

# Researching Women Entrepreneurs

## A Progress Report

by Kathryn Campbell

*Des données historiques limitées, une recherche contemporaine insuffisante, des méthodologies embryonnaires et une vision*

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*androcentrique du monde ont entravé la recherche sur les entrepreneuses. Toutefois, la nouvelle vision qu'offrent des sciences sociales sensibles au multiculturalisme et celle des méthodologies féministes associées à une coopération interdisciplinaire et une perspective multidisciplinaire du rôle des femmes contribueront certainement à rétablir la place des entrepreneuses dans le paysage de l'entreprise.*

North American economic and business histories contain very few references to women-owned businesses. This androcentric economic view has serious repercussions. In the first instance, when women entrepreneurs are denied knowledge of the collective experiences of other working women, they come to believe that they have no ancestors, that they are orphans.

With no documented history, women entrepreneurs face two equally unpalatable options. If they accept their orphan status, they may experience the stress, loneliness, and uncertainty of being pioneers. Alternatively, if they pretend that the prevailing business histories are gender-neutral, they may be persuaded that they should model their behaviour after male entrepreneurs.

When women are not written into economic histories, it is assumed, by default, that they have been nonessential to the development of the economy (Trofimenkoff and Prentice). Without an acknowledged business history, women entrepreneurs are unable to lean upon past traditions and status to inform and support them in their business endeavours. When their substantial contributions to the economy are ignored or denigrated, women have no recognized status as legitimate or alternate entrepreneurial role models.

Caroline Bird proposes that a pernicious socio-economic cycle has severely undermined progress for women in business. As she reports, in colonial United States,

...women helped their men, and when they became widows, which happened frequently, they had no choice but to go on running the farm, store, mill, newspaper, shipyard and even the ship... [F]rontier conditions...have motivated men and women to similar or androgynous goals. By contrast, periods of slow or orderly economic growth such as the first and fifth decades of this century have cultivated masculinity or femininity as goals in themselves. (17-18)

As economic conditions change, Bird suggests that periods can be characterized as either male-dominated or androgynous. Unfortunately for the long-term establishment of women in the workplace, Bird notes that the two philosophies have alternated frequently enough to keep every generation of American women from using their mothers as models (18).

Although some research implies that women entrepreneurs are a recent phenomenon, it would be more accurate to affirm that women's past economic contributions have not been fully or properly recorded. Currently, efforts to redress that deficiency are still missing the mark as large-scale surveys target growth-oriented, technology-based, full-time enterprises. A substantial population of women entrepreneurs choose to work outside this male-defined work model and are not "counted" as serious businesses. Alternatively, women who choose to operate within the dominant business norm are absorbed into that ethic and are judged on their similarity with their male counterparts; unique contributions are not valued and seldom noted.

### **Should women entrepreneurs be considered different?**

When entrepreneurial studies commingle results from male and female respondents, there is no opportunity to determine if women entrepreneurs are making distinctive or unique contributions to our understanding of the business process. The possibility that women entrepreneurs might choose to operate their businesses in a manner different from the prescribed norm is viewed with considerable unease and evokes diverse reactions. Some researchers (Schreier; Schwartz) assert that there are no differences between men and women entrepreneurs. Some (Gregg; Birley) gently caution that male/female differences are transitory, caused by women's recent entry into the world of entrepreneurship, while others (Taylor; Smith et al.; Hisrich and Peters) insist that female entrepreneurs and their enterprises are indeed very different. In the world of academe, fears of stigmatization and ghettoization (of both researcher and research) are not trivial issues. If

difference is dichotomized into inferiority, the risk of peer rejection becomes a critical inhibitor to research design and publication. To align women entrepreneurs within the existing male-based model might assure publication but the opportunity to learn about women's experiences is thereby lost.

When studies of women entrepreneurs are written with an unstated bias in favour of the no-difference or transitory difference view, pejorative judgments accrue. Implicit to this stance is the belief that women can and should operate their businesses as men do and that any deviations are weaknesses on the part of women who have not yet

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learned to "play the game." (Taylor). An alternative interpretation may be that women are playing the same game but with different rules or perhaps that they are playing an entirely different game!

