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# Exploring the dynamics of gender, feminism and entrepreneurship: advancing debate to escape a dead end?

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## Abstract

Contrary to the neo-liberal thesis that entrepreneuring is an open and accessible endeavour where personal effort alone determines reward and status, it has been demonstrated that there is a persistent, but occluded, gender bias within the entrepreneurial discourse. Accordingly, women are positioned as lacking and incomplete men; however, despite calls to employ feminist theory as an analytical frame to demonstrate the reproduction of such subordination, there is scant evidence this has emerged. Within this article however, we respond to this call by demonstrating how post structural feminist analysis reveals the gendered assumptions informing entrepreneurship theory and so, embed prevailing hetero-normative assumptions. These assumptions limit the epistemological scope of contemporary research which positions women as failed or reluctant entrepreneurial subjects; as such, in the absence of feminist theorising these analyses remain descriptive rather than explanatory. Accordingly, the current entrepreneurial research agenda is in danger of reaching an epistemological dead end in the absence of a reflexive critical perspective to inform the idea of who can be and what might be an entrepreneur. Finally, we draw upon these arguments to reflect upon current approaches to theorising within the broader field of entrepreneurial enquiry.

Key words: Entrepreneurship, Feminist Theory, Gender, Epistemology.

## Introduction: Making our case: what do we mean by a dead end, where does it come from, why does it matter?

Since the early 1980s, there has been a global shift towards greater neo liberal individualism in society prompted by periodic market crises and critiques of collective welfare regimes (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; McRobbie, 2009). Accompanying this ideological, social and economic focus upon the individual is a profoundly changed perception of the value and potential of entrepreneurship. It is now celebrated as the foundation of opportunistic individualism which enables the realisation of human potential for creativity and innovation when freed from the constraints and confines of organisational and institutional regulation (Down, 2010; Ogbor, 2000; Sturdy & Wright, 2008). Embedded within this current

entrepreneurial project is a notion of individualism and inclusiveness; as such, entrepreneuring realises individual potential but at the same time is inclusive as it has no formal entry barriers. As such we all have the scope to realise our own enterprising potential through the application of personal effort and determination (Lewis and Simpson, 2010; McRobbie, 2009).

Yet, despite the benign image of entrepreneurship as a meritocratic accessible field of economic opportunity seeking behaviour, closer analysis suggests that there are limitations upon the possibilities of who can claim the subject position of 'entrepreneur' (Ahl, 2006; Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009; Taylor & Marlow, 2009; Watson, 2009). So, for example, the discourse underpinning entrepreneurial representation has been analytically revealed as fundamentally masculine (Bourne, 2010; Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004a, 2004b; De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2006). In effect, the defining characteristics of the entrepreneur are also those which define masculinity and so, unsurprisingly, men dominate as high profile entrepreneurial role models (Ahl, 2006; Marlow, Henry, & Carter, 2009). Consequently, women have not featured within the mindset or image of what an entrepreneur is or should be (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2005; Baker, Aldrich, & Liou, 1997). Such gender bias is of critical importance not only as a social injustice but, given the current focus upon individualised attainment within an entrepreneuring epoch, women are positioned in deficit unless they acknowledge and subscribe to a masculinised discourse. And of course, regardless of the extent to which women might subscribe to this discourse, they cannot deny or escape their feminine ascription; as such, their affiliation and acceptance can only ever be partial.

So, despite the popular representation of entrepreneurship as an open and meritocratic socio- economic space which enables us to reveal our enterprising capacity, we suggest that two critical presumptions limit this proposition. First, the masculine discourse informing entrepreneurship is taken as normative; this invites universal subscription and represents those outside this norm as 'other'. Second and relatedly, those – such as women - who cannot fit into this discourse require 'fixing' through specific interventions to address this assumed deficit.

We suggest therefore, that the research agenda has become embedded within a series of gendered assumptions which rest upon weak foundations; that entrepreneurship offers gender neutral meritocratic opportunities to individuals to realise their potential for innovation and wealth creation; that the normative entrepreneurial character is male and, in the main, his ventures out-perform those owned by women. In addition, it is assumed that such performance gaps arise from individual deficits associated with femininity; such deficits can be adjusted or rectified through specific policy interventions to address female lack. Accordingly, the epistemological focus here does not question the normative underpinnings of this debate; embedded and hegemonic assumptions presume that deficit and lack rests within women who fail to

assimilate and reproduce masculine norms. As such, it becomes axiomatic to question the attitude and behaviours of the subject rather than their constructed subject position (Butler, 2004; Kelan, 2009).

Consequently, we believe that research on gender and entrepreneurship is in danger of reaching a dead end. The focus on individual women and their businesses does not explain current patterns of women's entrepreneurship. Worse, it blames the victim in that women are held accountable for structural circumstances beyond their control (Bradley, 2007). This in turn, perpetuates a hierarchical gendered ordering where femininity is associated with deficit and a masculine discourse of entrepreneurship emerges as the unquestioned norm (Bruni, et al., 2004a; Foss, 2010). So, the objective and contribution of this article is to open dialogue and suggest pathways to escape this cul-de-sac by arguing that an alternative, conceptually informed feminist critique of the assumptions which have informed the prevailing entrepreneurship research agenda is necessary. In so doing, we offer an additional contribution when configuring our arguments to suggest that a feminist critique offers a fruitful opportunity to challenge current theorising within the broader field of entrepreneurial enquiry. As such, and as Calás et al (2009) suggest, the feminist critique offers an alternative perspective to challenge the normative institutional underpinnings which constrain the possibilites of who can be recognised as an entrepreneurial actor and just what constitutes entrepreneurial behaviour.

To elaborate upon our arguments, the next section outlines a brief overview of feminist thought and argument. We suggest this descriptive scene setting is essential to frame an alternative perspective from which we can challenge the axiomatic normative assumptions embedded within the entrepreneurial field; this argument is developed within the third section. Fourth, we use two cases from previous research that both deconstruct conceptions of entrepreneurship as vehicles to critically evaluate and review these arguments. The first is a deconstruction of a popular entrepreneurship teaching case study (Ahl, 2007), and the second a deconstruction of the representation of women's entrepreneurship in media (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011). Having set out our position, we then develop our conceptual arguments regarding the necessity of feminist theorising to inform our understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour and finally, explore broader implications and future research directions.

