Entrepreneurs: family, business, and gender

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Abstract:
This paper explores entrepreneurs’ understanding of family and business. It draws on findings from qualitative research, which explores the experience of entrepreneurship and its intersection with family life from the perspectives of entrepreneurs and their spouses. This paper focuses only on the entrepreneurs. The men and women in this study have similar motivations and have businesses of a similar type, scale and sphere of operation. They subscribe to the entrepreneurial myth of the achievement of success through individual hard work, talent and persistence. All emphasise the importance of family. However, gender differences persist in how they do business, and in their understandings and practice of family. An examination of entrepreneurs’ understanding and practice of work and family is important as it highlights the gendered structures underpinning economic activity within the fields of the market and the family, and challenges the notion of entrepreneur as a heroic individual.

Gender and Entrepreneurship
For some time, feminist economists have questioned the ‘masculine’ assumptions of neoclassical economics which give ‘market relations pride of place over family and social relations, [and] emphasize heroic individualism while ignoring interdependence’ (Ferber and Nelson 2003,vii).

In a similar way, entrepreneurship literature has been criticised for constructing entrepreneurs as autonomous, self-interested men (Lewis 2006; Johnson Ahl 2002). While there has been an increasing research focus on female entrepreneurs since the late 1970s, female entrepreneurs still tend to be cast in opposition to the norm of male entrepreneurship (Jonson Ahl 2002). Much of the research on female entrepreneurs suggests that women do business differently: they have different motivations, and are not interested in growth because they want to better manage their work and family.
responsibilities (see Greene et al 2003). Other research indicates that women have similar motivations to those of men (Birley 1989), are interested in growth, but have different patterns of business growth because of their family orientations (Morris et al 2006).

The gendered nature of entrepreneurship is also reflected in popular and business media, which presents female entrepreneurs as ‘super-women’ who manage to do business while also having a family. Profiles of male entrepreneurs rarely mention family. Where they do, the family is portrayed as a source of support and refuge. These types of profiles are part of a ‘mythological snowballing process’ that reinforce and perpetuate the entrepreneurial myths which ‘necessarily bypass the reality and balance of real working lives’ (Nicholson and Anderson 2005:166).

The study

This paper draws on research, undertaken as part of my Ph.D, which explores the family resources used in generating and maintaining new wealth, and the effects on intimate relationships of the pursuit of success. ‘Entrepreneur’ is a widely used and disputed term (Ernst & Young 2002). My research focuses on individuals whose privately owned businesses are characterised by the pursuit of fast growth and innovation. This kind of entrepreneurial activity is uncertain and risky, and failure can directly impinge on the entrepreneur’s family (for a discussion of sexually transmitted debt, see Fehlberg 1997).

Over a fourteen-month period (2002-2004) I interviewed entrepreneurs and their spouses (50 in total). To avoid the bulk of Australian small business owners whom Hindle and O’Connor (2005:3) describe as ‘not really entrepreneurial’, potential interviewees were identified from Australia business award lists (such as Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award).

This paper focuses only on the 31 entrepreneurs (20 men, eleven women). Most of the entrepreneurs were born in Australia, of middle-class, Anglo-Australian backgrounds, were well educated and under 50 years of age. Almost all of the entrepreneurs were in marriage type relationships, and most had at least two children. Their businesses ranged from large established international companies to start-ups. This paper explores entrepreneurs’ understanding and practice of family and business.
Doing family

Men

Most of the men said family comes first. The men talked about family in two main ways. First they described their family arrangements as complementary or traditional. These arrangements were presented as a personal preference rather than an ideological position. For example, Michael:

We’re probably not the current ideal. We’re pretty traditional in that [my wife] was committed to being a housewife and a mother […] that’s what she wanted to do.

These men talked about their role as a provider and a protector. As fathers they emphasised being a disciplinarian, ‘catching up’ with the family at meals, attending school functions, and family holidays. Most of the older men highlighted their wives’ domestic and mothering skills and described their relationship as a partnership.

Several of these men referred to the ‘deal’ and used business terminology when talking about their family arrangements. For example, James compared a wife and husband to

HR and Finance - they work well together but you don’t try and get the finance person to run HR or vice versa. It’s the same sort of thing – it’s a partnership.

Some admitted that their wives and children weren’t always happy with the ‘deal’. For example, Robert said his wife and children ‘complain a lot’ and that he ‘could probably change it around’ but he said they have to balance his frequent absence and the pervasiveness of business with their ‘very privileged’ lifestyle.

