WOMEN TALK ENTREPRENEURSHIP: GENDER, POWER AND AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

The gendering of business and entrepreneurship, with restrictive stereotypes and social norms, has real consequences for women who seek to be entrepreneurs. I conducted in-depth interviews with six Victorian based women entrepreneurs focussing on issues of gender, power and agency. I applied a discourse analysis to the data, informed by feminist theories of identity and agency. Key findings of my research are that the women defy binary concepts such as public versus private, and instead reveal a complicated interweaving of domestic and business responsibilities. I found domestic disruption played a powerful and positive role in the women’s decision to enter entrepreneurship, with their domestic lives continuing to influence their business choices. The women rejected masculine ideas of the valuing of women’s work and business success, preferring more subjective measures such as personal fulfilment, strong relationships and the ability to make their own choices.

INTRODUCTION

Women entrepreneurs are the subject of much media, government and scholarly interest. In the media they are glamorised; in business academia and government policy they are examined for the potential economic benefits they might deliver. Within this frame, the size of women-owned business is often presented as a problem which needs solving. The Centre for Women and Business in Western Australia has explored why women’s businesses are usually smaller than men owned businesses. Still and Timms (1999b) who interviewed 57 private and government service providers and researchers of small business about the circumstances or barriers of women owners/managers in respect to expanding their businesses found “two opposing views: first, that both men and women encounter similar barriers...; and, secondly, that women owners operate under specific circumstances and face unique barriers beyond the general burdens of small business (Still and Timms, 1999b, p. 3). Still and Timms (1999b) reported “little reconciliation between these two opposing views because both tended to have an ideological base” (p. 7). Thus women entrepreneurs who experience sexism must often deny their experience to avoid ridicule or antagonism from people who deny sexism exists. Other researchers report women applying subversive strategies to overcome sexism: “I am sort of an honorary man so they will do business with me” (Martin and Wright, 2005).
Ignorance of women entrepreneurs’ experience of sexism occurs in academia too. Helene Ahl, in examining the discursive practice in leading entrepreneurship journals found many research articles have “a tendency to recreate the idea of women as being secondary to men and of women’s businesses being of less significance or, at best, as being a complement” (Ahl, 2006). Ahl (2006) suggests two steps to challenge the established discursive practices on entrepreneurs:

1. Expansion of the research object
2. A shift in the epistemological position (p. 611)

My research takes Ahl’s (2006) second approach: using feminist theories of identity and agency, I examine how six “women [entrepreneurs] perform gender in daily interaction” (p. 612). My overarching question was: “how do women entrepreneurs do business in the mostly masculine business environment of Australia which is often ignorant if not hostile to the issues which women entrepreneurs face?”

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The study of entrepreneurs and the entrepreneurial character has been of fascination to scholars since Cantillon (1697-1737) identified the entrepreneur as a specialist in risk (Casson, 2007). As in many areas of scientific study, the research focused on men, producing a normative construct of the entrepreneur closely aligned with the values of hegemonic masculinity and was almost always male. As Collins and Moore (1964) observed:

However we may personally feel about the entrepreneur, he emerges as essentially more masculine than feminine, more heroic than cowardly. (p. 5)

It was only after gender emerged as a sustained category of analysis in business in the 1980s, that attention turned to women entrepreneurs. Moore and Buttner (1997) observed that entrepreneurship studies were concerned almost entirely with men until the early 1980s, when entrepreneurship scholars’ attention turned to women entrepreneurs. Ahl (2006) cites Baker et al as maintaining women entrepreneurs were rendered invisible by media and research. The standard use of the male pronoun contributed to the creation of the male gendered entrepreneur, but it was also embedded in the way the entrepreneur was described. Also at this time male-gendered measuring instruments, gendered attitudes to entrepreneurs, and male-gendered theories were affecting the development of knowledge around entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2006). Research aims tended to focus on increasing economic benefits: to ask: “why women do not appear to demonstrate the size and growth men do?” Most of the scholarly attention has come from business and economic disciplines with the premise that growth is good; there has been a notable failure to examine critically underlying value assumptions. While the quantity of research indicates a desire to learn more about women entrepreneurs, the research has tended to come from the position of asking: “why can’t a woman be more like a man?” Recently feminist researchers (Bruni et al 2005) have asked whether the dominant body of research on women entrepreneurs represents a continuation of paternalistic attitudes and the exploitation of women as a resource.

One feminist argument for studying women in any field in which their stories have been neglected is to correct the imbalance of history. Occasionally this reason has been used to justify research on women entrepreneurs. Feminists are challenging researchers to critically examine the epistemology and discourse they employ so they do not inadvertently promulgate the very practices which obstruct new understanding of women’s entrepreneurship:

The discursive practices that regulate the discourse on women’s entrepreneurship serve to produce and uphold a discourse on women entrepreneurs which excludes the social world and which constructs women as secondary. (Ahl, 2004, p. 183)

Gender and power structures are seldom examined within women’s entrepreneurship studies; feminists explain this as deeply problematic in that it upholds the concept of woman as secondary and other without identifying the social norms which keep women in that place conceptually and materially:

Indeed, to study women entrepreneurs without examining the gender structuring of entrepreneurship is to legitimate the ‘gender blindness’ which renders masculinity
invisible and turns it into the universal parameter of entrepreneurial action, the model
with which every entrepreneurial act must comply because it is the norm and the
standard value. (Bruni et al, 2005, p. 2)