However, the assertion of difference may, inadvertently, undermine an agenda of inclusion. Women entering the male-dominated business world have been likened to immigrants trying to become established in a new country (Hisrich and Brush). On the one hand, entrepreneurship seems to offer to the outsider/woman unfettered opportunities for economic self-sufficiency (Taylor). On the other hand, the incursion of minority groups into mainstream economic activity precipitates discussions of social mobility, social marginality, social integration, security, and the degree of legitimacy assigned by the dominant culture to entrepreneurship (Stevenson, 1983). In either case, entrepreneurship may simply become a sanctioned activity in which outsiders are allowed to function in the formal economy without challenging the status quo. Survival is dependent upon individual initiative not system support. In this configuration, entrepreneurship is more a process of containment than of opportunity.

To move beyond the contentious difference/no-difference dichotomy, researchers might assume a standard marketing philosophy. To conquer a market, a good marketer conducts a detailed market segmentation, with the specific intent of identifying distinct groups to whom goods or services can be targeted. There will be similarities and overlaps between some segments but the intent is to identify a viable group which shares sufficient commonalities to justify a product or service specifically intended for them.

Women entrepreneurs are an ideal market/research segment. They represent a sizable and growing population

of business owners. As reported in numerous studies, many female-owned businesses are less than five years old, are small, are service-oriented, have a limited number of employees (usually female), and self-finance with low levels of start-up capital. Often their education and work experience differ from their male counterparts. Collectively, these traits define a distinct market segment and argue for a focused research agenda.

Overall, while the risks of ghettoization and marginalization must be carefully evaluated, it is nonetheless imperative that women entrepreneurs be properly recognized as a distinct group of business owners; failure to do so has multiple costs. At the individual level, the process of exclusion has an inestimable, negative impact on a woman's self-perception. More generally, incomplete business histories misrepresent the many contributions made by women, ignore significant role models for women, and deny women the opportunity to feel pride in the accomplishments of others. In history, women business owners have limited legitimacy and credibility. Regrettably, current research has not yet been able to ameliorate this situation.

#### **Problems with current research**

At both the theoretical level and the operational level, there are problems with the current research on women entrepreneurs. The very shape of academic inquiry limits the study of women entrepreneurs. All academic disciplines and their related methodologies implicitly assume an androcentric stance which establishes male values, traits, and behaviours as the norm against which women and research on women are judged (Tomm and Hamilton). These constraints impinge upon all subsequent aspects of entrepreneurship research efforts.

There is, for example, no universal, agreed definition of entrepreneurship, but unchallenged are the assumptions that an entrepreneurial endeavour will operate within traditional commercial, for-profit boundaries, will be full-time, will exhibit an aggressive growth-orientation, and may have a strong technological component. Those values constitute a bias for work in the visible, paid economy and effectively exclude many entrepreneurial women who work in part-time, seasonal, home-based and even invisible (i.e. the black economy) circumstances. Trofimenkoff and Prentice report that both economic and labour historians have sustained the bias in favour of "work in the market place...[as] the only labour worthy of consideration" (8). If women business owners utilize resources, take risks, control their own activities, and work for personal gain, why are they not deserving of the descriptor entrepreneurial?

The study of women entrepreneurs operates within an evolving discipline. Many methodologies are in an embryonic stage of development; they have not yet been adequately "debugged" and require considerable care in their design and implementation. Peterson and Ainslie

published a volume of conference papers which itemized many deficiencies in current entrepreneurship research methods, including: convenience sampling; *ex post facto* surveys; inadequate attention to the pre-start-up phase; a need for longitudinal studies to study cause-effect relationships; and limited collaboration with other disciplines. As a subset of the field of entrepreneurship, the study of women entrepreneurs is susceptible to these weaknesses.

At the pragmatic, operational level, additional problems are evident. There is an urgent need for more research. Studies of women entrepreneurs are few in

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number, are of limited generalizability (Smith *et al.*; Watkins and Watkins; Stevenson), and suffer from limited circulation (Moore). Researchers regularly call for more studies, particularly longitudinal research (Peterson and Ainslie).