Second, the men said they wanted to do things differently from their fathers. These men emphasised their desire to be ‘to be a great dad and a fantastic partner’. David said that he wanted to be not only a father ‘but a friend as well’, someone his kids can ‘look up to’ and ‘admire’ not only for his achievements in business but also ‘in life’ as ‘a good person’. For Mark, being a great dad meant ‘being there’, ‘being supportive’ and ‘creating the right opportunities’ and ‘the right environment’ for his children and for his partner. As fathers, these men stressed the importance of being able to choose to play with the children, drive them to school, and to help out with caring for them.
Some of these men talked about struggling with the practice of an equal partnership with their wives. For example, Nick said he found changing from boss to ‘a nurturing listening husband [...] a bloody struggle’. In business, as the boss he could problem solve and take decisive action but he said, ‘you can’t do that at home’.

**Women**

The women did not talk about family coming first in the same way as the men. For these women there was no need to say it. Almost all the women were clear that the well-being and happiness of the family was their responsibility. Only one woman said that family has ‘never just been my job - it's always been our job’.

Almost all subscribed to the ideal of intensive hands on mothering (Hays 1996). The older women said there was ‘no way’ they could have combined business and family responsibilities when they had young children. The younger women actively managed the ways they did business and family so that they could do both. These women talked about the importance of preparing and sharing meals, supervising homework, and engaging in school and community activities with and for their children.

Some of the women talked about their ‘good luck’ at having supportive partners who ‘allowed’ them to focus on business. For example, Melanie said

> I certainly couldn’t have done what I have done without him and [...] if I had a different type of partner I would be divorced without a doubt. Because I just don’t think there are many men who would tolerate the pressures, or the responsibility it puts on them.

Most of the women talked about needing to be aware - and protective - of their partner’s feelings. Some were frustrated that despite their success they felt responsible for the partners’ emotional wellbeing. Several of these women said that they felt judged as wives and mothers rather than as business women.

**Doing business**

In this study both the men and women had businesses of similar size and scope of operations, and had similar reasons for wanting to do business. They wanted to do business because it ‘felt natural’; they had a desire for self-actualisation, independence, recognition, and money. As Rachel said ‘The two great drivers are personal success and money’.
Two kinds of motivations were clearly aligned with gender. For some of the men, entrepreneurship was an opportunity to test oneself against others (often their fathers) and prove themselves as men. For the women, entrepreneurship was an opportunity to act as positive role models for their children and for other women.

The men stressed the time they took in doing business. They emphasised how hard they worked and the long hours they spent working and travelling. There is no question that, on a day to day basis, work came first for them. The men travelled extensively. They said they did not enjoy it, but it was unavoidable. Most of the men admitted they don’t want to turn off from business. They highlighted the need for constant availability and emphasised their use of technology to enable this.

I love it! […] If we’re watching a movie I’ll have my Blackberry on the table with me. If someone sends me an email I want to know what’s happening. […] I’m addicted to that sort of stuff. I never find it intrusive because I love it!

(Michael)

Like the men, the women worked hard. They worked long hours, but they managed their time to enable them to fulfil what they saw as their roles as wives and mothers. As Rachel said ‘you have to be able to organise it’. These women emphasised management systems, support structures, and the use of technology in controlling the business/family interface.

Some of the women said they do not want to turn off from business but unlike the men they felt they should. These women wanted to do business. They enjoyed the money and the feelings of success and achievement, but unlike the men, their role as entrepreneurs did not excuse them from domestic and family care responsibilities.

Work/family Balance

Men

The men talked about work and family balance in four main ways. First, some said that business is life. For example, Phillip argued that ‘the whole thing is one’. He said that the idea that time should be divided into ‘time for home, some time for work, some time for sleep’ was nonsense. But he acknowledged that ‘people get resentful because they think that the boundaries have been broached’.

Second, several men drew diagrams and used phrases that I later found were from business self help literature. Richard leapt up and drew diagrams on the whiteboard.
He said that business and family should be kept separate because ‘it's dangerous to mingle the two […] very dangerous.’ He said ‘There's work, there's social, and there's family’. These are ‘competing forces’. He explained that ‘you've just got to decide and trade off’; you might spend too much time on work, but you can balance that out by going on a holiday with your family later.