To discuss women entrepreneurs is, by implication, acknowledging women as the exception. Just as
“career-women” suggests normal women do not have careers, “women entrepreneurs” suggests normal
entrepreneurs are men. Ahl (2004) points to a feminist dilemma of studying women entrepreneurs:
There is a problem when doing feminist research, namely how to study power
relationships between men and women without simultaneously reproducing them. To
study how women are positioned in relation to men, one needs to be able to talk about
women, to categorise people as women. The problem is that studying any category
invites an act of comparison. Studying anything “different” implies recognizing it as
degrees of the same and implies hierarchy. What is made different, according to Derrida
(1978), is also made secondary and suppressed. (pp 189-190)

The gendering of business and entrepreneurship has real consequences for women who seek to be
entrepreneurs. An invisible masculine hegemony is reinforced by normative beliefs, and “good business”
is associated with a sex-role stereotyped, decisive, action oriented business man. Power plays are executed
in subtle ways which leave many women bewildered and confused, while women who assert authority are
treated with suspicion and critical scrutiny. Our understanding of how women negotiate in this
environment, and how they make sense of their experiences, is limited. The work of Ahl (2004, 2006), and
Bruni et al (2004, 2005) stand out as rare examples which question the epistemological basis for studying
women entrepreneurs, and excited my interest in using an alternative theoretical framework. In my
research I apply feminist critical analysis and challenge the underlying assumptions to improve our
understanding of how women entrepreneurs experience and negotiate social constructs to do business.

A FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

My analysis is informed by feminist theories of the social constructs which shape women’s experiences,
especially the dichotomous representations of public and private life, and women’s agency. Explicit
feminist analysis of the gendering of business roles is rarely found in the business schools or
entrepreneurship journals. Helene Ahl (2004) notes leading journals in management and organisation
publish very few articles on entrepreneurship and those rarely on women’s entrepreneurship (p. 75). This
is reflected by the discomfort businesses and business schools have with issues of gender and difference:
“To raise gender is to risk being marginalized” (Sinclair, 1995). Yet significant feminist analysis has been
done in the field of women and work: examining organisations, practices and attitudes (Acker, 2003,
this section I first discuss feminist analysis of gender identity: how unquestioned our understanding of
‘femininity’ is, and how feminist theory invites us to reconsider our assumptions and understanding of
gender. I then explain the feminist argument with dichotomies, those categories which, as opposites,
suggest a simple explanation of differences. I then explore feminist critiques of business and capitalism,
particularly alternative views of what has value. The final part of this section explains agency theory.

Gender identity; what is ‘feminine’?

Gender is a contested term; it is often used to refer to a person’s biological sex, their sexuality, or, for
sociologists, to a socially constructed expectation of what a woman or a man is. Poststructuralist feminists
treat gender as a verb, subject to change and circumstances:

For human beings there is no essential femaleness of maleness, femininity or
masculinity, womanhood or manhood, but once gender is ascribed, the social order
constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations.
Individuals may vary on many of the components of gender and may shift genders
temporarily or permanently, but they must fit into the limited number of gender statuses
their society recognizes. In the process, they re-create their society's version of women
and men. (Lorber, 1994, p. 25)
Meyers (2002) turns to Iris Young to explain the inherent nature of gender: “No woman's identity “will escape the markings of gender,” [Young] observes, “but how gender marks her life is her own”” (p.7). Meyers agrees that identities are individualized, but hastens to add “…how gender marks a woman's (or a man's) identity will not be entirely her (or his) own choice. Gender worms its way into identity in ways that we may not be conscious of and in ways that we may not be able to change, no matter how much we try” (Meyers, 2002, p.7)

I use gender to refer to the social constructions of femininity and masculinity. That is, not to refer to a person’s biological sex, but to explore normative concepts of femininity and masculinity. The construction of gender is embedded in various social norms which we take for granted. To identify how gender is constructed requires critical questioning of language and discourse.

The term ‘feminine’ requires further explanation. In 1977 Sandra Bem constructed a sex role inventory; that indicates not the characteristics which belong to men or women, but those generally held to describe masculinity and femininity by American men and women at that time. The feminine list includes: affectionate, loyal, sympathetic, sensitive to the needs of others, understanding, compassionate, eager to soothe hurt feelings, soft spoken, warm, tender, gentle, loves children, does not use harsh language, flatterable, shy, yielding, cheerful, gullible, childlike (Ahl, 2004, p. 56). Bem’s sex role inventory was developed over thirty years ago, and significant social changes have occurred since. Iris Young (1990) offers a more expansive understanding and grounded account of femininity:

In accordance with Beauvoir’s understanding, I take “femininity” to designate not a mysterious quality or essence that all woman have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. Defined as such it is not necessary that any women be “feminine” – that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behaviour typical to the situation of women. (pp. 143-144)

This is useful for my analysis of how my cohort interprets and uses concepts such as ‘feminine’, and how they apply those concepts to themselves and their experience. The following section explains how concepts such as ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ are dichotomies which obscure complexity and ambiguity.

