp. 80-96.
- McAdam, M (2012) *Female Entrepreneurship*, London, Routledge.
- Petridou, E., Sarri, A. and Kyrgidou, L.P. (2009), "Entrepreneurship education in higher educational institutions: the gender dimension", *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 286–309.
- Schøtt, T. (2009), *Education, Training and Networking for Entrepreneurship in Denmark 2008 – Studied via Global Entrepreneurship Monitor*, University of Southern Denmark, Centre for Entrepreneurship and Small Business Studies, Kolding, Denmark.
- Swail, J., Down, S., & Kautonen, T. (2014). Examining the effect of 'entre-tainment' as a cultural influence on entrepreneurial intentions. *International Small Business Journal*, 32(8), 859-875.
- Westhead, P. and Solesvik, M.Z. (2016) "Entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial intention: Do female students benefit?" *International Small Business Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 8, pp 979– 1003.
- Wilson, F. and Tagg, S. (2010) Social constructionism and personal constructivism: Getting the business owner's view on the role of sex and gender. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 2(1), pp. 68-82.
- Yousafzai, S., Fayolle, A., Lindgreen, A., Henry, C., Saeed, S., & Sheikh, S. (Eds.). (2018). *Women Entrepreneurs and the Myth of 'Underperformance': A New Look at Women's Entrepreneurship Research*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
-

About the Authors



Lorna Treanor is an Assistant Professor in Entrepreneurship at Nottingham University Business School. She is an invited Fellow of the Royal Society and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Lorna is a co-founder of the Gender and Enterprise Network (GENSIG), the ISBE Special Interest Group established in 2010 to promote scholarly research into the gendering of entrepreneurship, and she is a Commissioning Editor of the *International Small Business Journal*.



Sally Jones is Reader in Entrepreneurship and Gender Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University's Faculty of Business and Law. Her research interests include feminist and critical approaches to entrepreneurship education, the social embeddedness of women's business growth trajectories, and the role of class and gender in the enterprise culture.



Susan Marlow is professor of entrepreneurship at the University of Birmingham, holder of the Queens Award for Enterprise and Fellow of the Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneurship. Her research interests focus upon the influence of gender upon entrepreneurship in which field she is an acknowledged expert.

Other SOTA Reviews are available on the Enterprise Research Centre web site www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk. This SOTA Review is one of five published in March 2020 in partnership with the Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneurship's Gender and Enterprise Network. This set reviews the state of knowledge on women's entrepreneurship. The views expressed in this review represent those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the ERC or its funders.

