
Entrepreneurship education and gender: the man-made entrepreneur

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Abstract: As the literature on entrepreneurship education grows, the issue of equality in entrepreneurship education has been raised; i.e., whether students are educated to become entrepreneurs equally. This article provides a critical and thought-provoking analysis of a portfolio of practices that, on the surface, appear to be successful in training entrepreneurs. To this purpose, we initiate a debate on what entrepreneurship education programmes tend to omit. We provide an argument within entrepreneurship scholarship that takes into consideration the diversity and complexity of gender in entrepreneurship. We present an insightful example of what we do in our university classrooms whilst calling for a more encompassing perspective of gender within present-day teaching practice. We acknowledge that academic entrepreneurship education is gendered (Ahl, 2006) and we show how hegemonic masculine-framed foundations of entrepreneurship influence the vocabulary of teaching and learning in Sweden. The paper provides insights into how both teachers and students unfortunately, fail to identify the masculinisation of entrepreneurship education.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education; gender; critical theory.

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1 Introduction

By using a gender-informed critical framework, this article challenges how entrepreneurship education is currently taught to university students. Informed by a critical-driven perspective (Ahl, 2006; Berglund and Verduijn, 2018; Ferguson, 1984; Jones, 2018; Zimmer, 1988), we challenge mainstream discourse about masculinity-determined entrepreneurship education, arguing that a huge number of textbooks and journal articles on entrepreneurship are deeply embedded in the prevailing norms of the business world; norms which are predominantly male. At the current time, it also appears that the influence of critical theory on entrepreneurship education remains minimal (Fletcher, 2001; Hamilton, 2013, 2014). This situation reiterates conventional wisdom within the field, particularly with respect to an embedded masculine discourse that privileges men as the normative model for entrepreneurial actors. Because of this, little or no attention has been afforded to provide an education to students that takes gender in proper account. We are thus troubled by the absence of a gendered business context and continued invisibility of gender role models (Gibson, 2004; Zozimo et al., 2017) despite the fact that they are the core of a societal substructure that is crucial for business creation (Calás and Smircich, 2009; Smircich and Calás, 1987).

This article takes the gendered culture of university entrepreneurship education as the principal object of study. Our study has two main aims:

- 1 to interrogate how in practice students are exposed to the entrepreneurship business world (within the educational programme)
- 2 to discuss the silent implications that a chosen approach may give rise to (in terms of what is omitted from the educational programme).

In pursuing the aims described above, we use Goffman's (1959) concepts of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' in the context of business and social life. Note that these 'stages' go beyond the surface of business-like interactions and may be used to uncover the hidden tensions, dynamics, and dilemmas of entrepreneurship performance within an education programme. The 'frontstage' represents assignments when students adopt an entrepreneurship persona. In contrast, the 'backstage' represents the prevailing gender-biased business and socio-economic context, i.e. invisible power structures.

By reflecting on a number of student assignments, we note the need to emphasise the importance of context in which the assignments are situated since this context is informed by a specific business culture and other social structures. Inspired by the hermeneutic tradition, we provide an interpretation of the deeper meaning (Aredal, 1986) and silenced subtexts that exist in the business discourse. We emphasise that, in relation to the purpose of entrepreneurial programmes, some of the educational tools used in such programmes should be subject to debate and further analysis. The basic tenet of these programmes has been to teach students through entrepreneurship, that is, to train an entrepreneurial labour force. This entails helping them to develop the skills needed in business formation (Jones, 2010a; Heinonen and Hytti, 2008, 2010).

This paper makes a number of contributions to entrepreneurship education. It addresses the present gap in the literature with respect to teaching portfolios, an area which is rarely subject to inquiry. It also addresses the silenced aspect that pervades the prevailing understanding of the gendered implications of entrepreneurship education. Note that in this context, student attitudes toward institutional arbitration of business

norms around entrepreneurship are also subject to some degree of neglect in the literature. Furthermore, our contribution advances awareness of how entrepreneurship education takes place at the practical level. We include a discussion of three student activities from the programme. We argue that there is a tacit acceptance of gendered norms, where teachers and students misrecognise the masculinisation of entrepreneurship education, since they view this as natural and do not question it. Finally, we critically examine our arguments with respect to future research concerning the influence of gender on formative life practices.