**Revealing and concealing gender within entrepreneurial theorising.**

Although gender awareness has increasingly informed analyses of entrepreneurial behaviours since the 1990s, much of this work this has been framed comparatively (Eddleston & Powell, 2008; Godwin, Stevens, & Brenner, 2006). Embedded within this epistemology is an underlying presumption that men and women are

fundamentally different and that such differences will be articulated as female deficiency. So, for example, it is assumed that female owned ventures will under-perform when compared to those of men. However, proving this assumption has been somewhat difficult (DuRietz & Henrekson, 2000; Watson, 2002; Wilson & Tagg, 2010; Robb and Watson, 2011) for as has been demonstrated through a critical evaluation of comparative data sets, the sexes are just not *that* different rather, 'somehow all men get to be free riders on their few growth-oriented fellow businessmen'(Ahl, 2004, p. 165). Indeed, small ventures, regardless of owner characteristics are, for the most part, marginal performers within their markets (Storey, 2011). Yet, as scholars such as Calás, et al. (2009) and Taylor & Marlow (2009) observe, the notion that women and men entrepreneurs are essentially different seems to retain a firm grip and thus, continues to inform research efforts and policy development.

So, despite the fragile evidence base regarding clearly attributable gender differences informing entrepreneurial behaviours, assumptions regarding feminine weakness are embedded in normative beliefs. Accordingly, women are offered business advice, training and support strategies to equip them with the necessary resources, attitudes and behaviours to address their gender related deficiencies (see for example, critical policy initiatives developed in the UK and Sweden; Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2011; Proposition, 1993/94:140; Small Business Service, 2003). The irony of this being that, as has been argued, the assumed male entrepreneurial norm of high growth, high performing ventures is mythical (Saradakis & Storey, 2010; Storey, 2011). We do not deny that men constitute the majority of entrepreneurial actors and fully recognise that they certainly do dominate the very small market segment of high growth ventures (Storey & Greene, 2010; Wynarczyk & Marlow, 2010). What we do question however, is why these differences are consistently exaggerated, govern research efforts and are uncritically and axiomatically attributed to female deficiency?

When making this argument, we are mindful that whilst presumptions concerning the social construction of gender are taken as a given, they rarely inform analyses of how such constructions are produced and reproduced. Instead, gender characterisations are all too often taken as 'stable and self evident' (Kelan; 2009, p. 40). Exploring this tension between assumed stasis and dynamism, Lewis and Simpson (2010) draw attention to the visibility and invisibility of gender constructions such that women are marked out by femininity [so highly visible] but adopt specific forms of identity work (Watson, 2009) to reconfigure this ascription to accord with dominant masculinised modes of being [seeking invisibility]. Thus, within organizations, there is a presumption that the managerial persona reflects the gender neutral identity of 'universal personhood' (Lewis and Simpson, 2010:5). Yet, this is contradicted by evidence which suggests an embedded masculinised managerial discourse; as Bendl, (2008:54) notes, 'women are not excluded but are measured according to masculine

values'. Accordingly, to be recognised as credible actors within this field, women have to learn the delicate balance between adopting a credible managerial identity which reflects dominant [masculinised] norms but, without denying or refuting ascribed femininity given the fundamental importance of social adherence to recognisable gender identities (Eriksson-Zetterqvist, 2002). As Mavin (2008:76) comments in her analysis of gender tensions within managerial/professional careers, women 'cannot join as a woman but once they behave like a man, cannot be a proper woman'. Thus, gender is an omniscient identity marker which endows visibility to human subjects constructing them as contextually credible (Butler, 2004). In effect, for women to enter and be accepted within masculinised social arenas they have to undertake particular forms of identity work to reflect the dominant norm which positions them as credible. Yet, this identity work has to be attenuated so as not to fundamentally challenge the prevailing order and thus, present a gender threat. As Kelan (2009: 181) wryly observes women, 'get the collegial slap on the back as honorary men but the door is held open to treat them like ladies'.

It might be presumed that the gendered institutional norms framing entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behaviour are more permeable than those which shape organisations given the central role afforded to agency and self efficacy in the absence of bureaucratic rigidities. Yet, as noted above there is a masculinised discourse where prevailing narratives align to position the ideal and normative entrepreneur as male (Ahl, 2006). Consequently, for women to gain legitimacy within this discourse they are encouraged to adopt and reproduce allegedly neutral entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours which are in fact, facsimiles of what men do and what men are within this context (Marlow and McAdam, 2011). Illustrating this argument, Kerfoot and Miller (2010) develop a critical evaluation of a training programme for potential business owners ostensibly aiming to encourage more women to enter self employment. However, the sub-text of the programme established men as natural entrepreneurs rendering women as outsiders whose only hope of entry lay in learning how to emulate the behaviour of the idealised male. Paradoxically, but perhaps not surprisingly, many of the potential female business owners were actively discouraged from starting new ventures after undertaking the course as it became increasingly evident that they did not 'fit' the fictive, masculinised normative entrepreneurial persona (Jones, 2009).

Given the centrality of the entrepreneurial project within contemporary society, it is essential to reveal and critique this persistent bias within the dominant discourse and how this is articulated and reproduced within current theorising. Consequently, we seek to challenge 'taken for granted' norms informing the gender bias which bounds research by adopting a post structuralist feminist critique of the entrepreneurial discourse. In so doing, we aim to offer pathways to promote and advance debate whilst supporting theoretical development.

**Establishing context: the feminist critique.**

> 'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat'

Attributed to Rebecca West: novelist [(in Law, 1992)].

Feminist arguments are persistently subject to popular derision, suspicion and rejection as challenges to the power of the masculine which resides within and is articulated by a fundamental gendered socio-economic ordering [1] (Butler, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). Yet, as Calás et al. (2009) argue feminist perspectives offer considerable potential to advance thinking and particularly, to inform ontological pluralism (Willmott, 2008). We add to these arguments through our critical evaluation of how the assumptions underpinning the normative entrepreneurial discourse can be de-constructed through feminist critiques. Moreover, we argue that such reflexive criticism should inform the analytical framing of entrepreneurial theorising. The foundation of this argument rests upon the recognition of and engagement with feminist theory which has generated a co-ordinated oppositional critique of female subordination (Beasley, 1999; Weedon, 1999). Such critiques have been expressed through a number of perspectives over history with varying emphases but it can be cautiously observed that a common thread underpinning these differing analyses of female subordination relate to the notion of structural, institutional patriarchal subordination (Bradley, 2007). These analyses have been very productive in demonstrating and explaining female subordination. However, whether using liberal, social, psychoanalytical or radical feminist perspectives, which all use an empiricist epistemology (Gherardi 2003, Calás et al. 2009), there is a tendency of essentialising gender; this risks oversimplification and in "blaming the victim" in that women, or their actions (or lack of action), are used as explanations for their subordination.

