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# State of the Art Review



## Is Time Up for The Hero Male Entrepreneur? A Review of Enterprise Discourse and its Effects



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The contemporary stereotypical entrepreneur is typically characterised as a middle-class, middle-aged, white male (McAdam, 2012) leading a high-growth, high turnover enterprise. In reality, most UK businesses are home based, micro or small firms owned and managed by families, partners or teams, very few of which will ever exhibit sustained growth (Anyadike-danes, Hart and Du, 2013). This stereotype is also highly gendered, with ideal entrepreneurial characteristics closely reflecting those ascribed to men and masculinity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

The portrayal of the typical entrepreneur as a high-performing male suggests women do not fit the preferred entrepreneurial prototype (McAdam, 2012) as they lack essential characteristics such as aggression, risk taking and competitiveness. This argument forms a popular and policy rationale for why women are significantly less likely than men to create and lead new entrepreneurial ventures. Thus, women are encouraged to 'step-up' to this prototype by undertaking training and emulating role models to become more self-confident, ambitious and risk tolerant to unleash their entrepreneurial capabilities (Deloitte, 2016). In becoming more like the prototypical 'hero male entrepreneur' (Marlow, 2014) women will be able to create more new ventures, enhance their productivity and contribute to employment and wealth creation. This SOTA review considers the evidence that exists on the effects and implications of a masculine entrepreneurial discourse across entrepreneurship education, enterprise policy and practice.

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## Background

Language is powerful. It can subliminally influence our attitudes and actions and notably, language is gendered. Whilst sex denotes a biological category [male, female, intersex] gender is a social ascription that has no substantive form but is used upon a universal basis to shape human behaviour informing the construction of gendered roles and social identities (Coates, 2004). It has been acknowledged in psychology and feminist literature that words such as assertive, powerful, ambitious and confident suggest masculinity because of widely held gender stereotypes associated with men and women. Similarly words such as submissive, gentle and caring tend to be associated with the feminine (McAdam, 2012). Likewise, the language often used to describe entrepreneurs – bold, assertive, strategic, resilient, determined – draws on language associated with masculinity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). These societal and cultural cues about the typical entrepreneur, and the suggested behaviours of successful entrepreneurs (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018) can therefore combine, producing a discourse of entrepreneurship that privileges, “particular forms of masculinity” (Hamilton, 2014: 703). It has been shown that this is evident across entrepreneurship research and education, the media and policy documents (McAdam, 2012; Jones and Warhuus, 2018; Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Ahl and Marlow, 2019).

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## Evidence

### **Evidence of the Effects of Masculine Enterprise Discourse: Higher Education, Policy and Practice**

Research shows that highly educated individuals are more likely to start more sustainable value added businesses than those with lower levels of educational attainment (Schøtt, 2009). Women are increasingly pursuing higher education (Eurostat, 2016) and we might subsequently assume that women would be increasingly likely to participate in entrepreneurship courses, which are widely available at university. However, evidence suggests that this is not the case (Petridou *et al.*, 2009). Access to entrepreneurship education is growing, with schools, colleges and universities offering courses in the practicalities of venture creation and critically evaluating the contribution of entrepreneurship to society (Jones, 2014). However, it is argued that entrepreneurship itself, and subsequently entrepreneurship courses are framed as masculine (Duval-Couetil *et al.*, 2014; Jones, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Jones and Warhuus, 2018), which may explain why fewer women than men choose to take entrepreneurship courses at university. It has been found that “socially constructed gender career stereotypes” shape the choices of the different sexes in relation to who takes entrepreneurship courses (Duval-Couetil *et al.*, 2014). A masculine discourse of entrepreneurship could subsequently act as a barrier to those who do not see themselves reflected in the stereotypes informing this discourse, including many women. This is because masculinised language is *more* relevant and accessible to men, given their socialisation into masculinity and the broader masculinisation of entrepreneurship (Jones and Warhuus, 2018). Research evidence also questions the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education for women; indeed, it has been suggested that women may be *less* interested in pursuing entrepreneurial careers if they undertake entrepreneurship courses (Westhead and Solesvik, 2016).

Similarly, research has also shown that policy documents are informed by a masculine entrepreneurial discourse and associated performance expectations (Wilson and Tagg, 2010; Jones, 2014; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). The underpinning gendered assumptions position women at a deficit – they ‘lack’ entrepreneurial know-how or motivation or are reluctant risk takers (Deloitte, 2016). This rationale has trickle-down implications for the provision of Government funded business start-up provision which has been critiqued for encouraging women to behave like ‘honorary men’ when approaching new firm creation (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). This is highly detrimental to women’s entrepreneurial efforts as it fails to acknowledge structural barriers to attainment, such as discrimination, the inflexibility of self-employment, sectoral channelling into lower value feminised industries with marginal returns and a lack of welfare benefits (Jayawarna et al., 2019). Rather, the assumption is that women just need to use their agency to ‘try harder,’ using the stereotypical hero male as their role model (Marlow, 2014). However, an assumed male norm silences these issues as they are not relevant to the ‘typical [male] entrepreneur’.

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## Implications

The performance of women owned and led firms reflects the performance profile of typical UK businesses in that they are marginal performers with few growth prospects most of which are operated from home (Yousafzai et al., 2018). Research has firmly established that there are more differences between entrepreneurs within categories rather than between the categories themselves i.e. there are greater differences between women entrepreneurs than there are between male and female entrepreneurs and their businesses (Ahl, 2006). Research undertaken using a comparative approach in that sex is used as a variable to discriminate upon firm performance exaggerates differences between men and women business owners and overlooks the multiplicity of differences within categories. Despite longstanding evidence to the contrary, women entrepreneurs and their businesses are consistently labelled underperforming due to gendered assumptions (Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Yousafzai et al., 2018). Research shows that fewer women entrants into entrepreneurial activity is a reflection of various combinations of: occupational channelling (women typically being employed in low-growth, crowded sectors), the advantages of employment with regard to flexibility, welfare provision and regulations, and the lower returns to women’s self-employment, rather than some innate entrepreneurial deficit (Jayawarna et al., 2019). Persistent structural inequalities will perpetuate this imbalance.

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## Summary and evidence gaps

Research has shown that the contemporary popular notion of who, and what, is an entrepreneur pivots upon an image of a ‘hero male’ creating innovative new ventures that generate wealth and employment (McAdam, 2012; Swail et al., 2014). However, the majority of UK businesses, whether owned by families, couples, teams or individual men and women, are small, marginal performers and will remain so for the duration of their existence (DBEIS, 2018). Yet, the heroic, male entrepreneur championing a high-growth business remains pervasive in media portrayals, in policy papers and in entrepreneurship classrooms (Swail et al., 2014; Jones and Warhuus, 2018). This paper outlines some of the implications for women, but this construction of the normative entrepreneur also has potentially negative implications for the wellbeing of many male entrepreneurs, who may perceive a pressure to perform and behave in keeping with the

enduring alpha-male entrepreneurial norm contrary to their authentic selves (Swail et al., 2014; Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017). While further research is required, exploring how women are constrained by and can successfully challenge the masculine norm, particularly in contexts that remain traditionally masculine, it is important that a broader perspective is adopted. Further research is required exploring the influence of the 'hero male' discourse upon the entrepreneurial proclivity and activity of: male entrepreneurs, University students, marginalised and disadvantaged group members (such as refugees, disabled individuals, those from low income or ethnic minority backgrounds) and, given the multiplicity of genders recognised in contemporary society, of individuals identifying across the gender spectrum.

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