Dichotomies

Feminists urge caution when confronted with dichotomies and dualisms, as they are often constructed as opposites, to emphasise difference:

We are now learning that this model of separate spheres distorts reality, that it is every bit as much an ideological construct as are the notions of ‘male’ and ‘female’ themselves. (Petchesky, cited in Nicholson, 1992, p.36)

For feminists, the categories of private and public provide much of the basis for analysing social practices of creating woman as secondary:

Apart from the category of gender, there is perhaps no more widely employed concept in feminist historiography than that of the public and the private. But while the former rarely provokes controversy anymore, the public/private remains a contested category. (Landes, 2003. p. 28)

The public/private distinction is embodied in aspects of work and home, with images of women located at home providing unpaid domestic labour and men in paid labour at a work place. Apart from the obvious value differences of paid and unpaid, inherent within private and public are more subtle social value differences. The public sphere is visible, and includes politics and power. The private sphere of home is invisible, and encapsulates nurturing and dependence. In an analysis of the history of the public/private distinction Landes (2003) turns to Leonore Davidoff, a leading contributor. Landes (2003), explains Davidoff’s argument that ‘public’ and ‘private’, in being posed as opposite and mutually exclusive, inevitably connotes hierarchy. Like Nicholson (1992), Landes (2003) acknowledges the “contextually sensitive and shifting” (pp 33-34) meaning of the terms, but invariably, the distinction includes “the open
and revealed versus the hidden or withdrawn; and the collective versus the individual” (Davidoff as cited in Landes, 2003, p. 34).

Nicholson (1992), in analysing the ‘private’ and ‘public’ categories posits the divisions as obscuring our understanding of the dynamics of gender, but cautions against completely rejecting the analysis of divisions (p.43). The changing dynamics of the ideological divisions are critical to my analysis, as I find women entrepreneurs are leaders of change. Entrepreneurs are by definition and practice leaders of change; women entrepreneurs are not only engaged in market change, they are also engaged in social change. Their capacity as entrepreneurs has the potential to enable them to redefine where women’s work has value, and to combine and merge the private and public spheres. I found their interest and action toward social change enmeshed in their business activities, much as their private and public lives were enmeshed. My research reveals how women entrepreneurs challenge the ‘private’ and ‘public’ categories; how they engage in both concurrently, combining domesticity and entrepreneurship in their daily activity.

Critiques of capitalism

Feminist scholars explain women’s secondary position in business as upheld by structural systems of power which have been in place for centuries. The systems include unquestioned and invisible beliefs of what effective management looks like:

‘Masculine’ characteristics such as self-reliance, independence, analysis, aggressiveness and domination are associated with the successful manager, while ‘feminine’ characteristics such as cooperation, acceptance, emotion, spiritual and artistic interests and caring are judged to be irrelevant or even damaging to effective management. (Halford and Leonard, 2001, p. 106)

There has been a strange silence, which we believe reflects an embedded and taken-for-granted association, even conflation, of men with organizational power, authority and prestige. (Collinson and Hearn, 2003, p. 75)

Feminist scholars invite us to challenge and examine these and other norms in business to reveal where and how women’s secondary position has been constructed. Some have taken an optimistic approach, calling for more diversity in management, and a fresh look at the benefits women bring to business. Amanda Sinclair (2005), in Doing leadership differently explained the business benefits for employees, customers and the organisation from embracing diversity (p. 142). Sinclair (2005) described economic benefits, but she also pointed to benefits from better understanding of individuals and less stereotyping, resulting in reduced stress and improved teamwork. One optimistic response to women’s exclusion is the ‘feminine-in-management’ concept which claims women’s ‘feminine advantage’ will inevitably be recognized as a useful resource:

As women’s leadership qualities come to play a more dominant role in the public sphere, their particular aptitudes for long-term negotiating, analytical listening, and creating an ambiance in which people work with zest and spirit will help reconcile the split between the ideals of being efficient and being humane. This integration of female values is already producing a more collaborative kind of leadership, and changing the very ideal of what strong leadership actually is. (Helgesen, 2003, p. 32)

Other feminist scholars challenge this position, encouraging us to explore the underlying assumptions and value judgments of capitalism. Calás and Smircich (1993) argued the ‘feminine-in-management’ position as just another form of women pleasing men, while supporting consumerism and avoiding issues of inequity and exploitation in capitalism:

The dangers, we argued [in a 1991 article], are very real insofar as their apparent valuing of some “essential women’s” qualities maintains an illusion of opportunity and equality for women in the managerial world while obstructing critical examination of the pervasive theoretical assumptions sustaining that world. (p. 72)

Calás and Smircich (1993) invite us to “apply a different way of thinking ‘feminine’” (p. 78), and suggest alternative images which incorporate social responsibility into capitalism. As women entrepreneurs often cite ‘making a difference’ as a reason to enter entrepreneurship, the images offered by Calás and Smircich
(1993) might well apply: the frugal housewife who scrimps and saves for a rainy day; female ingenuity; women's gossiping and hysterical woman images, which are “already around us, that are the more critical aspects of “the feminine” discussed in feminist theory” (p. 78). Calás and Smircich (1993) suggest instead of looking at women as a resource for capitalism, we look at them as a counter to greed and inequity.

Some feminists argue consumerism and capitalism are themselves inherently damaging to women. Rosemary Pringle (1992) has argued women are manipulated by consumerism, which objectifies them in advertisements and encourages them to consume to enhance their position as objects of desire for men, and to uphold the feminine construct of good wife and mother (p. 152). Pringle (1992) argued the division of production and consumption, like the division of patriarchy and capitalism, parallels the division of private and public life, and serves to continue male dominance and female oppression (p. 152). Pringle (1995) cautioned against celebrating women’s participation while ignoring the power of paternalism (p.211).