Since the 1980s however, a critical evaluation of essentialist and structural analyses of female subordination has emerged through the work of post structural scholars (Butler, 1990; Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1982) who study how gender is "done" rather than what it "is"; that is, it pays serious attention to the definition of gender as socially

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[1] The persistence of this 'fear and loathing' of feminism was demonstrated in the UK recently when a government minister, David Willets, suggested that high contemporary rates of unemployment for working class males was caused by 'feminists'. Agitating for access to education and employment in the 1960s, feminists had ensured that the current generation of young women were now displacing men from their rightful and traditional employment roles; he commented 'feminism was probably the "single biggest factor" for the lack of social mobility in Britain, because women who would otherwise have been housewives had taken university places and well-paid jobs that could have gone to ambitious working-class men'. (Guardian Newspaper, April 1st, 2011).

constructed (West and Zimmerman 1987). This complex body of work explores and analyses the dynamic and fluid manner in which female subordination is constructed within and through language and texts. Analyses of 'man made language' (Spender, 1980) reveal how those words and metaphors associated with the feminine are consistently represented as weaker, different or subordinate to those of the masculine (Kelan, 2009; Speer, 2005). Fundamental to these theories of language and text are key notions of dualities so, to be weak is not to be strong; to be a risk taker is not to be risk averse; to be a woman is not to be a man. Thus, socially constructed representations of gendered subject positions are articulated through oppositional categories within language itself where the feminine side of the binary reflect and sustains subordination. Linguistic practices can be themed and analysed as 'discourses' which represent, 'a group of claims, ideas and terminologies that are historically and socially specific and create truth effects' (Alvesson & Due Billing, 1999, p. 49 our translation). As such, language can be arranged, used and reproduced to represent and privilege specific interpretations. So, language is not neutral; neither is it just a ciphering device rather, it is a powerful interpretative tool which informs meaning and shapes constitutions of reality. Accordingly, discourses carry power relations in being both exclusionary and inclusionary; so they construct and describe a profile which embraces those who are 'part' of a discourse and conversely, singles out those who are excluded (Kelan, 2009; Ogbor, 2000; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). Prevailing discourses also act as gate-keeping devices in that they bring into being identities to which individuals must conform to gain legitimacy and of course, rejects those who do not or cannot subscribe (Kelan, 2009; Speer, 2002, 2005). Thus, meaning is constituted by language which in turn creates and embeds specific discourses within which particular contextualised ways of being are produced and reproduced through institutionalised processes and influences.

The post structuralist stance has been critical to developing feminist debate which challenges the notion of female essentialism and assumptions of shared subordination arising from a homogeneous biological identity and socio-economic positioning. As such, the notion of gender as constructed through discourse is framed as a fluid, contextualised diverse performance. Yet, this focus upon differentiated experience is not without problems. Hartsock (1990) for example, argues that the focus upon language, specificity and difference denies common experiences of subordination and so, challenges collective movements to address inequality and discrimination. The tendency to increasingly deconstruct experience and embed it within linguistic constructions and ever smaller local narratives must inexorably lead to hyper-reflexivity; the consequence of such being the denial of any possibility for collective mobilisation. When exploring accusations of hyper-individualism, Bradley (2007) notes that whilst gender may be performed as a series of individual acts (Butler, 1990), it is done so as a routinized repetition such that an impression of a stable, gendered self is produced and reproduced. As such, gendered characterisations and

subordination become institutionalised, stereotypical and normalised within prevailing discourses. Putting it in a different way, local narratives cannot be produced or recognised unless they draw upon and are reflective of encompassing discourses which command a broad subscription. If not, they would be dismissed as nonsensical. So, it is possible to remain sensitive to the micro-constructed nature of gender identity whilst acknowledging how this coagulates into collective subordinating assumptions.

Post-structuralist feminist analyses are embedded within the theoretical points of departure outlined above, but within this broad construct there are several distinct strands of argument (Bradley, 2007). So although anchored within a fundamentally sympathetic foundational argument, parallel developments within the context of multi-disciplinary fields emerging from various countries have informed differing articulations. In addition, on going reflexive critiques of the post structural construct generate a dynamic theory subject to debate, discussion and development (Bowden and Mummery, 2010)

 The approach with which this article aligns reflects Foucauldian poststructuralist feminism. This perspective focuses upon how knowledge produces power effects. In addition, the analysis engages with the material discursive practices included in such power effects thus, reflecting materialist feminist understandings of post-structuralism (Hekman 2010). Or, in simpler terms, language is not *all* there is, discourses are also material. This is argued succinctly during the installation lecture to the College de France during which Foucault describes the various material and social practices that enable or constrain discourses (Foucault 1972). However, whilst we map this particular analytical framing onto the arguments in this article, we acknowledge alternative iterations.

So, for example, third world/post-colonial analyses emerged from black feminist critiques of western feminism which whilst challenging female subordination, ignored differences between women thus, reproducing power differentials based on class and ethnicity. In addition, it has been argued that biased western epistemological approaches, as well as material and economic arrangements following from globalization, circumscribe the space available to recognise the subjectivity of third world women (see Calás and Smircich 1996 for an overview). We also acknowledge the importance of the intersectionality debate which critically evaluates how issues such as age, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation and disabilities interact with gender (McCall 2005; Holvino 2010).

Finally, we note that there is an assumption that gender as a subordinating construct is coterminous with heteronormative female disadvantage (Kelan, 2009) and indeed, that stance is again reflected within this article. However, we do recognise that this is just one perspective upon the gender binary and post-structural analyses of

masculinity (Gherardi; 2003, Hearn, 1998) and queer studies (Butler 1990; Haraway 1991) occupy an important role within current debate.