The presentation of our arguments concerning *what we omitted or missed* within the practice of entrepreneurship education is structured as follows: the first section presents a brief review of the critical framework used in this study with overarching gender considerations, followed by a note on the method. The second section focuses on entrepreneurship education, and provides a critical evaluation of the relationship between ‘gender’ and ‘entrepreneurship’. Once we have set out our position on this matter, we develop a conceptual argument concerning the need to use critical frameworks to inform our understanding of certain wrongdoings in entrepreneurship education. We then describe a portfolio of applied entrepreneurship educational practices and provide a number of empirical examples. Thereafter, we discuss the findings of this study. Finally, we share our conclusions and suggest a number of avenues.

2 Theoretical background

Our discussion of the theoretical background is structured into three sections. In the first section, we argue that it is appropriate to apply a critical framework to entrepreneurship education. To support our argument, we provide a brief review of the theory that is used. The second section consists of our reflections over how the role of gender in educational practices has been disregarded. The third section explicitly relates ‘gender’ to ‘entrepreneurship education’ and presents a number of research findings with respect to entrepreneurship education.

2.1 *Why use a critical framework to study the practice of entrepreneurship education?*

Adopting a critical framework allows us to employ a fundamentally different approach towards entrepreneurship; an approach that may essentially subvert and transcend traditionally used terms, norms, business goals, and relationships. Importantly, a critical framework is committed to reveal the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurs who are engaged in business ventures and associated activities. According to Prasad and Caproni (1997, p.289), “[...] praxis may well be the most difficult element to accomplish within critical theory, it also remains the most important. Without sustained commitment to praxis, critical theory restricts itself to becoming a self-indulgent academic effort and thus risks losing its emancipatory potential”. Thus, it is crucial that we come to a proper understanding of how entrepreneurship education in practice enhances or inhibits this emancipatory potential.

A critical framework should not be confused with ‘critical thinking’, which is a pedagogic concept which is deployed to embed systematic reflection within the wide-ranging assumptions of human realism. However, a critical framework maintains

critical thinking through reflection and empowerment, but uses different assumptions concerning what constitutes asymmetrical human power relations. The critical framework used in this study takes as a starting position that reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This framework is committed to examining how, for example, entrepreneurship education is constructed. This examination is performed by questioning many taken-for-granted assumptions about the construction process. For example, the concept of 'gender' is interrogated by our critical framework in terms of existing power relations within a particular business culture.

Our critical framework builds on critical theory and the Frankfurt school of philosophy and social theory (e.g., Fromm, 1955; Foucault, 1972; Habermas, 1971, 1990; Zimmer, 1988). Over the last 30 years, it has substantially influenced the social sciences. It is a complex theory, and the present paper cannot describe the various approaches employed within this theory. However, we use critical theory as we examine entrepreneurship education by interrogating gendered ascriptions as they exist (explicitly or tacitly) in practice. Although critical theory is committed to examining how we construct everyday realities, it does so by questioning taken-for-granted beliefs. It takes a position that we construct reality by being influenced by power relations within particular socio-economic cultures and that we revise reality through social negotiations. Consequently, an understanding of the role that businesses play in shaping socio-economic realities is central to our critical analysis.

A critical framework can substantially contribute to our understanding of entrepreneurship practices in the classroom. It offers the researcher a fundamentally different perspective that is committed to the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurs and their enterprises. It also helps to develop our understanding of how the everyday practices of researchers, educators, and students may come to advance or inhibit this potential.