When employed women become mothers

Nancy Chodorow, Pringle tells us, “argued that women’s responsibility for mothering systematically reproduced gender inequalities through the formation of masculine and feminine core selves” (Pringle, 1995, p. 201). Even before women become mothers the possibility that they might is often used to deny them promotion and responsibilities at work (Halford and Leonard, 2001, p. 12, Summers, 2003), or to threaten their position (Summers, 2003, pp 50-51). If they do become mothers, the problems of inequality multiply. In Australia, “...women continue to carry out the bulk of the household’s domestic duties even though they now typically also work outside the home…” (Barrett, 2006, p. 29). While at work, women, unlike men, often feel guilty for leaving their children in the care of others (Halford and Leonard, 2001, p. 8). Mothers are not the only ones who believe they ‘should’ be at home with children; Summers (2003) reports a “national survey of attitudes towards working mothers that showed 69 per cent of Australians (women and men) believed mothers of pre-schoolers should be stay-at-home housewives” (p. 66). While women might be frowned on for being at work, work-places seldom accommodate their family commitments. In The end of equality, Anne Summers (2003) chronicles the types of problems women face once they become mothers, from lower wages through career blocks to lack of flexibility.

Mothers are more likely to work part time, and they report less than full time hours to be their preference (Qu and Weston, 2005). The diminished economic independence and superannuation, however, is a cost they carry personally. The cost to a woman in lost lifetime earnings due to having a child has been estimated at $160,000 (Summers, 2003, p. 159). Also in terms of their career development women pay in less interesting work, and less career progression. This has been particularly noted in the legal profession, where hours of work and attitudes toward part-time workers substantially affect returning mothers’ ability to develop their careers (Summers, 2003, pp 192-193). Nor do the problems end there, for some inexplicable reason women are assumed to be less capable once they have children. American former Congresswoman Pat Schroeder became so fed up with questions about how she coped balancing work and family she pointed out that she had both a “brain and a uterus, and they both work” (Rhode, 2003, p. 163). Schroeder’s response encapsulates many women’s objection to a concept that they can either be mothers or have a career. Indeed the either/or arguments are challenged by feminists who invite a more complex analysis of differences.

Self determination and agency

A strong and often cited motivation for women entering entrepreneurship is a desire for autonomy and self determination (Buttnor and Moore, 1997, Still, 1990, Still and Timms, 1999a). However, women’s ability to achieve self determination within patriarchal systems is debated by feminists. Diana Tietjens Meyers has written much on women’s agency. Agency can be understood as a person’s ability to direct their own actions. The concept is not absolute, but is affected by social context of the person. In exploring the effect of social mores on individuals attempting to exercise autonomy, Meyers (2002) cites internalisation, that is, to believe, without question, values of the social community one lives in. Feminists debate the extent to which internalised oppression interferes with a woman’s capacity for autonomy, especially in response to the idea that “certain forms of socialization are oppressive and clearly lessen autonomy” (Benson, as cited in Meyers, 2002, p. 14). Meyer (2002) resists the overarching power of oppression, arguing that “undeniably, women in patriarchal cultures have much to overcome to attain autonomy. But it is hard to
believe that where gender is concerned none of them ever chooses autonomously” (p. 15). In her examination of autonomy and self-determination, Meyers produced a list of skills which make self-determination possible: introspection, communication, memory, imagination, analytical, self-nurturing, volition and interpersonal. Meyers’ list emphasises self-awareness as intrinsic to self-determination. It is this intersection of autonomy and agency that I explore in my cohorts’ experience of negotiating gendered identity.

**METHODOLOGY**

I conducted a small-scale qualitative interview based study among women who were both major shareholders in their businesses and had been relying on the business for their livelihood for a period of at least two years. The research was designed to allow the women to speak about what was important to them. In-depth interviews with open questions were used to encourage them to speak at length about issues of their choice. While general interview topics were decided prior to recruitment and provided to participants beforehand, the order and wording of questions were unique for each interview. This was to enable the women to tell their experiences in their own way, elaborate where they chose, and to allow me to probe when they raised issues relevant to my research inquiry. Questions revolved around the circumstances of the launch of their business and their experience and management of relationships with internal and external stakeholders of their business.