From this brief overview of post-structuralist feminist thought and argument, it emerges that this perspective articulates a challenge to the normative 'common sense' gendered order which is uncritically produced and reproduced in daily interaction. Accordingly, we develop this discussion and expand both feminist and entrepreneurial theory development through an analysis of how women are represented as lacking through the epistemological assumptions uncritically reproduced within the contemporary entrepreneurial discourse.

**Epistemological bias in entrepreneurship: celebrating the masculine, repressing the feminine.**

When subscribing to a constructed ideology which devalues what it is to be 'woman', there can be no objective set of truths which validate or justify the gendered order (Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Consequently, this constructed gender hierarchy is supported and confirmed through dominant epistemological perspectives (Ahl, 2004; Harding, 1986). As such, those questions which are asked, how they are asked and why they are asked critically shapes what we know and the value given to such knowledge. Thus, as Code (1998, p. 176) notes, 'epistemologies, in their trickle down effects in the everyday world, play a part in sustaining patriarchal and other hierarchical structures'. Dominant epistemologies also bestow authority upon the 'facts' which are produced in that an assumption of objectivity is accredited to knowledge which is in then legitimated as objective truth so, as Sarasvathy (2004, p. 707) argues, 'the questions we ask often prevent us from asking other questions'. Or, simply stated, the answers you get depend upon the questions you ask.

Work by Ahl (2004, 2006); Bruni, Gherardi et al. (2004) and Calás et al. (2009) has been particularly useful in exposing epistemological gender bias in the field of entrepreneurship. Drawing upon a wide range of literatures, the gendered nature of the entrepreneurial discourse is exposed – in effect, that which is associated with entrepreneurial activity, intentions, traits, behaviours and actions reflects and reproduces masculinity and so, frames the analytical frame of enquiry within this field. This assumption in turn, affects the presumptions surrounding who and what is an entrepreneur and how the field of entrepreneurship should be investigated. Thus, when reviewing what we 'know' about entrepreneurs, it is apparent that until the 1990s main stream research activities assumed them to be male and so, research instruments reflected this bias and assumption (Wilson & Tagg, 2010). This is problematic as such presumptions neglect the contribution of women to the field and deny their subjectivity for as Ahl (2004, p. 108) notes, 'when pre-formulated questions, based on male centred notions of entrepreneurship are imposed on women

entrepreneurs, there will be little chance to capture anything different about women entrepreneurs, only "more" or "less" of what is already imagined'. Analysing the body of evidence relating to female entrepreneurship, what we usually see is women portrayed as having 'less' of the resources and qualities associated with entrepreneurial behaviour (De Bruin, et al., 2006; Taylor & Marlow, 2009). Ahl's (2004) analysis of extant research on women's entrepreneurship found *all* explanatory articles to hypothesize that women were deficient – be it in value systems, entrepreneurial intentions, risk taking propensity, strategies, or networking, to mention a few investigated areas. There was an assumption that deficiencies in these respects would explain why women's businesses were smaller or less profitable than those owned and managed by men. The lack of explanatory power of such assumed deficiencies was disappointing to researchers, who showed little interest in disproving their hypotheses. Even studies who find no evidence of lack in women explain this by saying that their research subjects were "self-selected" and different from "ordinary women", which demonstrates the stronghold of normative, masculinised assumptions (Ahl, 2004). The problem then becomes that women are just not men!

This indicates a problem with the essentialist assumptions of mainstream research on women's entrepreneurship – women are first assumed to be deficient, then "proved" to be deficient, and finally held accountable for their own deficiencies. Even feminist research using an empiricist epistemology tends to fall into the same trap – Ahl (2004) demonstrates how the arguments of gender and power orders of liberal and social feminist theory are turned into individual "situational and dispositional variables" in entrepreneurship research thus, firmly avoiding any analysis of constructions of gender and resulting gender orders.

Drawing upon this critique, it is suggested that a post structural analysis offers a more coherent epistemological critique of the atheoretical nature of knowledge regarding female entrepreneurship. We suggest that greater sensitivity to the feminist critique exposing the heteronormativity underpinning entrepreneurship would widen the conceptual net of what entrepreneurial behaviour entails. This would reveal, analyse and illuminate the meaning of entrepreneurship through women's experiences and so ensure that their activities are afforded greater credibility and legitimacy and so rebalance analytical framing and understanding. Such work draws upon an interpretivist approach which aims to study the nuanced details of women's and men's lives, where private and public spheres blur and overlap, an issue that cannot be captured in closed, economically focused research instruments. Consequently, much of what informs entrepreneurial activity and mainstream models of 'doing business' may be seen as irrelevant and excluded. Therefore, taking the challenge of studying gender as socially constructed seriously has consequences not only for the issues under focus, the questions asked and the assumptions taken, but also for the methods used. We have no ideological aversion against quantification and statistical analysis as

this often provides the necessary background information for determining the importance of research questions, but for the purposes discussed here, it does not enable a nuanced analysis of how a gendered construction of the entrepreneurial discourse is produced and reproduced. Consequently, a more diverse and differentiated methodological stance is necessary.

In a critical review article of prevailing methodological approaches, Gartner (2010) debates and discusses the need for greater reflexivity in current approaches to entrepreneurship research making a strong case for greater engagement with narrative analyses (Down, 2010; Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004). Narratives are the quintessential sense-making tools of human existence; analyses of entrepreneurial narratives can reveal not only how those within the narratives think and act but also offer detailed insight into the actors' world view and brings a voice to related experience (Czarniawska, 2004). In essence, narrative analyses reveal taken for granted assumptions that inform as well as limit entrepreneurial thinking and action (Down & Reveley, 2009; Watson, 2009). Alternatively, ethnographic perspectives have been fruitfully employed in the context of women's entrepreneurship by, for example, Bruni et al. (2004a), Gherardi (1996), Fournier (2002) and Essers (2009). Interview studies using a life history approach have been adopted (Mulholland, 1996) analyzing entrepreneuring activities as an element and feature of the life course rather than a discrete and distinct activity. Deconstruction and/or discourse analysis are other alternatives, as used by for example Ahl (2004) or Berglund and Johansson (2007). This article is not a methods instruction, (for this, see e.g. Martin 1990, or Neergaard and Ulhoj 2007), but acts as an illustration of the type of research that the epistemological assumptions underpinning the post structuralist approach may produce; we draw upon two particular studies in some detail in the following analysis to illustrate this argument.

