

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

“Paganpreneurs”: Demythologizing the gender gap in the “Cult of the Entrepreneur”

Mandy Wheadon
mwheadon@purdue.edu

Nathalie Duval-Couetil

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Entrepreneurship has been experiencing unprecedented media attention and visibility in the U.S. over the last few years. Often called “The Cult of the Entrepreneur” to describe the level of fervor surrounding entrepreneurship, the idols worshipped by this cult look strikingly homogenous: White males with tech startups. Those who do not fit into these categories still practice entrepreneurship, but deviations from prototypical norms and expectations set them apart as figurative “pagans” — individuals regarded as something other than “legitimate” (i.e., stereotypical) entrepreneurs. This paper uses one type of “paganpreneur” — the female entrepreneur — to interrogate the cultivation and perception of hierarchical legitimacy in entrepreneurship by: 1) exploring the social and cultural factors prompting the recurrent comparison of entrepreneurship to a cult in recent years; 2) considering what it means to be a “paganpreneur” by investigating the social construction of legitimacy and its inverse, illegitimacy. Specifically, the underlying processes normalizing hierarchical differences in perceptions of legitimacy, participation rates, types of work performed, access to resources, and outcome expectations for male and female entrepreneurs are examined in relation to the larger historical and sociocultural contexts they are embedded within; and 3) discussing the consequences of hierarchical perceptions of legitimacy based on gender and suggesting the necessity of a more diverse cultural climate where one’s gender no longer impacts the intention to become, or likelihood of succeeding, as an entrepreneur.