Gender and the Production of Entrepreneurial Legitimacy: A Bourdieusian Perspective

Introduction

This paper explores the role of gender in shaping how women entrepreneurs obtain legitimacy through their membership of formal networks established to support women's entrepreneurship. We apply elements of Bourdieu's analysis of capital, field and habitus to develop a greater understanding of the strategies and behaviours women adopt in developing and extending network relations which play a critical role in establishing and claiming entrepreneurial legitimacy.

While Bourdieu's work has been widely applied in the social sciences, much of this research has failed to acknowledge its androcentric bias (Laberge, 1995) and to date has largely ignored contemporary feminist Bourdieusian scholarship (Huppatz, 2009). For Bourdieu, capital was gender neutral and ignored the possibility of gender capital and of women as 'capital wielding subjects'. Even though he acknowledged the inseparability of class and gender and shifted in his thinking about the applicability of his ideas for the analysis of gender he paid little attention to the relationships between gender and capital (Huppatz, 2009: 60). A number of feminists have suggested that the gendering of capital may be a useful tool for understanding contemporary gender practices and have identified parallels between Bourdieu's analysis and, for example, Harding's (1986) feminist epistemology (Laberge, 1995).

While Bourdieu's work has been applied to entrepreneurship, the majority of this has focused on economic, cultural social and symbolic capital (see for instance, Scott, 2012; de Clerq and Voronov 2009a, 2009b; Spigel, 2013) and less attention has been paid to the notion of fields and habitus. In this paper, we apply this feminist perspective on Bourdieu's ideas to examine the role gender plays in the ways in which women entrepreneurs go about building relationships to accrue entrepreneurial capital and seek entrepreneurial legitimacy. Networks are an essential element in entrepreneurial social processes as the nature of the network in which an entrepreneur is embedded will influence their access to significant others and capital. We apply Bourdieu's notion of field, which he defined as relational, dynamic social microcosms that are contingent and ever-changing, to networks as social arenas in which actors manoeuvre and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources. Following de Clerq and Voronov (2009a) we also use Bourdieu's concept of capital in this context to explore how women entrepreneurs gain access to capital claim entrepreneurial legitimacy. Within any social arena socialised norms and tendencies that guide behaviour and thinking are evident. Accordingly, we use the third component of Bourdieu's theory, habitus, to reflect on the role gender plays in shaping and reinforcing women entrepreneurs' attitudes and actions within networks.

Methodology

Central to our analysis is an investigation of formal women-only and mixed networks, some of which (women-only networks) have been established by an economic development agency, to stimulate networking activity and hence more effective entrepreneurial activity. Conceptualising networks as fields, we develop understanding of the role gender plays in women's access to capital and to their establishment or claiming of entrepreneurial legitimacy. As network processes are too

subtle to capture and understand using questionnaires (Neergaard, Shaw and Carter, 2005), we adopted an interpretivist approach to gain understanding of the role which gender plays in how women entrepreneurs acquire and build capital and gain legitimacy in networks. Participants' experiences and insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews which, with permission, were tape recorded and transcribed. Sixteen women entrepreneurs, including those belonging to women-only and those belonging to mixed networks, were interviewed. The majority of interviews took place in a group setting. Each participant had the opportunity of engaging fully with the issues under consideration, leading to a broad and in-depth participatory discussion.

To obtain a holistic understanding of how membership of a network facilitates or hinders the accrual of entrepreneurial capital and legitimacy five network organisers/ facilitators of women-only networks and four organisers/ facilitators of mixed networks were also interviewed on an individual basis. All interviews took place at the network venue, lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and in line with assurances given to participants their names have been changed to ensure anonymity. We undertook thematic analysis to identify, examine and record patterns or themes within the data relevant to the phenomenon under consideration. Accordingly, we read and reread each transcript examining it for examples of the different ways in women's acquisition of capital was influenced by gender and the impact this had on hindering or otherwise women's attempts to claim entrepreneurial legitimacy.

Findings, Discussion and Contributions

We present illustrations of the different ways in which gender plays a role in women entrepreneurs' access to capital and their attempts to establish legitimacy through their membership of networks. We also provide reflections on the role which network facilitators play in defining the remit of the network and reinforcing stereotypical gendered behaviours and attitudes within it. The contributions of the paper are threefold and are both theoretical and policy-related. First, we extend the use of Bourdieu's framework in the entrepreneurial domain by applying his concept of field to formal business networks. Second, we address the androcentric tendencies of the framework to explore the ways in which capital and access to it might be gendered. In so doing, we have responded to Bourdieu's recognition of the value in expanding his original framework as the fact that "capital can take a variety of forms is indispensable to explain the structure and dynamics of differentiated societies (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119). Third, we provide recommendations for policymakers about the efficacy of establishing women-only networks in an attempt to increase the quantity and calibre of female entrepreneurs.

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