Jack also drew a diagram of three overlapping ‘circles of life’ which he labelled ‘what’s good for Jack, what’s good for the family, and what’s good for business’. He said he tried to keep these areas of his life ‘all interactive’. Jack believed that the secret to work family balance was to ensure that his wife mixed with entrepreneurial families. He explained ‘if I wasn’t there and it was a regular group of people they’d be saying negative things’. But, if ‘she mingles with people who all work hard […] entrepreneurial people who are all travelling, working’ then she won’t be confronted by negative comment. For Jack, managing work and family meant managing his wife.

Third, for some of men work and family balance meant having more ‘me time’. For example, Robert said starting out and growing the business was hard but he had found a balance.

> Today I balance - you know I fly planes, I race cars, I play golf. I do my business. I have my friends. I try to balance it all out.

Fourth, some of the men explicitly referred to the problems they faced in trying to do things differently. Matt described how many of his business associates, who have had relationships that have ‘crumbled due to the time constraints of the business’ chose to go out with ‘very, very simple women who don’t have many expectations of them’. He said this is because ‘they’ve got so many expectations at work that they don’t really want those expectations when they get home’. He did not agree with what they do but he could:

> understand that [laughs]. But I couldn’t do it because personally I’m a lot younger than them and from a different generation. I couldn’t go out - like a partner is a partner - like in business or in life it’s not…

Matt, like many of the younger men, was struggling to find a way to reconcile his ideas about relationships with the pressures of doing business. He said
society puts a lot more pressure on people nowadays [...] we’re in a sort of transition stage I reckon, like my generation, [...] our parents were either there or not, so you’ve either got a role model of how to be a stay at home parent or you’ve got a role model of how to be an absent parent.

**Women**

The women didn’t refer to ideas about managing work and family in the same way as the men. For these women, work and family was a matter of practice rather than theory. They took an active approach to managing the intersection of business and family, but most did not challenge their domestic and caring roles. For example, Hannah said

the children can’t be managed so the business has got to be managed. [...] This business works really well without me. [...] You have to move out of the entrepreneur model and into management model, because if you can’t do that then you put a limit on what you can do.

For the younger women, a common strategy for integrating work and family was to take their babies and very young children to work with them. This was not always easy for them or their staff as Melissa explained:

We did have someone before who didn’t like having the baby around [...] and she left and I was glad because people who get pissed off by children don’t work at My Company – but they’re all great now. Everyone plays with him and loves him.

The women said that being their own boss enabled flexibility that would be ‘impossible as an employee’, and yet they also admitted that the demands of business meant that ‘in some ways you have no flexibility’ because ‘you have to keep up with the challenges’. Most of the women said that their experience of doing business had been affected by having children. They acknowledged the tensions between doing business and doing family, and some, like Sarah, agonised over what they should be doing.

I say to myself, ‘My kids will come first no matter what!’ And I live by that and then [...] I’ll say, ‘Well, why did you just do that? Why did you just agree to do that if my kids really do come first? Is it about money?’ I think: No. I’m not doing that extra time at work to earn more money. So why are you doing it? I feel very uncomfortable with that tussle, and that’s why, every single day some aspect of that thought comes into my mind.
Discussion

The women actively managed business and family, their time, their relationships, and most took responsibility for organising family and domestic care. While a few had husbands who shared responsibility for family and domestic tasks, none had stay-at-home supportive spouses.

Most of these women took control and worked around their husbands rather than trying to get them to change. In part, this reflects Bittman et al’s (2002:30) findings that, in Australia, women who earned more than their husbands ‘either cannot or don’t try’ to increase their husbands’ housework.

Almost all of the male entrepreneurs had wives who took full responsibility for the family and housework. These men were enabled to take their time in doing business. Their role as provider served to excuse (and exclude) them from routine domestic responsibility as Mulholland (2003) has suggested. Some of the men said they wanted to be different from their fathers but they did not develop and implement strategies to do things differently.

The male and female entrepreneurs in this study had similar motivations, and similar types of businesses. They subscribed to the notion that individual success can be achieved through hard work, talent, and perseverance. All emphasized the importance of family. However, gender differences persist in how they did business and in their understandings and practice of family.

Conclusion

An examination of entrepreneurs’ understanding and practice of work and family is important as challenges the notion of the entrepreneur as a heroic individual, and highlights the gendered structures underpinning economic activity within the fields of the market and the family.

Footnotes

1. For details of methodology, see Bowman (2005)
References