Too often, quantification is assumed to be superior to qualitative approaches (Calas and Smircich). Rationality, 'hard' data, laboratory experiments, controls, large scale surveys, the features equated with the agentic male approach (Mackie), are valued more than 'soft', subjective, contextualized data. Empirical methods and controlled experiments purposely ignore the social context and thus lose the richness and ambiguities of social interaction and economic development. In general, much of entrepreneurship research is skewed towards a quantitative, agentic approach.

A male-as-norm perspective can also overpower the interpretation of research findings. Stevenson (1988) documents instances of male bias in current entrepreneurial literature including the total exclusion of women from research samples or the removal of female samples which do not conform to the larger male sample. She is concerned, as well, about sexual imperialism and the imposition of male value systems and ways of thinking onto women researchers and subjects. Some studies comment, almost as a form of apology, that the women-owned businesses are very young (Schreier; Hisrich and Brush). The inference is that the business is so immature as to have nothing to say about entrepreneurship, that the business is somehow transient, and that the findings need not be taken seriously. Valuable insights into the formative workings of entrepreneurial venture are summarily dismissed.

When research findings dispute the male-as-norm premises, some researchers express puzzlement about their findings rather than recognizing the limitations of their

theories (Stevenson 1988). Taken to the extreme, the male-as-norm bias generates such absurd commentaries as Schreier's report of difficulty evaluating the childhood entrepreneurial activities of women because, unlike their male counterparts, they had not had paper routes. Unchallenged is the male-defined view underpinning his analysis, the bald assumption that childhood work experiences are tightly predictive of adult entrepreneurial potential. Thus, on a broad, theoretical level, acceptance of male behaviour as the norm severely limits the discovery of new entrepreneurial patterns, while at a specific, pragmatic level, the male-as-norm bias distorts seemingly objective data. All these problems invite greater diligence in the design, execution, and analysis of research studies.

### **The discipline of entrepreneurship is in the adaptive phase**

The methodologies adopted by entrepreneurship researchers reveal an evolutionary pattern, borrowing generously from other fields. The disciplines of history, economics, psychology, and sociology each in turn have had significant influence. The earliest entrepreneurial works were of the Horatio Alger variety, biographical histories of successful men who were presented as positive role models in the perpetuation of the capitalist, free enterprise system. Trofimenkoff and Prentice comment on "the tendency to model historical writing about women on the 'great man' approach to history" (8) resulting in studies of historical women that lacked context. Researchers began to analyze these "successes" (with success strictly defined in economic terms by such measures as gross sales or levels of employment), looking for predictive or causal behaviours and the psychological, "personality trait" approach gained momentum. Further research and analysis revealed that individual personality traits were not always sufficient to explain the emergence of an entrepreneur and the focus broadened to a sociological examination of the immediate family environment. Finally, the focus shifted away from an exclusively individual orientation and onto the environment as, partially or totally, deterministic. Drucker's theory of entrepreneurship as learnable and Vesper's belief in the reading and grasping of opportunities are examples of an environmental or exogenous approach.

Shapiro's displacement theory of entrepreneurship is firmly positioned within the environmental/exogenous interpretation of entrepreneurial activity. While he used this construct to describe entrepreneurs in general, the core theory has significant descriptive power for many women if additional displacement experiences unique to women are recognized. These events include: transplant shock, divorce, widowhood, separation, sex discrimination, children reaching school age, "the empty nest," aging, mastectomy, and reduced alimony settlements. Winter and Taylor discuss the displacement concept in their study of women entrepreneurs and Stevenson (1983) talks of various precipitating events which impact on

women entrepreneurs. Thus, the theory is susceptible to constructive adaptation.

Similarly, Knight's conceptualization of entrepreneurs as refugees has significant interpretative possibilities for women entrepreneurs. Seven of his refugee categories (foreign, corporate, parental, feminist, housewife, society, educational) can be applied to women entrepreneurs. These categories detail the variety of backgrounds and circumstances which might propel a woman into entrepreneurship and emphasize numerous barriers and pushes/pulls (Campbell, 1989) shaping women entrepreneurs.