Recruiting interviewees for my research was easy; six interviews resulted from only twenty letters. The women were warm and friendly, and generous with their time and stories. As well as providing rich data which enabled me to explore their experience of gendered entrepreneurship, these women revealed their strengths, weaknesses, opinions and foibles. Each woman has been given a pseudonym, with partner and place names also changed to protect anonymity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Business Activity</th>
<th>Business Age (Years)</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Primary production, product development, import, export, wholesale</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sole operator, with strategic alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Certificates</td>
<td>Retail food, product development</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5 – 10 employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therese</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Export food, Product development</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2 employees, contract partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Certificates</td>
<td>Import and distribution, cosmetics and personal care</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20 + employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>TAFE Diploma</td>
<td>Business services, franchising</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5 – 10 employees, franchisees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanna</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Import, export, product development, branding</td>
<td>8 – 9</td>
<td>10 – 20 employees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like other researchers who have interviewed women entrepreneurs (Clark, 2006, Heffernan, 2007, Walsh-Martin, 1998), I was impressed by the women’s generosity in participating in research. Many of the women shared more than their business experiences: they reflected on their childhood; education; family of origin; family life; relationships; how they personally ‘fit’ into the role they had created for themselves and how they managed the public/private spheres of their lives. This can be understood as a reflection of their entrepreneurial character – having the attributes which enable entrepreneurship: risk bearer, innovator,
source of authority, need for achievement, ambition, self-confidence, communication ability, autonomy, need for power, internal locus of control, self-confidence (Timmons, 1999, p. 218). It is also often part of the entrepreneur character to share their experiences. As Felicity (43) said: “Entrepreneurs are very willing to tell you their stories”. There was something particular about these women sharing their stories as women: they are taking leadership roles in a traditionally male sphere. June (62) said when I thanked her for making herself available: “You’re welcome, I’m a great supporter of increased information and research or whatever else on the role of female entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs in general, but female entrepreneurs particularly.”

I applied a discourse analysis to the interview data to elicit underlying meanings from the stories the women shared. My research was a small scale project conducted within the constraints of a 66% research Master of Arts Degree. As such it can be read as a pilot program which explores the complexity of gender in entrepreneurship, with a view to further research to test the prevalence of the issues identified.

RESULTS

In this section I explore six women’s gendered experiences of entering entrepreneurship; the circumstances and the motives which propelled them to become entrepreneurs. I evaluate the binary discourse surrounding entering entrepreneurship; concepts of being ‘pushed’ or ‘pulled’ into entrepreneurship, being in the ‘private’ or ‘public’ sphere, only to find they are binary terms which fail to allow for the complexity of the decisions to enter entrepreneurship. I find gendered domestic disruption plays a powerful catalytic role, which I examine using feminist theories. I investigate how the women negotiate the private and public spheres of their lives, and find their entrepreneurship activity is not only affected by their domestic and private life, it is likely as not shaped by it. I provide examples of how they merge their private and public lives, and the satisfaction they gain from the new versions of work/life combinations they create. I compare them with profiles from prior research, and show how my cohort, while mostly typical of prior profiles, include some differences, thereby complementing existing understandings of women entrepreneurs in Australia.

My cohort in context

I concur with the many researchers (Breen et al 1994; Bridley, 2005; Constantinidis et al, 2006, Hill et al 2006; Still & Timms, 2000) who have emphasised that women entrepreneurs are not an homogenous group. Still argues that “…most Australian studies suffer from a lack of diversity representation. Until that is rectified, most profile analysis of women in small business must acknowledge the dominance of middle-class professional women in their sampling” (Still, 2002, p. 5). My research contributes to addressing the diversity problem. Three of the women I interviewed could be called middle-class professional women, two come from working or middle class families, and one came from a very poor family. The six women I interviewed varied in personal background, ambition, industry, ownership structure, business size, and age. The size of businesses ranged from home based businesses employing only the principal through to large businesses turning over tens of millions of dollars and employing many people. Several of their businesses are complicated: instead of fitting neatly into a single category they spill over into several. Suzanna’s business, for instance, is in import and export, product development and branding. A key strength of her business is stock management, but so are customer care and innovation, three very different skill types. Isabel’s business is in agribusiness, food processing, product development, export and local supply. Her key strengths are networking and innovation, and, she says, “I’m good at … the logistics and the processes”. Both these women employ very different skills sets to run complicated businesses. Suzanna employs staff with whom she works closely to ensure standards are maintained; Isabel works alone from her home office. Both have large contracts with many local and international partners. The breadth and complexity of the business activities and skills of Suzanna and Isabel are true of all the women I interviewed, acting to challenge categories, and demonstrate the heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs’ businesses. Nor can assumptions be made about size, age or sector of these women’s businesses; Isabel and Therese are running export businesses from their homes, whereas Liz’s business is only seven years old and is well on the way to turn-over of one hundred million dollars.

Recently, Still and Walker conducted the first Australian national study of women in small to medium-sized enterprises. Their aim was to develop a more comprehensive profile of both the woman owner and
her business to serve as a benchmark for future studies. Collecting responses from 517 women in all states of Australia using a questionnaire, as well as several focus groups, they found the profile consistent with those developed in the early 1980s:

The changes that were detected have been incremental ones rather than major dysfunctional ones, primarily because the expansion of the profiles is not the result of changes over time but rather additional information that has been gleaned from more recent research. In other words, a fuller picture is emerging of the women and their businesses as more studies, covering more issues, are conducted. (Still and Walker, 2006, p. 305)

Still & Walker (2006) provide a useful, if general, profile:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Woman</th>
<th>The Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aged 30 years and over</td>
<td>Mainly sole-traders or micro-businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employ few full-time staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With children</td>
<td>Employ few part-time staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian born/naturalized</td>
<td>Operates in Service sector predominantly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well educated</td>
<td>Service type of business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business provides the majority of support for the household</td>
<td>Majority been operating for more than a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works full-time in the business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns only one business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


My cohort generally do sit within Still and Walker’s (2006) profile: They are all thirty years or older; only one was not married; only one had no children; all were Australian born or naturalised and were reasonably well educated; only the woman involved in primary production sometimes relied on her husband’s income; they mostly worked full time in their businesses. In contrast, half of them own more than one business. In terms of the business types, my cohorts’ were not typical of Still and Walker’s (2006) profile: three of the businesses are larger than micro, with more than a few staff, and only one is in a service industry. As to the age of the business, all of my women had businesses of more than two years old as that was a requirement in my selection criteria. In summary, the women entrepreneurs in my cohort mostly fit within Still and Walkers’ (2006) profile, and are not unrepresentative of Australian women entrepreneurs. My qualitative methodology and in-depth analysis of their experience adds depth to our understanding of women entrepreneurs in Australia.

