Stuck in neutral? HE entrepreneurship and enterprise education and gender

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Introduction

"...any particular society will necessarily select, develop, and reward (and conversely discourage) certain personality types and traits for certain roles – a selective operation that inevitably affects entrepreneurship."
(Sawyer, 1952, p. 9)

"...there are no neutral words..."
(Bourdieu, 1992, p. 40)

This paper explores HE entrepreneurship and enterprise education (HEee) as an area of debate and contestation, particularly with regard to the masculine-framed foundations of entrepreneurship theory and how female students may perceive their chances of success as entrepreneurs in the light of this and related masculinised behaviours, risks and rewards. Despite Government efforts to encourage nascent women entrepreneurs, having reviewed the literature on graduate entrepreneurship in Europe, Martinez et al (2007) describe the factors that favour entrepreneurial intent as being "a man aged between 25 and 40 with self-employed parents, a higher education degree, need for achievement, risk taking propensity, and preference for innovation": an entrepreneurial profile that seems resistant to change and suggests that male graduates are taking cues from societal and educational discourses about their 'chances of success' as entrepreneurs. I argue that it is therefore important to develop pedagogic approaches that support and acknowledge a range of ambitions for entrepreneurship, presenting a variety of approaches and options and not just focused on identifying and developing certain 'entrepreneurial' traits or characteristics – characteristics which are based on an historically masculine-framed approach (Jones, 2008). This critical response to entrepreneurship theory started during my time as manager of several EU-funded business support projects when I found that women business owners did not feel comfortable with the 'label' entrepreneur, with suggestions that they did not 'fit' the typical profile of an entrepreneur; this prompted me to start questioning how this profile has developed. This response is also evident in my PhD research and the negative response of female interviewees to the question "Do people like you become entrepreneurs?", although a majority are interested in business ownership. I suggest this reflects their difficulty in relating to mainstream presentations of the entrepreneur.

My reading of the literature suggests that arbitrary cultural norms have historically positioned entrepreneurship as a form of masculinity (Halford & Leonard, 2001; Greer & Greene, 2003; Jones, 2008), legitimising the interests of men as a dominant group. Bourdieu outlines this "androcentric principle" or "primacy of masculinity":

"The particularity of the dominant is that they are in a position to ensure that their particular way of being is recognized as universal. The definition of excellence is in any case charged with masculine implications that have the particularity of not appearing as such."
(Bourdieu, 1998, p. 62)

Challenging neutrality in HEee: acknowledging social constructions of entrepreneurship

"... there is a discourse on womanhood that is in conflict with the discourse of entrepreneurship. Being a woman and an entrepreneur at the same time means that one has to position oneself simultaneously in regard to two conflicting discourses."
(Ahl, 2004, p. 61)

Although there is no universally agreed definition of the entrepreneur there has been an increasing focus, in education and training for entrepreneurship, on traits and personality-based indicators of potential entrepreneurial success. Helene Ahl (2004, p. 61) suggests that there is also an inherently masculine gender construction in received notions of the entrepreneur and definitions of entrepreneurship, saying that: "... the discourse on entrepreneurship in the economic literature [is] male gendered. It is not gender neutral". This is arguably an unintended consequence of the early co-opting of entrepreneurship by male writers and subjects, with ideas suggested by Richard Cantillon in the 18th century being refined and further developed in the 19th century by authors such as Jean-Baptiste Say and Alfred Marshall and leading to Joseph Schumpeter's influential 20th-century interpretation of the entrepreneur. Given this masculine-framed approach it is unsurprising that entrepreneurship should reflect the concerns and assumptions of the many male thinkers involved in its historical development. Joseph Schumpeter was particularly influential in shaping our modern concept of entrepreneurship, invoking ideas of entrepreneurs as combative and status-driven, seeking to prove themselves better than others and whose ideas and actions result in 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 1934). This all-conquering image of the entrepreneur

is still prevalent in today's economically driven business culture, with programmes such as *Dragons' Den* and *The Apprentice* presenting entrepreneurial success as a battle for resources and recognition, with highly visible 'self-made men' such as Richard Branson and Alan Sugar becoming cultural heroes, embedded within the public consciousness.