There are, then, a number of theoretical frameworks within which an entrepreneurial study might be positioned: the documentation of the individual experience as a great personal role model; the tabulation of personality traits against an idealized norm believed to be predictive of success; the close study of the entrepreneurial family as a critical incubating influence; or the environmental/exogenous approach which repositions motivational pressures outside the individual. That selection provides a great deal of latitude within which to define and conduct

research about women entrepreneurs. All these options can be of assistance in capturing women entrepreneurs' past achievements as well as documenting their current activities.

### **Innovative new approaches**

Canadian researchers have contributed important new initiatives in the study of women entrepreneurs. Lavoie invites us to recognize a variety of entrepreneurial profiles—to see that women entrepreneurs are not a simplistically definable or homogenous population. She delineates women entrepreneurs along 16 organizational and personal factors. The resultant three categories (the sponsored entrepreneur; the young college-educated entrepreneur; and the social entrepreneur) help us appreciate the diversity of female entrepreneurial types.

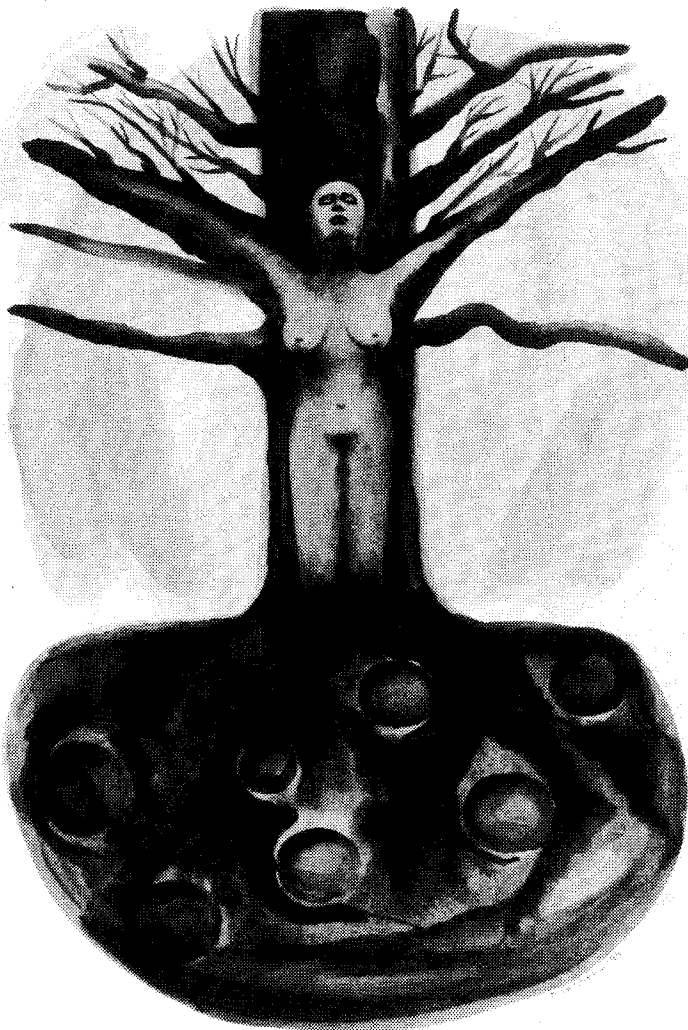
Lois Stevenson (1983) has also been a pioneer in the study of women entrepreneurs, having conducted a major study of Maritime women entrepreneurs. She urges us to find and report on women in all sectors of the economy. She stresses the importance of recognizing differences between entry level female entrepreneurs and those who have been operating a business for some time.

Elsewhere, Goffee and Scase have advanced the study of women entrepreneurs with the creation of an exclusively female typology. Women entrepreneurs are rated by their degree (high/low) of attachment to entrepreneurial ideals and conventional gender roles, thereby creating four types of female entrepreneurs: conventional, innovative, domestic, and radical. The grid is appealing as it aligns traits often considered to be contradictory and shows how they can co-exist with differing degrees of potency.