We commence with Ahl's (2007) deconstruction of a classic teaching case study of entrepreneurial venturing; she uses the method of narrative deconstruction, building her analysis on a Foucaultian post-structuralist feminist perspective. On the surface, this case describes a stereotypical entrepreneurial success story with all the archetypal elements of daring, risk-taking and ingenuity that we are accustomed to expect in such a narrative. And indeed, using a narrative approach certainly does enable insight into the world of these entrepreneurs. By reflecting upon and revisiting the deconstruction of this tale, we reveal how the sexist sub text resonates with the current and underlying epistemological assumptions we criticise as informing normative approaches to contemporary entrepreneurial research. Our second example is drawn from Achtenhagen & Welter's (2011) discourse analysis of articles upon women entrepreneurs in the German news media. The authors use a multi-step analysis beginning with a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of almost 5000 articles, identifying the "grand discourse" of women entrepreneurs. They then proceed by

deconstructing a number of representative excerpts, explicitly building on theories of language as constitutive of social reality. This study demonstrates the ambiguities in the discourse which whilst adopting a celebratory tone simultaneously suggests that these women are 'exceptional' which in effect, positions entrepreneurship as beyond the reach of the most women and so, is counter productive and actively discourages entrepreneurial engagement.  We comment upon how these accounts coalesce to create a fictive entrepreneur (Jones, 2009) which is embedded in masculinity and perpetuates the notion that entrepreneurship is indeed, a man's world.

These particular cases were chosen as they clearly illustrate our analytical frame but also for two other reasons: First, the material they analyse plays a critical role in the construction of social reality. News media is the most influential source of contemporary reality construction (Scharff and Gill, 2011) whilst entrepreneurship education is now prioritised within the higher education curriculum. Thus, how the entrepreneur is represented within the popular media and within educative teaching case studies critically constructs the image of who can legitimately claim this identity (Jones, 2011). If women are systematically excluded from dominant representations of the normative entrepreneur, we suggest a cumulative but corrosive reinforcing interface between the fields of academic theory and popular media imagery. Second, the cases are rare examples of feminist post-structuralist work on women's entrepreneurship published in leading entrepreneurship research journals, demonstrating an opening for this perspective in the entrepreneurship research community (Neergaard, et al. 2011).


**Boys and Toys, Girls, Tears and Fears or, 'Sex business in the toy store: A narrative analysis of a teaching case'.[2]**

The 'Toy Story' case study outlines the heroic story of Terry and John - who, through wit, deceit, charm, cunning, business acumen and a fair share of good luck, manage to create a highly profitable venture. As a teaching case, the story of the business is an exemplar of entrepreneurial opportunity recognition. Moreover, within this story we see prime examples of individuals developing their enterprising selves, finding solutions to problems and so, reaping a just reward. Accordingly, the narrative describes how two men decide to begin a retail venture to sell a specific toy, 'Marvel Mustang' just prior to Christmas. To realise this ambition, Terry and John utilise their savings to rent retail space, attain bank loans to support the venture, struggle to find sufficient stock and experience financial short falls but, they persevere in the face of such adversity. All is nearly lost when their plan to buy up all stocks of the toy - leaving them as sole market supplier - founders as their major competitor sources a

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[2] Ahl, H. (2007), Journal of Business Venturing: 22, 673 – 693.

new consignment. Serendipitously however, at the crucial time just prior to Christmas, their competitor's order fails to arrive so, they are left as the sole supplier and thus, 'clean up the market'.

On the face of it, this narrative offers an exemplary account of entrepreneurial venturing; it has all the ingredients to illustrate the challenges but also, the rewards to be gained if the protagonists are sufficiently courageous, ambitious and determined. Yet, Ahl's (2007) deconstruction of the narrative reveals how women are positioned within this story; they are portrayed as obstacles to entrepreneurial venturing who need to be deceived, cajoled and placated in turn. Terry tells how he and his business partner John formulated their business plan over dinner one night and financed it initially from house hold savings; however, this required the 'wives' to be convinced of their idea and cajoled into agreement (the women are never afforded independent identities, they are only ever known as the 'wife' or the 'wives'). Within this process, the wives were represented as impediments to be negotiated given their reluctance to commit their entire stock of household savings into a highly uncertain new venture. That this venture was founded on an idea from two men with no previous entrepreneurial or retail experience, and who had other full time employment commitments was not considered to be a reasonable cause of spousal concern. When the wives are required to approve a further loan agreement, much is made of their caution and emotional response to this proposal; their consent is again gained through a process of emotional pressure and persuasion. When even more finance is required, the anxieties and tears of the wives are bypassed altogether through the simple act of not informing them of the new enlarged debt. In effect, the wives are represented as exemplars of feminine weakness – not capable of grasping a business case, resorting to tears and anxiety when faced with the hard choices which a 'real entrepreneur' must address.

In essence, ascribed femininity is sufficient justification to employ deception and exclusion from critical business decisions which could potentially result in the loss of all family resources. These wives are represented throughout as obstacles; their femininity fuels an overly emotional, irrational response to the tactics employed by their entrepreneurial husbands to maintain their business venture. It is only mentioned in passing that in fact, it is the 'wives' who step in to supply unpaid labour to the business and essentially, manage it on a daily basis. This is presented as a natural extension of what wives should do to support their husbands; more taxing decisions regarding financial matters (which could potentially spell a disastrous loss of all family resources) were considered to be beyond their wit or intelligence. There is however, a happy ending to this story as largely through luck – particularly bad luck for their key rivals - the venture succeeded so the wives were rewarded; Terry tells how he stuffed a stocking full of money as his wife's Christmas gift.

