

## RELATIONALLY REFLEXIVE WOMEN: HOUSEHOLD STRATEGIES OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS AS SOCIAL CHANGE

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### INTRODUCTION

Feminist scholars have argued that entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon can lead to varieties of outcomes, which reveal aspects of social complexity not readily apparent in studies of economic man (Calas et al, 2009). Our purpose is to consider the actions of women confronting personal discontinuities as examples of entrepreneurship; we are most interested in how they meet these discontinuities in the context of the gendered structures shaping their lives, creating opportunities and starting new ventures, which, we argue, exposes the *reflexive choices* of women living at the family, occupational and household nexus (Alsos, Carter and Ljunggren, 2014, Wallace, 2002). Making the necessary choices and shaping these into a way of life are relationally reflexive endeavors, which depend on relational reflexivity (Donati and Archer, 2015: 126). In this paper we analyse the household strategies elaborated by women in order to set up a business that enables them to sustain the “relational goods” generated in the household.

### Structural barriers and women’s entrepreneurship

In the field of gender and employment scholars have demonstrated how prevailing gender roles render market entry/business survival more difficult for women (Jennings & Brush, 2013). These gendering practices are supported by assumptions that work is separate from the rest of life, which place female entrepreneurs at the periphery of recognized entrepreneurial activity regardless of whether they are ‘working women’ or even if they have no caring obligations (Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

These reflections on the barriers female entrepreneurs face explain the social context that activities take place and opportunities are formed. The outcomes of these events are reproduced in contemporary contexts creating or restricting, as a result, the entrepreneurial opportunities for women. In this paper our contention is that to understand how female entrepreneurs sometimes overcome the gendered barriers and set up a business is explained in relation to the concept of reflexivity (Archer, 2003, 2012). We show how women in our study exercise relational reflexivity and through the reorganization of the household find necessary incentives to evaluate and create opportunities to set up a business and to personally succeed.

### Household strategies and relational reflexivity

Although widely regarded as separate arenas, the family and the business are not independent of each other (Bourne and Calas, 2013). The household is influential as expectations, hopes or motives and more importantly as networks of family and friends who remain active in actors’ lives. Understanding household strategies seems therefore important for making sense of economic activities as social changes may force households to become

more self-conscious and reflexive in the way that they organize their resources (Wallace, 2012).

Archer's (2003, 2012) work on human reflexivity adds considerably more depth into this analysis because reflexivity is the mechanism through which actors make decisions about what is important to them. Reflexivity allows us to explain different motivations and how choices are made, as households may have a range of economic and non-economic goals which may guide their actions. Indeed, families evolve over time because new members are born, grown-up children may leave the family home, couples may separate and older generations pass away. From this perspective, the relational organization of close relationships as "chains of interdependency" (Elias, 1978) affects all household members, their interactions and household dynamics. Donati and Archer (2015:153) argue too that "relational reflexivity consists in orientating the subjects to the reality emergent from their interactions by their taking into consideration how this reality is able to feedback onto the subjects". This means that household members operate with regard to what is deemed to be relationally possible and relationally best for the household as it is perceived by all members considered together.

Here, we argue that the business (es) that female entrepreneurs set up is the relational emergent that results from their attempts to evaluate objectives and realize the common concerns of the household. Whether expected or not, in stable phases of life, the interrelated dynamics between actors remain unrecognized and downplayed; patterns of intimacy evolve through agonizing family life (Ketokivi, 2012). Based on an understanding of these relational patterns and context we identify three household strategies that female entrepreneurs engage with during moments of change and life discontinuities in order to overcome the gendered structures they experience. These are related to the changing dynamics of households: "leverage relationships", "repair relationships" and "maintain relationship". What emerges is a business as a means to achieve and sustain what is important for them and the household.

## METHODS

Data were collected by means of in-depth biographical interviews, through a life history methodology (Plummer, 2001). The 11 interviews reported here are part of a broader project focusing on understanding women entrepreneurs' lives, interests and experiences as a basis for knowledge construction. In the sample, participants were all drawn from the UK and ranged in age from 28 to 53 years. Ten interviewees were married and one divorced at the time of the interview. Of those interviewed seven had one child or more. Each participant asked to tell a life story focusing on their current and previous working/life contexts from the point of early aspiration and natal background through to their education and current family situation and employment.

To analyze our data first, a coding framework was constructed by the researchers using conceptual categories as thematic codes identified in the literature relating to gendered structures, life concerns, barriers, opportunities, and life/career decisions. Following this we coded the transcripts and extended it to include any new themes founded in the specific interview. Second, we focused on identifying recurrent patterns of household relations emerging in women's biographies. This allowed the reduction and interpretation of data by means of thematic coding and enabled us to interrogate the literature and primary data to isolate text extracts from across the range of participants. Finally, this enabled us to unpack the "household strategies" that led to the as collective outcome of their household and are presented in this article. These are conceptual categories emerging from the data and linked to the literature. Our analysis is not irreducible merely to giving information about a

succession of events but relates to the way women interpret, understand and make sense of their lives and thereby initiate action (Goia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012). Unpacking the household strategies emphasizes the autonomy of agents and shows how relational reflexivity is constituted in practice.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Household strategies of female entrepreneurs as social change**

The biographical narratives of our participants illustrate how the household provides the spatial and temporal context that enables them to set up a business. We identified three household strategies that stem from the re-organization of personal relations in the household for the maintenance of the relational goods resulting in the business as the relational emergent (Donati and Archer, 2015).