Thus, groundbreaking studies of women entrepreneurs are recording and analysing female entrepreneurial activities. While the relative youth of the entrepreneurship discipline invites and even demands innovative research, new initiatives must be designed with considerable care. Much could be gained by seeking out experimental and creative new research approaches, by painting many pictures of women entrepreneurs in many different mediums. Such an approach is not without risks. Mansell and Dansereau both comment on the dangers of working outside convention in an "unconsecrated genre."

### **The need for culturally sensitive research methods**

There is growing affirmation that women are socialized into a distinct culture whose tenets have not yet been clearly articulated (Campbell, 1991; Gilligan; Schaefer). To study female entrepreneurship as conditioned by a cultural context requires thoughtful questions and sensitive analysis of the responses. How do women define entrepreneurship? What are they seeking in self-employment? How do they measure success? Why are so many women working in the informal, part-time economy? These questions seem innocuous but the responses might challenge



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the androcentric belief in one prevailing entrepreneurial culture as epitomized by the simplistic enthusiasm for McClelland's need for achievement label. Expansion of the conceptual and operational definition of entrepreneurship could enhance our understanding of the sub-culture of the micro-enterprise and would uncover more women business owners. Under critical scrutiny would be the traditional economic definition of work and the status of money as the true/only measure of success. The phrasing of these questions is problematic as words from a shared vocabulary carry official connotations which do not easily admit alternative meanings. Similarly, responses

entrepreneurs are clearly heard. Cachon warns that there may, in fact, be considerable risk in depending too much on questionnaire results. "The pressure to respond to surveys in a 'generally accepted business manner' allows women to hide their personal opinions and feelings."

Cachon's experience suggests that standardized questionnaires may be producing misleading findings about women entrepreneurs. He is in favour of in-depth personal interviews—which generate very powerful results for him—and is consonant with social science initiatives to employ more qualitative, context-specific research methodologies.

### Options developed in feminist research

Feminist research can be instructive as entrepreneurship researchers build and expand research protocols. Specifically, from feminist scholars we can learn vigilance towards the pervasive gender bias endemic to research methods across all disciplines (Tomm and Hamilton) and we can draw upon a growing repertoire of alternative methodologies. There are a number of noteworthy options.

The revisionist approach was the earliest feminist thrust. It is an essential first step in the discovery process as it tries to recover women into recorded history or literature as both subject and object. However, it adds women to traditional paradigms and assumes that the theories themselves and their underlying assumptions are bias-free (Thibault). Thus, the revisionist view could help to overcome the dearth of historical data discussed previously but would be of limited usefulness to the extent that conventional economic definitions and analyses would then be applied, without challenge, to the newly-discovered business women.

The deconstructionist approach (Dansereau) is more sensitive to underlying biases and entails critical practices to expose the mechanics by which traditional modes of thought have been transmitted, thereby making explicit their unstated biases. Eco-feminism is deconstructionist. It combines ecological thinking and feminism to reject the conventional economic hierarchy of "man" over nature and substitutes an integrated system of caring, a holistic view of the interaction of human beings within their total environment (Sells). Many Third World development programs are functioning examples of eco-feminism and need to be written into the literature of feminist entrepreneurship.

Action-oriented research (Gregory) moves the researcher toward applied research in which the intention is to delineate the needs of present and potential women entrepreneurs, investigating means by which their successes might be encouraged. The intention of action-oriented research "is to help women cope with the alien culture of the organization" (Gregory 1.8). As a needs-driven approach, the focus is upon immediate, incremental assistance, often within prevailing social and economic struc-

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may employ common terms but convey subtle and significant nuances that are overlooked because of the apparent familiarity of the words. Culturally sensitive language becomes an issue.