**'Surfing on the ironing board' - the representation of women's entrepreneurship in German newspapers.[3]**

The apt title of this article is actually a quote from the title of a media report allegedly celebrating women's entrepreneurial achievements. It forms part of a systematic analysis of all (4995) articles on women entrepreneurs published in leading German newspapers during a ten year period (1995-2004) undertaken by Achtenhagen and Welter (2011). With a feminist empiricist approach, their conclusions might have culminated with the observation that reports of women's entrepreneurship, although only a fraction of all entrepreneurship articles, had in fact, increased year on year. Indeed, there were twice as many in 2004 as in 1995, reflecting the increasing socio-political attention afforded to women's entrepreneurship. It might be argued that women's entrepreneurial activities are being afforded greater visibility within the in German news media which can only be positive. Drawing upon a critical constructionist analysis, however, Achtenhagen and Welter (2011: 765) argue that the more salient issue is how these women are portrayed in that images of women's entrepreneurship "contribute to regulate its nature and most likely also its extent, as they contain information about 'typical' and 'wanted' behaviour of a woman as well as of an entrepreneur". Thus, this analysis revealed the reproduction of uncritical stereotypical representations with the male norm of entrepreneurship presumed as natural such that women are positioned as "the other" which digresses from the norm. In reporting upon women's entrepreneurial endeavours, the focus was directed towards the subject position of woman per se so, clothing, looks and lifestyle are central. Exploring the trappings of womanhood and engagement with social and cultural activities was closely reported but the entrepreneurial/business side of their enterprises was not unless it was 'strange, unusual or wicked' (p. 775). Women's roles as mothers and housewives were constant referral points emphasising normative gender affiliations; equally however, the potential for this male world of entrepreneurship to threaten such normativity was strongly featured as in this extract from the newspaper *Welt* illustrates:

*''Everything is possible – The young, newly rich Chinese who have made their fortune during the boom are called 'Chuppies'. Christie Ling is one of them – formerly a medical student, today a millionaire'' (Welt)*
Today, [Christie Ling] glides through the streets of Shanghai in her silver Mercedes. The slim Chinese woman with the short haircut is a successful entrepreneur. The former medical student has created her own little empire. Loving fun and luxury, she is one of the ''Chuppies'', as China's young generation of self-made men and women are called. ( . . . .) After years of hard work and no rest, her company was profitable. ( . . . ) But the price for success was high. Her marriage broke apart. Ling's husband, a

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journalist, could not cope with the fact that his wife invested so much time into her work, ''He is very traditional'', tells the self made millionaire and shrugs. ''He wanted me to stay at home and wait for him. But I don't care about that.'' Christie Ling's little daughter lives with her father. ''Of course, I am sometimes concerned about this, but I'm just too busy'' [with business ideas].Yes, her hobbies are exquisite. ( . . . ) At least three times a year, Christie travels abroad, to Europe, New York or some beautiful beach somewhere in the world. Like her friends, she regularly gets a manicure and goes to the make-up parlour. And once a week, she relaxes with a long oil massage.
(Achtenhagen and Welter 2011:  780)

This media representation presents a nuanced image of the contemporary successful female entrepreneur. Indeed, she has her Mercedes and her wealth but at the cost of her marriage and here again, given contemporary divorce rates and female emancipation this is perhaps not that noteworthy. Yet, to refute motherhood is far more heinous – the juxtaposition of that she is 'too busy' to be a mother but has time for holidays, manicures and facials is an interesting and telling positioning of the text. One reading of this article suggests a subtext that successful women are those who reject the normative gendered order and associated roles; far safer for those women contemplating business ownership to focus on ventures which ensure they can conform to socio-economic expectations.   This point is further illustrated within the articles describing how those women operating in typical male industries, such as construction, exemplify what gender theorists call "restoring the gender order", as in the following excerpt from *Neues Deutschland*:

''A female entrepreneur stands her ground in a typical male domain – the construction industry'' .
Marina Schilling has been self-employed in this [construction] profession since 1993. Not voluntarily, like so many others she lost her job after the 'Wende' when she was 37 years old ( . . . ) Thus, she had no choice when she founded her company. As is so typical for women, she did that from her home, by putting up a desk in her bedroom. ( . . . ) Marina Schilling had to learn to fight against the well-known prejudice that women are not apt for the construction industry. It would indeed be easier to picture this blond, pretty woman to sit in a bright, clean office, rather than in the mouldy basement of an apartment house in need of rehabilitation. But this is her place – even if she often feels scared and prefers to take along one of her male employees."(Achtenhagen and Welter 2011, p 779)


Thus, we can see two underpinning assumptions here – first that women operating in non-typical sectors are likely to feel [and be] threatened so need a man to enhance their legitimacy in the field and second, that blonde pretty women, by virtue of their femininity, belong in particular physical spaces which reflect this subjectivity.

The cases illustrate three important points; first, they demonstrate for researchers the fruitfulness of using a feminist post-structuralist approach to the study of women's entrepreneurship. This clearly enables the development of alternative research questions and perspectives in addition to those which dominate received approaches. Second, by using this perspective, the analyses discussed here are able to demonstrate the pervasive gendering and resulting gender/power order of the entrepreneurship discourse, as well as illustrating the assumptions underlying such discourse. And third, by implication, they address the issue of why such assumptions also tend to inform most of extant entrepreneurship research – they are, simply put, assumptions that are generally shared by people, be they journalists, entrepreneurs, researchers and academics. A key argument within this article being that entrepreneurship research needs to seriously question its own basic assumptions. We discuss this in more detail below.

**Implications and critique.**

There are a number of implications which arise from these two studies that could not be revealed had the authors taken an empiricist approach to research. In broader terms, there are normative, unquestioned representations of masculinity and femininity. Gendered characterisations are effortlessly reproduced with the key protagonists in the Toy Store case. Terry and John, represented as competitive, market savvy risk takers, saw an opportunity and aggressively pursued it. The [anonymous] wives however, are portrayed as cautious, conservative and risk averse – they are defined within a subject position of domesticity, weakness and anonymity. Although only ever identified as 'the wives', the two women are in fact, business partners given that joint savings fund the venture and they supply unpaid labour. However, these anonymous women are expected to unquestionably place blind faith in their husbands on the basis of it being an extension of the wifely role to do so. From the details of the case, it would appear that the venture succeeds through pure serendipity given that the main competitor experiences delivery problems such that their 'Marvel Mustangs' do not arrive in time for Christmas. Had this not occurred, regardless of their optimism, Terry and John – and their wives and children – would probably have lost everything. This would have made for rather a broken 'Toy Story' with a very unhappy ending.