**Going into business**

The discourse around becoming an entrepreneur suggests a transition, a movement from one place to another, like a coming of age or rite of passage. Once someone becomes an entrepreneur, we imagine she is no longer an employee or unemployed. There is a polarity at work: an either/or contained in the label ‘entrepreneur’. The traditional entrepreneur embodies the heroic image described earlier: an individual of extraordinary talents, who is opposite to an ordinary employee. The polarity also parallels the ‘production’ / ‘reproduction’ dualism which social Marxist feminists recognised as occurring when capitalism needed cheap labour (Nicholson, 1992, p. 36-37). Beverley Theile (1992) urges extreme caution when considering dualisms, “...because more often than not they line up with that fundamental dichotomy, male/female” (p. 31). Drawing on the work of Nancy Jay, Theile (1992) argues dualisms are not mere contraries which allow continuity but are regarded as contradictions, ie either/or. In analysing my cohorts’ experience of entering entrepreneurship I turned to prior research, to test my findings and build on the work of other researchers. Dualisms featured often: entrepreneur/employee, pushed/pulled, private/public. Researchers did not present the dualisms as empirical findings, but referred to their use in earlier research, and often questioned the validity of the dualist categories. My research interrogates the validity and value of dualisms when researching women entrepreneurs.
Pushed and pulled

Within the entrepreneurship literature a recurring question about women going into business is whether they are ‘pushed’ or ‘pulled’ (Buttner and Moore, 1997, Barrett, 2006, Still, 2002, Still and Walker, 2006, Granger et al., 1995, Hughes, 2003, Walker and Webster, 2007, McClelland et al., 2005). The categories of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ are not explicit, and subject to interpretation, but rest on whether the woman’s motivation is due to an attraction to entrepreneurship (pulled) or a rejection of her current employment or unemployment (pushed). Buttner and Moore (1997), reviewing Hisrich and Brush cite frustration, boredom and the glass ceiling as push factors, and desire for autonomy as a pull factor. In separate studies Still (2002, p. 7) and Still and Walker (2006, p. 298) found the Australian women they researched were less likely to be pushed than pulled, a finding which differs from prior research. Still and Walker do not posit the reason for their alternative findings. In both these studies, only unemployment or inability to find a job are cited as push factors, with desire for independence and flexibility, and opportunity to be creative cited as pull factors. By identifying push factors so narrowly, Still (2002), and Still and Walker (2006), credit their research subjects as having agency. In this debate I am concerned with the binary question of push versus pull. Karen Hughes (2003), in an analysis of push and pull factors, observed that by narrowly defining push factors around quantity of jobs other factors such as quality of jobs can become obscured (p. 437). Hughes (2003) goes further, finding the tendency to dichotomise choices as either/or fails to account for the complexity of the process of choosing entrepreneurship, and agrees with Granger et al (1995) that a continuum serves better to consider the “many combinations of opportunities and constraints” (p. 501).

When I asked the women about the circumstances of when they went into business they spoke broadly about issues such as their health, work and career options, where they lived and family situation. They spoke about finding themselves in an unsatisfactory or frustrating position (push factors), with desires and ideas for autonomy (pull factors). A common question asked by women before they go into business is ‘what am I going to do?’ It is a question raised in response to an unsatisfactory situation with an optimistic ideas for autonomy (pull factors). A common question asked by women before they go into business is ‘what am I going to do?’ It is a question raised in response to an unsatisfactory situation with an optimistic belief that there are better options. It contains both push and pull factors. While the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors provide a language for interrogating the decision to enter entrepreneurship, I found they could not be separated or prioritised. The complexities and contradictions of their experiences and motives included both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors working competitively with their private lives. Suzanna talked about the timing of starting her current business in terms of picking the “right moment” to pursue a desire she had always held:

…it’s always been in my blood and I’d always wanted to do something, and suddenly the opportunity arose. Because you know when you’ve got two girls, two children you’re trying to put through school and run a house and all the rest of it…(Suzanna, 50)

Years earlier Suzanna had run her own business, and stopped due to relocating for her husband’s work. We came over here, I got my girls settled into school, did all the finding a house, and all that kind of thing, and because I’m used to working at quite a fast pace, to suddenly find myself with nothing to do was actually quite traumatic! So [I] started thinking about what I could do. (Suzanna, 50)