Language is the quintessential vehicle by which culture is transmitted and entrenched. To date, the language and symbols of business have been doubly influenced first by male-dominated military and sports analogies (Taylor; Cohn) and, more recently, by the impersonal and instrumental lexicon of science. To encourage cultural sensitivity to the processes of female entrepreneurship, the language of research might need a more expressive orientation, meaning that it becomes more descriptive, affective, and organic (French). New words may be needed along with the careful redefinition of existing words.

If given the opportunity to describe their work in their own words, women may add substantially to the vocabulary of entrepreneurship. The instrumental, euphemistic language borrowed from the hard sciences is remarkably inept at capturing the passion and subjectivity of the entrepreneurial experience.

Once sensitized to the power of language to support or suppress cultural identities, the researcher must then critically analyze research employed. Questionnaires are routinely used to survey male subjects and we are pressured to survey women entrepreneurs to enable comparisons. Standardized questions would be valid if the questions were without gender-cultural bias but many surveys could not withstand a test for bias. Surveying the female entrepreneurial population may be a necessary first step but only to provide raw demographic data. Motivational variables, the measurement of job satisfaction, and styles of management and leadership are not readily captured in even the most carefully worded survey and need unstructured, culturally sensitive techniques to ensure that women

tures. While systemic change is not the targeted outcome of action-oriented research, thoughtful practitioner-oriented, culturally-sensitive research would augment our perspective on women entrepreneurs and would assist an agenda for change.

Social feminism has the stated intention of social and economic transformation and is succinctly described by Naomi Black.

The deliberately feminist researcher will feel that her distinctive contribution to knowledge is most likely to result from defining and examining those areas in which women's lives and values differ from men's. Through the understanding of these areas, she can make the largest possible contribution to the social project of feminists: a transformed society influenced by women's experiences, values and definitions. (183)

Social feminists promote a dual research agenda—theory building and effecting social change.

There are many issues to be addressed. Research on women entrepreneurs needs an historical and cultural context. In addition to ethnic and male/female cultural differences, we need to consider the possibility that studies conducted in the United States may not be applicable in Canada. We must encourage a diversity of approaches, seeking out the strengths of a multidisciplinary focus. We must not succumb to sexist criticisms that our research is not rigorous or scientific enough. We must work to build networks among colleagues, to share ideas, and to make women visible, as researchers and as subjects of research. We must challenge the sexist language of business research. We must be more accepting of an existentialist approach to entrepreneurial research. Stevenson calls for more research by women about women entrepreneurs (1988 5.42). Similarly, Mansell sees a need for "more female interpreters" (110), more women to record and decode the distinct cultural perspective of women. In our own separate and unique ways, drawing on and sharing the strengths of all our separate disciplines, we must work towards a world in which women finally are acknowledged for the important economic role they play.

Entrepreneurship is a source of optimism in an otherwise gloomy outlook for women in business (Campbell, 1989). The corporate "glass ceiling" (Morrison *et al.*) has not been penetrated; the wage-gap has not narrowed; sexism at work and in society generally has not abated. Many women have recognized these realities and the much-reported corporate bail-out (Hardesty and Jacobs) indicates that women are seeking other career and life strategies. The process of female entrepreneurship will be better understood if studied separately and intensively. To capture the female work culture, more culturally sensitive, qualitative research methods are needed. To recover the history of past female entrepreneurs, core data is required. A multidisciplinary approach is recommended to benefit from a diversity of perspectives. Scholarly goals can be

achieved through the rigorous accumulation of qualitative and quantitative empirical data upon which future longitudinal studies could be based. Policy imperatives can be addressed through the careful articulation of variables which support or suppress women's entrepreneurial initiatives. Pragmatic concerns can be satisfied with better training materials for present and potential women entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurship provides opportunities for women of all ages to shape their own life experiences and to get due recognition for their many capabilities. The more we learn about the process of entrepreneurship, the more we will be able to help women both to recover their economic past and shape their own future.

*Over the past ten years, Kathryn Campbell has been researching and teaching about women in business, both as managers and as business owners. The importance of entrepreneurial initiatives and the need for sensitivity to the female work culture are recurring themes in her writing. Her most recent work looks at women in the informal economy of Botswana.*

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