Yet, it may be argued that the underlying message here – that entrepreneurship is about risk taking, opportunity seeking and vision – is appropriate to inform a teaching case in contemporary business education (being published in a relatively recent entrepreneurship case study text; Allen, 2001). Yet, what does it actually tell students about being an entrepreneur; that it is perfectly acceptable to lie, cheat and deceive whilst women are entrepreneurial impediments. Moreover, the epistemological approach here is founded upon an acceptance of a hierarchical order which reduces

women to a specifically gendered subject position – wives - who are treated as nameless obstructions, rather than legitimate business partners. The 'knowledge' this case illustrates is that it is first, normal and natural to reduce women to anonymous objects in relation to the male subject and second, femininity is associated with weakness, anxiety, risk aversity and a lack of business acumen. As such, is this the kind of classical teaching case which should be used to illustrate successful normative entrepreneurial behaviour? What message does this give to those studying entrepreneurial behaviour? The deconstruction of this case would have little impact or purpose if it was unrepresentative of the broader field; it would remain a salutary example of a rather poor illustration of practice.

These events occurred during the 1960s; whilst this was at the height of second wave feminism it might be argued that entrenched values regarding the position of women in society were merely reflected within this case. As such, the representation of the gendered relationships and expectations were in keeping with contemporary norms and expectations; as such, it would not happen now. We might hope that this story is 'Not Valid Here and Not Valid Now' (Ahl, 2007, p. 689) but this hope is rather forlorn when this case features within a text book published in the twenty first century.

And as the second study demonstrates, the story seems indeed valid both here and now. Contemporary representations of women entrepreneurs in German news media reinforce each and every one of the assumptions of gender in the Toy Story case. Women are first and foremost seen as mothers and homemakers and women's entrepreneurship is portrayed as something competing with this, more primary role. Media reports of women's businesses allow little space for the business side of it – most of the text is about clothing, looks, home, children, spouses etc., little of which is reported in articles about male business owners. Moreover, reports celebrate stereotypical feminine values such as beauty, caring and selflessness. Even fear has a place, as the second excerpt demonstrates.

Positive role models of women business owners remain rare both within research papers, teaching cases and as examples of entrepreneurial actors and educators. In textbooks or teaching cases in business this is still very typical; the main protagonist is still normally a man, and women are, if at all present, in secondary and supportive roles (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2005; Baker, et al., 1997; Jones, 2009).

Hence, women continue to be reproduced within normative gendered roles where they are represented as secondary; this camouflages the perpetuation of gendered orders both within entrepreneurship and the wider socio-economic context. Such assumptions reinforce the subtext that women are not entrepreneurial rather, they are reduced to passive observers or directed actors requiring specific instructions and tuition to learn what is means to be an entrepreneur.

The message emanating from such representation is that women lack legitimacy within the entrepreneurial discourse; the feminine subject is not a credible entrepreneurial actor. This stance not only discredits the feminine within broader debate also positions women business owners as subordinate within the gendered entrepreneurial binary where the normative representation is confirmed as male.


## Conclusion and Future Directions

This discussion aims to bring together a ranges of issues which, when linked suggest that the entrepreneurial research agenda runs the risk of reaching a dead end by spiralling around a cul-de-sac in uncritically adopting normative frames of reference to support theoretical development and empirical enquiry. We suggest more reflexive, theoretically informed critiques are required to reframe understanding of contemporary entrepreneurship which purports to enable the realisation of individual potential. As is recognised by Calás et al (2009: 561), entrepreneurship is positioned within contemporary thinking as a noun – a neutral construct theorised as an opportunity focused income generating activity which describes the 'world as it is'. Yet, transforming this construct into a verb – as entrepreneuring – reveals it to be a complex nexus of intertwined socio-economic politically framed activities shaped by contextualised institutional frameworks. Thus, entrepreneuring, as a socially constructed 'doing' is embedded within the prevailing gendered order which privileges masculinity as the dominant mode of thought, deed and action.

So, at its heart, this entrepreneurial discourse remains embedded within a gender biased epistemology informing our understanding of who can be recognised as an entrepreneur.  To inform these arguments, we have focused upon the production and reproduction of gendered orders within entrepreneurship theory, research and policy development. We have suggested that much of this literature remains essentially descriptive given the lack of awareness and engagement with a feminist perspective to offer analytical exploration.  Yet, drawing from our initial review of feminist thought we would argue that it is not so much a case that the female entrepreneurship literature is atheoretical but rather, it is theoretically naïve and unaware. It does at times refer to feminist thought, albeit implicitly more often than explicitly. This misses the central point in feminist theory however, namely the theorization of gender as a socially constructed articulation of biological sex which creates, sustains and embeds as normal, female subordination. Mapping the development of the extant literature upon gender and entrepreneurship revealed an initial focus on comparative work which aimed to identify the gap between the entrepreneurial activities of men and women; this prompted calls to offer women special assistance such that they might be assisted to be the 'equal' of men. As such, we can see reflections of liberal feminist thought which argues that institutional adjustments and policy shifts are

necessary to open up traditionally male dominated areas. Thus, women must accept their lack and deficit; but, when structural barriers are removed and at the same time, women accept the need to replicate male norms, they will then achieve on the same terms. This argument is well rehearsed within the entrepreneurial field and indeed, informs much of the contemporary policy agenda (Calás et al., 2009, Jones, 2009; Marlow, et al., 2008).

This narrow focus upon comparative work has now somewhat declined and women are recognised as subjects worthy of attention in their own right (de Bruin, Gatewood, & Henry, 2010; Fielden & Davidson, 2009) but within this agenda, there has been some effort to justify this stance in terms of what women can bring to the 'entrepreneurial party' (see for example Brush, Carter, Gatewood, Greene, & Hart, 2002; Marlow & Patton, 2005). So, essential feminine qualities are identified such as female empathy, focus on service quality and more caring employment conditions for instance, such traits can bring a softer element to the hard edged image of entrepreneurship which defines popular representations. This stance embraces standpoint feminist perspectives (Bowden & Mummery, 2009; Bradley, 2007) which celebrate female distinctiveness and so, challenge the devaluation of the feminine and ultimately, seek to contest the patriarchal gender order. Underpinning the standpoint feminist analysis however, is recognition for a collective challenge regarding sexist institutional assumptions; this critical element of the analysis remains poorly conceptualised within the hyper-individuality of the entrepreneurial field of theory, policy and practice. Rather, it would appear that somehow and at some point, it might be demonstrated that essential feminine qualities can realise greater economic returns within entrepreneuring and this example will amorphously roll out, gaining credibility and acceptance as it does. We are not entirely convinced by this optimistic scenario.