Reflecting this historical and cultural development, HEee is typically approached from two perspectives: an economic one which emphasises the importance of entrepreneurship for economic growth, global competitiveness and graduate employment; and a psychological one, emphasising the behaviours, traits and abilities 'required' to be a successful entrepreneur (Jones, 2008). However, I suggest that we should also expose students to a sociological approach to challenge these apparently neutral and objective approaches and encourage them to explore how entrepreneurship sits within particular cultural contexts, allowing space to consider how issues such as class, race and gender and their related societal values may be linked to the 'entrepreneur' and entrepreneurship as a social as well as an economic or psychological activity. I would argue that to focus on economic or psychological approaches effectively privileges a discourse of entrepreneurship as an 'objective' and value-free subject with staff positioned as neutral conduits of information, merely 'delivering' established and uncontested 'facts'. This ignores the theoretical instability of entrepreneurship as a concept influenced by societal mores – often underpinned by socially constructed concepts of 'gender appropriate' behaviours (Greer and Greene, 2003; Chell, 2008). These apparently gender neutral and value-free ideas have created a view of entrepreneurship that focuses on identifying and/or developing the traits, abilities and behaviours that are deemed necessary to be a successful entrepreneur. This "entrepreneurial mindset" (EU Commission, 2006) is arguably, after Bourdieu, a socially constructed "entrepreneurial habitus", promoting, for example, an individualistic work ethic – based around working long hours and focusing on setting up a business to the exclusion of all else – that assumes no other commitments or external demands on a person's time (Jones, 2009): a socially constructed and gendered work ethic that has been problematised by feminist researchers (Hochschild & Machung, 2003).

Whether or not we believe that entrepreneurs are born or made, we need to critically engage with the very concepts upon which entrepreneurship is based: concepts that have the effect of normalising masculine-typified behaviours as entrepreneurial. Even if we agree that these behaviours can be 'learnt' we should nevertheless acknowledge their tendency to privilege and elevate traditionally 'masculine' ideals, which, in an increasingly female HE environment (Leathwood & Reader, 2009), is problematic. I am therefore concerned that, although seemingly objective and value-free, models based on the study of traditionally male-owned businesses form the foundation of what is taught in HEee and that analysis or critique of these definitions and theories is lacking in mainstream teaching, despite an increasing body of knowledge around the gendering of business ownership, working lives and career aspirations (Blau et al, 1986; Witz, 1992; Tannen 1994; Halford & Leonard, 2001; Hakim, 2004; Heffernan, 2007; Walby et al, 2007)

Conclusion

A gender neutral approach is not a gender neutral approach; it is a gender *silent* approach. It has the potential to reproduce and mask stereotypical notions of who can be an entrepreneur, further enforcing gendered stereotypes of what a successful entrepreneur 'looks like' and related skill sets and behaviours. The emphasis on a functional, practical approach to skills development in HEee effectively closes down opportunity for individual thought or debate, and without debate marginalised voices can be silenced, positioning the aim of supporting students to fit a particular and masculinised entrepreneurial 'blue-print' as a non-negotiable imperative.

Bourdieu suggests that 'common-sense' concepts "[go] without saying because [they come] without saying" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 69), resulting in "symbolic violence", a term that Bourdieu uses to describe arbitrary and socially constructed notions being accepted as somehow 'natural' or common knowledge and therefore concealing the power relations that are the foundations of their force (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This is one potential consequence of an uncritical, gender neutral approach within HEee. Leathwood and Reader (2009, p.112) suggest that there are "limitations in the extent to which mobility across gender identities is possible". A gender neutral approach ultimately does little to address female students' sense of the potential lack of fit between their gendered identity and mainstream imaginings of the entrepreneur.

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