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Title: Making sense of women entrepreneurship research : a qualitative meta-analytical review

Year: 2016

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Aaltio, I., & Wang, Q. (2016). Making sense of women entrepreneurship research : a qualitative meta-analytical review. In ICSB 2016 World Conference : Proceedings (pp. 1-19). International Council for Small Business.

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Making sense of women entrepreneurship research: a qualitative meta-analytical review

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Abstract: *In this study, we explore how extant literature contributes to the development in women entrepreneurship research in terms of both theoretical and practical perspectives. Accordingly, an ostensible tendency can be seen as women entrepreneurship shifting from a marginalized discipline to a mainstream concept concerning more multi-dimensional attributes. Gender has been used as a lens into studies and it is understood as a socially-constructed process – to simply conduct comparative analysis between sexes cannot lead to more fruitful research results – women entrepreneurs need a medium to undergo their significant contributions and important roles. Literature materials are chosen with the keywords “women entrepreneurship” from academically well-known journals and book compilations which are published within recent 10 years (from 2006 to 2015). Two relatively new books (published in 2014 and 2015 respectively) will be added to our research data list. Thus, certain new findings will be generated and evolved based on our previous conference paper (which focused on the publications ranging from 2006 to 2012). Our research objective can be reflected from three questions: (1) Why has women entrepreneurship been a focus of entrepreneurship research? (2) How does current research contribute to women entrepreneurship both from conceptual and practical points of view? (3) What are the future concerns indicated by the findings? Four positions (“equal opportunities”, “meritocracy”, “special contribution”, and “alternative values”) synthesized by Alvesson and Billing (2009) as “approaches to the understanding of women and leadership” will be “borrowed” for grouping and categorizing our findings. We will*

build up a reflexive relationship between literature and seven codes applied in ATLAS.ti. (Seven codes include “overall conceptual development”, “empirical data development”, “enterprising promise”, “comparisons between male and female entrepreneurs”, “gender disparity”, “important role performance of women entrepreneurs”, and “cultural and/or national differences”). A qualitative meta-analysis is to underpin and concentrate on discourses related to diverse perspectives in women entrepreneurship study.

Keywords: *women entrepreneurship, gender study, qualitative meta-analytical review*

Synopsis of the central thesis

Recently, research in women entrepreneurship has had an encouraging start and continuously gained cumulative attention in academia. “Mainstream” constructs explored from a gendered perspective has been legitimized instead of being noted as a discrete list of topics especially pertinent to women or gender researchers. (Lewis et al. 2014) From the late 1990s, “wave” researching women entrepreneurship in small business has been positioned from a marginalized to a more central stage. Situation is changing – women are not merely an “invisible” force and they cannot be roughly categorized as “otherness”. (Kyrö, 2009) The substantial growth of both quality and quantity in women-owned/led enterprises has to some extent been analyzed within a multi-dimensional paradigm based on diverse approaches. (Bruin, Brush, and Welter, 2006; Brush et al. 2010; Acs et al. 2011; Hughes et al. 2012; Lewis et al. 2014) Contextual factors also at the same time shed light on research concerning how women develop their businesses, which includes not only internal (individual characteristics and ways to gather financial and/or social capital) but also external (environmental, cultural and demographic influences) elements. (Brush et al. 2010; Hughes and Jennings, 2012) “Contextual explanations” from an “objectivist and/or constructionist approach” deserve more focus compared to

“individualistic” approaches. (Hughes et al. 2012) Furthermore, various ways of studying women entrepreneurship are being explored by following a “macro-meso-micro logic” involving “diverse settings, questions and approaches”. (Hughes and Jennings, 2012; Lewis et al. 2014)

We need to study the contribution that gender studies and women entrepreneurship have brought to the field as they cannot be self-evident. (Fischer, Reuber, and Dyke, 1993; Sirec, Tominc, and Rebernik, 2010; Carrier, Julien, and Menvielle, 2008) Therefore, we plan to set three objectives in this proposal based on following questions: Why has women entrepreneurship been a focus of entrepreneurship research? How does current research contribute to women entrepreneurship both from conceptual and practical points of view? What are the future concerns indicated by the findings? Literature resources are chosen with close attention to the keywords “women entrepreneurship” in current issues from journals and book compilations. In order to clarify the research aims in a more systematic manner, it is to apply a qualitative meta-analysis by exploring the discourses related to diverse perspectives studying women entrepreneurship.