*Leverage relationships: “Coming in”.* Many of our participants explained how they developed relational reflexivity in their practical reasoning by setting up a conjoint and reciprocal enterprise with their partners when they found themselves under conditions of change and instability. “Leverage relationships” demonstrates the active process of “reconnecting” and carving new opportunities for the household and family. As shown in participants’ accounts such actions were deliberate because the security of the household was paramount.

One of our participants, Alex, explains how she “came in” to help her husband when he had problems to maintain a regular wage. Given her experience of building a client base through a bookkeeping start-up and her connections with a Women’s Business Network, she felt able to initiate their own painting and decorating firm.

“Then my husband got made redundant... So I threw my toy out the pram one day and said well I’ll find you work. If you like painting and decorating and tiling and things, I’ll find you work. I’ve done it for the book keeping; I’ll do it for you. It went from me sort of helping out and giving advice and finding the work, to sort of doing all of it. And then it’s just steadily grown; overall it’s steadily going in the right direction” (Alex, married with children)

Participants’ biographical accounts reveal that their reciprocity and togetherness with their partners supplied the agency to respond more openly to life change discontinuities, and increased the complementarity of their joint concern through their co-endorsement of a plan that shaped their life in the household. Our participants mentioned how the co-optation of resources through their relationships created complementarities and provided them with idiosyncratic knowledge that heightens their ability to create entrepreneurial opportunities.

These examples illustrate how female entrepreneurs by leveraging relationships, and exploiting the synergy between their household concerns and career projects, extend their horizons and create new opportunities that allow them to overcome the discontinuities they experience. As a consequence the businesses grew out of mutual interests and skills (Fletcher, 2010). Most of our participants have developed a portfolio of businesses that reflected the realities of their changing social situation and the challenges these represented.

*Repair relationships: “Moving out”.* Households encompass ties of solidarity and affection, as well as points of tension (Alsos et al, 2014). “Repair relationships” illustrates how tension is eased and affectivity is sustained as a result of an exit through separation or death. Opportunities to set up a business are thus borne out of familial histories in order to

sustain the relational goods associated with the ideological, affective and practical roles that the household plays.

Linda in her account illustrates how she set up her current business in an unconventional area, such as automotive services for women, as a result of their daughter moving out of home. There is an inherent relationality to this mobility. Linda and her husband feel responsible for their daughter in spite of distance. Providing practical support at a distance through the business for their adult daughter suggests a continuation of parenting beyond the typical age of dependency, which eases the emotional strain. Linda is now the founder, owner and managing director of an award-winning firm, which has attracted national attention. In her account she acknowledges the tension accompanying the exit of their daughter.

A combination of factors then occurred, but the main one was that our stepdaughter ... left home with her 3-year-old car... This caused her father a great deal of stress. We then started to look at how it might be possible to offer a package of motoring services specifically for women (*Linda, married with children*).

“Repair relationships” allowed female entrepreneurs to respond to affective changes associated with their household relations, settle back and ease an emotional tension. The relational organization of relationships is not fluid enough to simply adjust to changing circumstances. It requires resilient selves and supportive relationships.

*Maintain relationships: “Keeping in touch”*. Some of our respondents sought to start their own business when it became apparent that their current role could not be reconciled with their personal concerns in the household. “Maintain relationships” enabled them to pursue the ultimate concern of the household and relocate to recombine their resources in a subversive way to set up a business (Tomlinson et al, 2013).

Facing glass ceiling phenomena and leaving the corporation was inherent part in the biographies of some participants. In her account Laura, founder of a successful HR company, explains that her career had reached a peak in the UK. Working abroad was considered the best plan for her career at the time but not the right choice for her life. When she founded her business, Laura was not in a relationship but “keeping in touch” with mother and friends was essential.

“An international role wasn’t the right time for me in my life. I felt that I needed to spend more time with my family and friends, and I wanted to focus on my career in this country. So I decided to take redundancy and then set the business up in 2004” (*Laura, married*)

“Maintaining relationships”, as the other emergent strategies, explains the motives and decisions of female entrepreneurs with regard to what is deemed to be relationally possible and relationally best for the household, and reflects the considerable agency of female entrepreneurs in forming entrepreneurial opportunities.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Understanding Archer’s (2003, 2012) work on reflexivity in the context of household strategizing (Wallace, 2002) enabled us to explore why and how female entrepreneurs form opportunities. Our study makes evident the ideological, affective and practical roles that

household plays in shaping decisions and forming entrepreneurial opportunities. The household is, as result, perceived as *sui generis* social relation and not simply an aggregate of people (Donati and Archer, 2015).

Our analysis revealed how through the development of relational reflexivity the actions of female entrepreneurs highlight their agency as they have the power to implement practices they deem appropriate for their lives. For our respondents, structures were ‘what they confront – and have to grapple with’ (Archer, 1982: 463). Instead of adopting a deterministic perspective which understands the actions of female entrepreneurs as being defined by the gendered structures, we have argued that it is essential to maintain the analytical distinction of structure and agency (Archer, 2003) which allows us to explore the capacities needed to overcome these gendered structures. The three strategies identified indicate how female entrepreneurs are active, and in many ways entrepreneurial, while at the same time they are pragmatic in the way they conduct business. Entrepreneurship in this instance is a response to social instability (Calas et al, 2009).

Most of our participants can be characterized as “necessity portfolio entrepreneurs”. The establishment of portfolio businesses is well documented in the literature, but what is not documented is the relationship between these social discontinuities and emergent household strategies related to the available resources and relationships and the reflexive motivations of the individual in these contexts. Here, entrepreneurship represents a transformational activity related to the agency of those involved and their social situation. The emphasis is on the link between the actor, their relations, the household and society.

#### **REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS**