To categorise Suzanna’s motives as more push or pull would obscure rather than illuminate her experience of entering entrepreneurship. She explains her decision as timely and opportune, doing what she had long imagined. She also describes finding herself with time on her hands as traumatic. Did she start her business to fill a void (push) or fulfил a dream (pull)? I argue both. When Isabel observed: “around here – there’s really not a huge amount of job opportunities. Unless you want to be a waitress, or clean motel rooms, there’s really not a huge amount to do…” she is describing being pushed into entrepreneurship due to a lack of employment options. In the same breath she asks herself what she is going to do about it. Isabel is pushed into entrepreneurship due to a lack of opportunities, and pulled into it by her belief in being able to create a better option for herself. As Hughes (2003) argues: “[a] limitation of many studies is the tendency to dichotomize individual choices in order to determine who was pushed or pulled” (p. 438). To categorise Isabel or Suzanna as being more pushed than pulled would deny the complexity of their situation; it would require over-stating their opportunism and ignoring the competing priorities which they aim to satisfy. Instead I found they combined their domestic and entrepreneurship demands in response to both push and pull factors to achieve a complex balance, much as a weaver strengthens a cloth by pushing and pulling the threads. This interweaving of demands is also seen in the way they incorporate their
private and public lives, so entrepreneurship is not a move from one sphere to another, but a process of incorporating demands.

**Interweaving private and public**

I found the women’s entry to entrepreneurship was often not only affected by their private life, it was intrinsically shaped by it. This finding supports two feminist arguments: that dichotomies obscure our understanding of social life; and that women’s experience of motherhood is affected by their domestic work being socially and economically undervalued. The women I interviewed appear to have created lives which include time and involvement with family as well as meaningful work. They appear to be creating ways where they have both rich and rewarding careers as well as satisfying private family lives.

June started her current business after five or six years of charity work when she “needed another business investment”. At that time her son came to her with an idea of running an organic food store, an interest which resulted from “a lifetime exposure to organic wholemeal pizza”. While June had been in business many times earlier, her son had not and she was concerned his lack of experience would make success difficult. Going into partnership with her son meant she could mentor him while he established some business experience and fulfil her own financial needs. June was mindful of creating a structure which would not compromise their relationship:

> Because of my work … in consultancy and dispute resolution, and those areas – conflict, management etcetera, … even from my experience of growing up in a family business, [I knew] the value of putting some real conflict resolution, succession plans and strategies in place, particularly between mother and son or a parent and a child in business. So we did quite a bit of counselling before we really set up the partnership, so that we would learn now to communicate [with] each other and resolve our differences or any disputes in the business partnership. (June, 62)

June’s story of how her current business started encapsulates the merging of private and public spheres: her son’s interest in healthy food is developed in his childhood; his ambitions are inspired by her entrepreneurial career; her knowledge and experience of family business issues inform their business structure and procedures; her own and her son’s private and public needs are able to be addressed in a partnership. She felt it was “very important for him not to feel like he was working for his mother”, that it “would be very different to a parent and a child” way of communicating. The result, June felt, “was quite a healthy relationship all round”. June used entrepreneurship to respond to her own and her adult son’s needs; Suzanna used it to respond to her own needs when her daughters were settled in school.

**Entrepreneur identity**

As discussed earlier, the normative construct of the entrepreneur is closely aligned with the values of hegemonic masculinity and almost always embodies the male figure. A woman entrepreneur challenges the normative construct, violating prescriptive norms. When women violate prescriptive stereotypes, as often occurs when they engage in management, leadership or communication, they lose influence (Heilman and Parks-Stamm, 2007, pp. 59-60). Felicity articulated the problem of prescriptive stereotypes conflicting with her sense of identity early in our interview:

> I still want to get up and put my tracksuit pants and runners on and go to work. (she raised her leg) I’m showing you my tracksuit pants and runners (laughter) and that’s what I want to do. I don’t want to have to get up in the morning and have to put on a suit and yet, the expectation is, that when people see me in a business sense they’ll see me in a suit. Or that I’ll be thinner or taller or more worldly or less funny. If there’s all this self doubt that came about, and I feel like, well, am I really an entrepreneur? I just feel like the same person I was twenty years ago. (Felicity, 43)

While raising her ‘self doubt’ Felicity is exercising volitional skills; she attends our interview in tracksuit pants and runners, and she displays her sense of humour at business conventions. At the same time, Felicity is acutely aware of the contradiction and disadvantage of being a woman entrepreneur:

> I wish I was a man entrepreneur. Not because I want to be a man, necessarily, but I think that men get an easier ride. There’s something – women stand out as being unusual when
they’re entrepreneurial or they’re successful… I go to franchise council meetings, and I go to these sorts of things and they’re all men. And I feel – different. I’m no less successful than most, in fact I’m more successful, … and yet I feel like I don’t have, it’s not that I don’t have a right to be there, it’s, that your business success isn’t the same. There’s a lot of ‘oh, you just started the business to earn some extra money’. (Felicity, 43)

Felicity is ambivalent about her position; while she expresses resentment in the paragraph above, at other times she flaunts her difference, challenging expectations and doggedly presenting a version of herself which defies convention and invites us to think more broadly about who she is, and what an entrepreneur might be. Her experience is not an easy one; she works hard to pursue her goals and participate in the business community while maintaining an identity which is genuinely her own:

I feel like I don’t have a place there, and I feel like I’m continually fighting for something. I feel like I’m not necessarily respected for what I’ve achieved… you get into this group of entrepreneurs and you’re just a whacky woman that can’t cope in life. (Felicity, 43)

Nonetheless, for all the difficulty, Felicity is practicing Meyers’ (2002) volitional skills; she is resisting pressure to capitulate to convention.