Seven codes (Table 1) have been summarized after reading through the data, which presents certain initiatives and/or interests manifesting what, why and how women entrepreneurship is still a scarcely-represented area of study; and therefore, it does need further analysis. Generally, the absence in the conceptual and empirical development appears to be considered as prevalent concerns. Not only in terms of quantity but also the quality improved in women-owned enterprises is also becoming an indispensable research area. Furthermore, it is necessary to analyze why to compare female with male entrepreneurs and to achieve meaningful comparisons. (Fischer, Reuber, and Dyke, 1993; Carrier, Julien, and Menvielle, 2008). However accordingly, contemporary research in women entrepreneurship has inspired “new directions” (Ahl, 2006),

“the focus has moved away from gender as a variable toward understanding gender as a lens and a socially constructed category... suggests that it is not about comparisons between the sexes but particular gendered processes that contribute to the marginalization or subordination of women as entrepreneurs” (Blackburn, Hytti, and Welter, 2015). As “gender reflects all the social practice of its making” (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007) by outlining a set of political, socioeconomic, labor market and health factors that have been shown historically to have a significant impact on gender inequality” (Smith-Hunter, 2013), thus the increasingly important women performance role needs to be contextualized not only in global scenario but also from an insight into cultural differences between both developing and developed countries.

Four positions synthesized by Alvesson and Billing (2009) – “approaches to the understanding of women and leadership” will inspire our research with its advocates of equality and concerns on gender studies. Inheriting from feminism, “alternative value” emphasizes more on the differences between female and male “values” and their contradictory attitudes. Instead of being critical to male-dominant stereotypes, “special contribution” aims to unveil the “new and important” achievement provided by women with their idiosyncratic capabilities. Different from the previous two positions which are related to individual perspective, “equal opportunities” and “meritocracy” have been summarized from the institutional view – the former one concerns the equality “looks at obstacles and possibilities from an ethical-political point of view”, while the latter one anticipates a more widened area to “increase effectivity” by “combating the irrational social forces” which suppress human qualification for proper use. (Alvesson and Billing, 2009) Accordingly, we posited the codes and their links to each position (Table 1). Qualitative meta-analytical view will be taken as to generate more findings based on books published recently

(especially 2014 and 2015 on the basis of our previous conference paper). It is to further our understanding of four positions and their interrelations with related discourses.

Methodology

Method applied in this study is a literature-based analysis. It is to review papers concerning women entrepreneurship selected from academically-respected and leading publications. In total, the resource pool (Table 2) includes 32 journal articles (from five journal special issues) and 124 book chapters (from eight book compilations). Time ranges from 2006 to recently 2015, through which we set the keywords primarily as “women entrepreneurship” and other relevant terms relating to women/female entrepreneurs/business owners/managers can also be accounted as to reach the promising quantity and quality of research materials. (We added two books published recently in 2014 and 2015 to our previous conference paper.) Qualitative meta-analysis conducted in the research can provide a useful technique to help us synthesize and interpret discursive construction based on the chosen data. The beginning stage is to read 13 introductions, approaching a general picture by tracking the contemporary trends in the field of women entrepreneurship research. A software support tool - ATLAS.ti - will be used to extract key words and patterns through the remaining literature (which includes 143 papers and book chapters). The objective of the whole analyzing process is to gather relevant findings based on the research questions.

Findings

The table (Table 3) exhibits our findings categorized by codes, keywords related to codes, and discourse examples. Keywords are gathered based on literature ranging from 2006 to 2012. The direct quotations showed in the fifth column have been selected from two book compilations published in 2014 and 2015. It is to see how the research into women entrepreneurship develops

and which points are emphasized more in recent years as compared to a retrospective of previous analysis – a sense-making in women entrepreneurship study is in progress.