What we expose here is how feminist theory, positioned as a bridge between the constructs of gender and entrepreneurship, is actually illustrated but not analytically developed or recognised as an explanatory frame. Added to this, we would suggest that these explanatory frames, (if recognised or not), are stifling development of analyses of entrepreneurship – whether focused upon women or more broadly.

We support this claim by using two studies drawing upon a post structural analysis. So, our point of departure was to consider how reality is socially constructed through the use of language which forms the building blocks of narrative accounts. As noted above, language is not a neutral tool rather, it constitutes meaning rather than merely representing it but, such meaning has to be shared otherwise, as social actors we could not make sense of our world (Holt & Macpherson, 2010; Weick, 1995). However, such narrative exchanges are not freely exchanged but rather, align as discourses which in turn, embody power and legitimacy (Ogbor, 2000). Using the teaching case and the media analyses as examples, we demonstrated how the assumptions

underpinning 'normative' tales of every day entrepreneurship seamlessly reproduces the message of a male dominated sphere of activity where women are peripheral.

This demonstrates how a post structuralist analysis enables a contribution to challenging normative representations of the entrepreneurial discourse. As such, the contribution of this discussion lies in the manner in which it challenges normative accounts of entrepreneurial venturing that reinforce the essence of a masculinised discourse whilst denying women both a voice and visibility. So, we question the dominant assumptions informing the grand narrative of entrepreneurship when critiquing these cases. Rather than being carried along with the merits – which appear to offer interesting examples of a normative entrepreneurial process – we expose and critically analyse the subordinating sub text. Thus, the subtleties of how a masculinised discourse, which underpins normative entrepreneurial behaviour, is effortlessly reproduced are clearly illustrated. Relating the analyses to our argument here, it could be suggested that they merely reflects a specific representation of gender relationships within a particular context. Consequently, this critical analysis of gendered representations might be dismissed as accounts of a 'local narrative' which has little relevance or bearing beyond its specific context. Thus, whilst sensitive to critiques of post structuralism, this theoretical framing illuminates how prevailing discourses effortlessly reproduce normative assumptions which underpin female subordination. In effect, the assumptions underpinning these cases inform the construction of a fictive characterisation whose image pervades who and what is and can be entrepreneurial. As Jones (2011) illustrates through her critical evaluation of media representations, policy documents and research articles, this normative construction actively constrains the analytical scope of the whole field of entrepreneurship enquiry. In addition, when reproduced within teaching cases these gendered narratives not only embed gender bias as a critical component of historical texts, they ensure such assumptions are taken forward by the next generation of scholars and students of entrepreneurship as both normal and natural.

So, to escape the dead end of entrepreneurship and gender research, greater attention is required to creating theoretical links between entrepreneurial behaviours, gender theory and feminist analyses. Consequently, using an interdisciplinary approach to explore the impact of gender upon women's business ownership will confirm that entrepreneurship cannot be adequately analysed from a gender neutral perspective. Thus, as Ahl (2006, p. 595) notes, prevailing research practices inadvertently contribute to the social construction of women entrepreneurs by recreating "the idea of women as being secondary to men and of women's businesses being of less significance". The provision of research responses and extensions to this perspective are critical. Finally, drawing upon a feminist perspective to analyse the extant and future body of entrepreneurial research is crucial to illustrate how gender is performed within this field; it is not sufficient to see feminist analyses and gender issues as corralled within the realms of 'women's business ownership'. This is to miss the

point; as has been argued, the assumptions which inform the masculinised entrepreneurial discourse per se have to be exposed in order to reveal their pervasiveness in terms of how they shape what is taken to be normal, natural and common sense.

A key contribution of this argument which we hope might be taken forward is that the research agenda should abandon the focus and fascinated engagement with 'female' entrepreneurs (note how women are separated out from the normative population of entrepreneurs [men] being qualified by their biological identity) but instead, acknowledge and explore how gendered assumptions infiltrate normative epistemological assumptions. This basic shift demands a feminist perspective to reveal the extent to which gender bias currently informs epistemological assumptions underlying the contemporary entrepreneurial research agenda. Thus, the greatest challenge for future research is to argue that a feminist perspective should not only be applied to women's business ownership but the field of entrepreneurship more broadly and in so doing, will perhaps enable us to analytically engage with how gender as a construct reflexively interfaces with our understanding and presumptions of entrepreneurial activities, behaviours and ambitions.

Further developments of this discussion could usefully draw upon a wider range of recent case material to strengthen these arguments. Moreover, we have framed our critique within a post structuralist analysis. Again, as we recognise, critiques of this perspective (Hartsock, 1990; Bradley, 2007) draw attention to potential hyper-individualism which denies the possibility for collective subordination and collective action. Again however, we have recognised how local narratives can coalesce to recognise and accommodate collective repression and action. There is scope here for future research efforts to draw upon differing feminist analyses to explore the process and practice of entrepreneuring; adding to the extant body of research from diverse feminist perspectives will strengthen the critical evaluation of the bounded ontology informing the current entrepreneurial research agenda. With a post-structuralist approach, this entails not merely the identification of limitations of extant approaches, but also critique and change in itself. As Gherardi (2003:221) suggests, such a project "sees the 'political' as residing in the destablilization of the categories to construct scientificity, objectivity and neutrality". This was also Foucault's project, "…to bring it about, together with many others, that certain phrases can no longer be spoken so lightly, certain acts no longer, or at least no longer so un-hesitantly, performed; to contribute to changing certain things in people's ways of perceiving and doing things…(Foucault 1991:83). Consequently, we argue that it is essential to encourage entrepreneruship research which critically challenges the axiomatic reproduction of women's subordination as normal and natural.

Finally, it might be suggested that employing feminist perspectives to analyse and explore entrepreneurial behaviour, activities and processes merely replaces one

gendered order with another – privileging the female rather than the male.  This is not our intention; rather, we challenge current assumptions informing the entrepreneurship research agenda from a post-structuralist feminist stance to illustrate limitations.  Consequently, this stance is a device - certainly it exposes the embedded heteronormativity of current debate, this is critical, but equally the aim is to illuminate contemporary limitations and encourage broader debate per se regarding how we research entrepreneurship.

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