Liz also resists the entrepreneur label, not because of gender, but because it implies a narrow definition:

I think I always had an entrepreneurial spirit, and to me that was take calculated risks, creative, aggressive for growth and sales so I was never bureaucratic in my style or my thinking so I think that one of my key success drivers even in my corporate life was my entrepreneurial spirit.… I didn’t suddenly change my style or personality and become this thing called an entrepreneur. (Liz, 50)

By resisting a narrow definition of entrepreneur Liz is inviting other people into a category of entrepreneur; perhaps people who work in corporate or social sectors. At the same time as exploring what ‘being an entrepreneur’ means to them, Liz and Felicity talk of a responsibility they feel, as though it is a natural part of their entrepreneurial success. Felicity told me she gave her personal story in a media interview, despite the risk that her disclosure might harm her profile and therefore her business. For Felicity, telling her story is not just about owning her identity, it is also a responsibility to share her experience with other women: “the story needed to be told, and … in some respects I have a responsibility to other women to tell [my] story…” (Felicity, 43). The importance of visibility was raised repeatedly, and deserves special analysis.

Visibility

Given the power of the individualist construct of the entrepreneur, women’s awards and networks play a valuable role in increasing women’s visibility, credibility, and in turn, confidence. Each woman spoke to the question of visibility, as an aspect of entrepreneurship which offered benefits both personally and professionally. This is in contrast to Moss Kanter’s (2003) theories on tokens whereby minorities suffer from being different from the dominant culture and visible. Therese expressed frustration at the lack of small business exposure in the media, and her friends’ lack of understanding about her experience of working in small business. Felicity referred to the importance of having her story told, and when June introduced her awards and reputation by way of explaining the “spin” on her current approach to negotiations she demonstrated the value of public recognition to her career. Although I did not ask a direct question about public achievement, each woman told me about an aspect of her public achievements in describing her entrepreneurial career. Liz raised another aspect of visibility, citing women’s minority in places of corporate power as providing a competitive advantage:

I think there are times when being a woman is an advantage, only because, often you’re in the minority and so you’re more remembered. I go back a long time ago when I first really became aware of it which was when I was working for [an international company], from a corporate point of view and we would have our vice president, and our president, everyone would be there, and there’d be ten people in the room and I’d be the only female. Now when they went back to London they remembered me because I was female. Not necessarily because I was any better than anybody else but I would have
stood out because I was female, and I have the same thing now, when I go onto boards, if you’ve got a board of ten and you’re the only female, the chance is, I mean it’s silly little things, but it’s things like they know you’re name, straight away, whereas I’m sitting and thinking, now which one is which? (laughs) When I’m looking around the table thinking which guy is which? There are those, from a presentation point of view and an impact point of view you’ve got a starting position that if you’re in the minority you’re more noticeable because you’re female. (Liz, 50)

Liz’s experience is supported by books such as *The female advantage* (Helgesen, 1990) and *The first sex* (Fisher, 1999), which argue women will be embraced by the business world because they have unique skills which will be increasingly valued as business becomes more complicated and consumers more discerning. However, as discussed earlier, these arguments are resisted by feminists such as Calás and Smircich (1993) and Pringle (1992, 1995) because they fail to address the intrinsic exploitation of capitalism and power of patriarchy. Women’s continued lack of pay equity, and slow if not backward representation in numbers in senior and powerful positions also belie the positive discourse of the ‘female advantage’ argument. Nonetheless, women do have both positive and negative experiences in business as a result of their sex. Meyers’ (2002) argument of patriarchal oppression impeding rather than preventing agency goes some way to explaining the complexity of women’s experience of power in business.

**CONCLUSION**

My analysis revealed a need to reconsider dualist concepts commonly used by researchers such as whether someone is ‘pushed’ or ‘pulled’ into entrepreneurship, as both occurred simultaneously. Similarly the women’s stories challenged the dualism of ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres of life; they often merged these spheres, interweaving them in their everyday activities. Their decision to enter entrepreneurship was often deeply influenced by their ‘private’ domestic lives, sometimes occurring as a result of gendered domestic disruption. Further, they described their ongoing engagement in entrepreneurship as an integrated part of their whole life experience, not as a distinct ‘business’ experience. Their interweaving of ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres was in response not only to the demands their families made of them, but also their desire to be responsive to those demands. These women were not calling for less involvement in their ‘private’ life so they could attend to more of their ‘public’ life. They organised their lives to enable a flexible and fluid involvement in both. Their merging of private/public was not apparent in the size or scope of their businesses; at least one woman was running a multi-million dollar enterprise with international contracts while prioritising family needs over business.

Although the traditional entrepreneur identity is a male construct, for reasons beyond the gendering of entrepreneurship, several women resisted the entrepreneur identity. Several women were uncomfortable with the narrowness and exclusivity of the term. The women were not inclined to fit themselves or their experiences within narrow definitions. They resisted naming experiences I considered sexist or ageist as discrimination, instead they focussed on their capacity to negotiate and achieve their goals. At the same time they spoke of a responsibility to speak to and for women about their experiences, and their interest in taking leadership roles. They spoke of benefits from the awards they had won and their resulting public profiles as being advantageous to themselves and other women. Given that women’s measure of business success is less tangible than business size, the minority of women finalists in general awards may reflect this difference rather than fewer women achieving success. A mismatch between women’s own goals and the measures of success for public recognition acts to compound the problem of women feeling excluded from concepts of business success.

**NOTES**


**REFERENCES**