Discussions and implications

In Table 3, we have highlighted the points discussed more in recent publications (quotations in bold). In a sense, gender inequality has been centered as a core issue which needs more concern and change. Many facets reflect this unequal situation – gender congruency, entrepreneurial segregation, family business succession, accessing to financial capital and social capital, exclusion of women in certain social networks, copreneurship, self-employment, work-family relationship, venture creation, etc. And certain contextual factors gained more research interests, for example, entrepreneurial ecosystem, “gender dynamics within the couple” (support from the spouse for women entrepreneur), family business, gender differences among copreneurs, etc. Additionally, it is necessary to gather relevant data from developing countries and explore how women entrepreneurship developed in different cultural backgrounds as some researchers take western countries’ examples for granted. To compare female and male entrepreneurs without a clear mind-set will eventually direct researchers to a vicious circle. In order to avoid detrimental results, it asks for a proper prerequisite, either from personal or institutional points of view. Not to completely imitate feminism (radically critical to male-dominant stereotypes), a rather rationalist viewpoint can be applied as gender itself is a social construction. As women have contributed many great achievements to the society and economy, it is ostensible to pay attention to women’s unique entrepreneurial capabilities. Thus, the ultimate goal at this point can be set as to help women entrepreneurs to achieve equal opportunities in an organization. Organizational instrumentality corresponds to ethical concern in terms of less discrimination. Furthermore, in society, people need to be treated equally according to their capabilities

regardless of simply gender consideration. Position with proper remuneration can thus be proportionally allocated with the aim of enhancing organizational efficiency and achieving the common good. Meritocracy is not a utopia but an ideal situation though anticipating an optimal harmony among “macro (country, state and culture), meso (firm-level) and micro (individuals and dynamics) dimensions” (Hughes and Jennings, 2012; Lewis et al. 2014). This is also applicable throughout the world as well as for developing countries.

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Table 1.
Code

Code	Name	Linked to “Four Positions” (Alvesson and Billing, 2009)
1	Research interests in overall conceptual development of women entrepreneurship study	Code1 and 2 General concern
2	Research interests in empirical data development of women entrepreneurship study	
3	Research interests in enterprising promise of women entrepreneurs	“Special contribution”
4	Research interests in comparisons between female and male entrepreneurs	“Special contribution”
5	Research interests in gender disparity (male-dominant stereotype, barriers for female-entrepreneurs approach financial and/or capital, inequality, etc.)	“Equal opportunities” “Meritocracy” “Alternative value”
6	Research interests in important role performance of women entrepreneurs	“Special contribution”
7	Research interests in cultural and/or national differences for studying women entrepreneurship	Contextual concern

Table 2.
Research Data

Year	Title	Editors	Publisher	Chapters/articles	Collecting ways
2006	Towards Building Cumulative Knowledge on Women's Entrepreneurship	Bruin, Brush, and Welter	Journal of Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice Special Issue	6	Directly downloaded from the official website (university online environment)
2006	Women and Entrepreneurship: Contemporary Classics	Brush et al.	Edward Elgar Publishing	30	Scanning based on paper-format book
2007	Advancing a Framework for Coherent Research on Women's Entrepreneurship	Bruin, Brush, and Welter	Journal of Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice Special Issue	7	Directly downloaded from the official website (university online environment)
2007	The Perspective of Women's Entrepreneurship in the Age of Globalization	Markovic	Information Age Publishing	18	Directly downloaded from the official website (university online environment)
2008	Women Entrepreneurship and Social Capital: A Dialogue and Construction	Aaltio, Kyrö, and Sundin	Copenhagen Business School Press	11	Downloaded from the online resource from university E-library
2009	Women Entrepreneurship in the Broader Zone	Aaltio, Kyrö, and Sundin	Journal of Enterprising Culture	6	Directly downloaded from the official website (university online environment)
2010	Women Entrepreneurs and the Global Environment for Growth: A Research Perspective	Brush et al.	Edward Elgar Publishing	17	Downloaded from the online resource from university E-library
2011	Small Business Economics on Female Entrepreneurship	Acs et al.	Journal of Small Business Economics Special Issue	6	Directly downloaded from the official website (university online environment)

	in Developed and Developing Economies				
2012	Extending Women's Entrepreneurship in New Directions	Hughes et al.	Journal of Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice Special Issue	7	Directly downloaded from the official website (university online environment)
2012	Women's Entrepreneurship and Economics: New Perspectives, Practices, and Policies	Galindo and Ribeiro	Springer	15	Directly downloaded from the official website (university online environment)
2012	Global Women's Entrepreneurship Research: Diverse Settings, Questions and Approaches	Hughes and Jennings	Edward Elgar Publishing	13	Scanning based on paper-format book
2014	Women's Entrepreneurship in the 21 st Century: An International Multi-Level Research Analysis	Lewis et al.	Edward Elgar Publishing	15	Scanning based on paper-format book
2015	Context, Process and Gender in Entrepreneurship Frontiers in European Entrepreneurship Research	Blackburn, Hytti, and Welter	Edward Elgar Publishing	5 (Introduction and 4 chapters selected as relevant to women entrepreneurship research)	Scanning based on paper-format book

**Table 3.
Findings**

Code	Name	Keywords examples (used for searching relevant discourses in ATLAS.ti) Literature 2006 - 2012	Discourses examples Literature 2014 - 2015
1	Research interests in overall conceptual development of women entrepreneurs hip study	Agency theory, Expectancy theory, Institutional theory, Management and leadership, Motivation theory, New theoretical/conceptual approaches (multi/integrated contexts), Political approach, Psychological approach, Social learning theory, Social network theory, Venture	<p>“Theory development exploring the role of gender in venture creation and sources of possible differences between men and women in this process is limited.” (Brush, Bruin, and Welter, 2014)</p> <p>“In the entrepreneurial literature, the discourse on gender, networks and networking in particular has been relatively limited, and only recently has this been explore more fully.” (Leitch and Harrison, 2014)</p> <p>Gender congruency theory “provides a model for understanding the relationship between the perceived fit between an individual and their occupational role, and ensuing social outcomes”. (Sappleton, 2014)</p> <p>“...advance discussions on the potential theoretical relevance of feminist social constructivist-rationalist choice frameworks for understanding the complex nature of their identities...” (Esnard, 2014)</p>
2	Research interests in empirical data	Contextual/environmental analysis, Historical approach, Industrial approach	<p>“Scholarly knowledge about how incubators and their surrounding entrepreneurial ecosystems work in relation to gender issues is still relatively scarce.” (Politis,</p>

development
of women
entrepreneurs
hip study

Gabrielsson, and Dahlstrand, 2014)

“More research on gender and succession is required and different contextual settings may offer new insights.” (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014)

“One is the **scarcity** of studies on women entrepreneurs in **developing countries**, especially in the context of the Diana International Project. The other is to focus, in the context of a strong male-dominated **Islamic** nation, on very successful (high growth) women-owned firms (the ‘outliers’).” (Jomaraty and Courvisanos, 2014)

“Support from a spouse or companion is clearly identifies in research as a key factor for success. However, the issue of the **gender dynamic within the couple is rarely mentioned**. Moreover, **male spousal/companion-based support (SCS) of women entrepreneurs (WE) remains a relatively unexplored field**.” (Chasserio, Lebegue and Poroli, 2014)

“Copreneurs are an under-researched but important group because they provide an excellent point for unpacking the interplay among business, family life, and gender.” (Krizkova, Jurik, and Dlouha, 2014)

“...paucity of qualitative research that seeks to deepen our understanding of the relationship between self-employment and work-family conflict...”(Esnard, 2014)

“‘gender as a lens approach’ as opposed to

3	Research interests in enterprising promise of women entrepreneurs	Internationalization, Organizational-level goal/growth/performance	<p>a ‘gender as a variable approach’...this implies recognition of the importance of context and a conceptualization of succession as a gendered activity” (Byrne and Fattoum, 2015)</p> <p>“Growth in the numbers of women-owned business worldwide has brought attention to their achievements and to the gendered nature of entrepreneurial experiences.” (Krizkova, Jurik, and Dlouha, 2014)</p> <p>“Since the 1970s, there has been a massive upsurge in business ownership among women. In the United States, women now own around 28 per cent of all privately held, non-agricultural businesses. In 2008, American women started over 400 new enterprises a day – twice the rate of other groups (that is, male-owned and jointly owned).” (Sapleton, 2014)</p>
4	Research interests in comparisons between female and male entrepreneurs	Empowerment, Feminist analysis, Gender study, Male-dominant stereotype, Male VS. Female entrepreneurs, Pragmatist feminism	<p>“their feminine deficits fuel entrepreneurial problems such as risk aversion, reluctance for growth, etc., which generates a circle of disadvantage”(Marlow, 2015)</p> <p>“In almost all participating Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) countries, the structure by gender reveals that men are more entrepreneurially active than women.” (Sirec and Mocnik, 2014)</p>
5	Research interests in gender disparity (male-	Authority, ethical approach, Financial capital, Gender (in)equality, Resource-based view, Social capital (human resources)	<p>“Extant research also reveals a clear picture of a gender gap in venture creation and ownership activity.” (Sirec and Mocnik, 2014)</p> <p>“The issue of daughter exclusion in family</p>

	<p>dominant stereotype, barriers for female-entrepreneurs approaching financial and/or capital, inequality, etc.)</p>		<p>business succession remains an under-researched area... ‘gender as a lens approach’ as opposed to a ‘gender as a variable approach’ ...this implies recognition of the importance of context and a conceptualization of succession as a gendered activity” (Byrne and Fattoum, 2015)</p> <p>“This stream of research has contributed much to our awareness of the potential barriers facing female academic entrepreneurs. For example:...the exclusion of women from high-level industrial links and commercial networks.” (Politis, Gabrielsson, and Dahlstrand, 2014)</p> <p>“...entrepreneurial segregation may undermine the progress that has been made in women’s uptake of entrepreneurship. Indeed, there is evidence that entrepreneurial segregation contributes to inequality in similar ways to sex segregation in employment. Women earn less than men in self-employment and business ownership, with segregation making a significant contribution to earnings disparities...two potential antecedents of entrepreneurial segregation: discrimination and access to finance...” (Sappleton, 2014)</p> <p>Gender differences in innovation among US entrepreneurs (Robb and Coleman, 2014)</p> <p>“Women play an increasingly important role in entrepreneurship and economic development throughout the</p>
6	<p>Research interests in important role performance</p>	<p>Entrepreneurship identity, Individual analysis, Individual aspect (performance – growth/role), Innovation, Opportunity-identification/recognition, Risk/uncertainty, Self-efficacy, Self-</p>	

of women entrepreneurs	employment, Self-management, Social entrepreneurship, Trust, Work-family relationship	world ... governments increasingly recognize the need to encourage women in forming and growing new ventures. To understand how self-efficacy is acquired in different contexts also helps us to appreciate factors of particular cohorts of women entrepreneurs” (Tegtmeier and Mitra, 2015)
7 Research interests in cultural and/or national differences for studying women entrepreneurs hip	African countries, Asian countries, Latin American countries, Cultural analysis	Female entrepreneurship in rural Vietnam : “During the last few decades female entrepreneurship has been expanding in most parts of the world and is considered one the fastest-growing entrepreneurial populations worldwide. This development is seen as particularly important for low-income countries.” (Nguyen, Frederick, and Nguyen, 2014) “Women in Asian countries such as Singapore and Thailand have entrepreneurship rates on a par with their male counterparts, and these countries create as many new firms, proportionately, as the United States and other Western countries. Highlighting the experiences of women entrepreneurs in both China and Japan , this chapter explores the potential impact of state policies and culture on the incidence of women’s entrepreneurship in Asian countries.” (Ibata-Arens, 2014) Growth process of small and medium-sized manufacturing in developing countries : a study of women-owned firms in Bangladesh : “One is the scarcity of studies on women entrepreneurs in developing

countries, especially in the context of the Diana International Project.” (Jomaraty and Courvisanos, 2014)

Centering **Caribbean** women’s gendered experiences and identities: a comparative analysis of female entrepreneurs in **St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago** (Esnard, 2014)

“...we focus on a prominent woman entrepreneur competition in **Turkey**...”
(Gogus, Orge, and Duygulu, 2015)