2.2 Bringing gender into entrepreneurship

To date, the existing discourse on entrepreneurship education has been predicated along masculine, secular, and western business and management systems. Underpinning this discourse is a belief that confirms that maximum profit is the locus of power and that any meaningful measurement or assessment of entrepreneurship should place maximum profit in a central position (Berglund and Wigren, 2012). However, this approach may well not correspond to the entrepreneurial choices that all students of entrepreneurship may wish to adopt. The adoption of a masculine benchmark in an educational programme does not properly prepare students to deal with the glass ceiling or glass cliff that they are about to be confronted with in the reality of business. This is specifically challenging for female students who primarily face male gendered structures when starting their lives as entrepreneurs, as entrepreneurship is male gendered (Ahl, 2004). Using a 'one-size-fits-all' teaching philosophy simply reinforces female students' subordination to the current business culture relative to their male counterparts (Marlow and Patton, 2005). Such a situation also may work against their personal choices.

In the context of the above, we argue that 'gender' is a social construct and is understood to have no substantive indicators. We acknowledge that it remains an extremely complex phenomenon that is portrayed through a multiplicity of social ascriptions. Individuals are socialised into 'doing' gender – an action that is performative in nature. According to Ahl and Marlow (2012), gender is an important indicator of identity. In fact, it is an omniscient identity indicator that endows visibility, since it is

constructed as contextually credible (Butler, 2004). For example, female entrepreneurship students must impose a particular form of identity to reflect the dominant norm if they wish to be positioned as 'credible'. As Kelan (2009, p.181) claims, "[females] get the collegial slap on the back as honorary men but the door is held open to treat them like ladies".

Other research has shown that a lack of gender equality has a negative impact on a woman's choice to become an entrepreneur, especially in male-oriented industries (Klyver et al., 2013). This standardised thinking is based on a country's historical masculinisation of entrepreneurship; something that has informed approaches to entrepreneurship education (e.g., Jones, 2010b; Marlow, 2016). Gender structures have been considered politically (for example, in the Swedish business context), but such considerations are never followed up on in practice. Note that wage levels still show a significant degree of gender discrepancy and inequality. According to Jones (2014, 2015), entrepreneurship education officially uses a gender-neutral or gender-blind approach for both male and female students. However, this is damaging in practice because it reproduces the masculine norm and reinforces negative gender perceptions for female students (Jones, 2018).

Furthermore, since the social construction of gender is taken-for-granted in entrepreneurship education, we know little about how these constructions are created and re-created. As Kelan (2009, p.40) reports, gender is treated as "a stable, self-evident category".

Lewis and Simpson (2010) identify the visibility and invisibility of gender construction of women, and characterise femininity as highly visible and evidenced by specific forms of identity. In the domain of entrepreneurship, women are conceptualised as visible gendered subjects whose performance is habitually evaluated against privileged masculinity (Lewis, 2006). Gender blindness in entrepreneurship, on the other hand, serves its purpose in maintaining the silence in which entrepreneurship is embedded, a place where women, willingly or unwillingly, subscribe to its dominant ideology. Since it is established via continuous socially-related re-enforcement, this masking is made to appear invisible by means of apparent normalcy (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Ahl, 2006; Baker et al., 1997; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; McAdam, 2012). Kerfoot and Miller (2010) evaluated one entrepreneurial educational programme that aimed at attracting female students who wished to start a business. Focusing on the behaviour and performance of male businessmen, the programme established males as natural entrepreneurs and depicted females as outsiders. It became evident to Kerfoot and Miller (2010) that potential female entrepreneurs were profoundly discouraged during the educative process, because they felt that they did not fit in with the image of a masculinised entrepreneurial persona.

2.3 Contextualising entrepreneurship education

In terms of theory, entrepreneurship habitually depicts entrepreneurs as male heroes (e.g., Welter et al., 2017) and focuses on industrial and high-tech companies, which are capital-backed ventures. This focus has created a rather homogeneous view of what an entrepreneur is (e.g., Ahl, 2004; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Jones, 2014, 2018). These studies tend to emphasise entrepreneurship as a form of masculinity, something that is a natural focus of any analysis that is informed by andro-centric theory building. Note that andro-centric theory building pays scant attention to gender dynamics (see Hamilton,

2013, 2014), and, as a consequence of this, some voices are unheard (Fletcher, 2001) also in entrepreneurship education processes (Hamilton, 2013; Marlow, 1997; Calás et al., 2007, 2009). Entrepreneurship is a highly gendered phenomenon (Ahl, 2006) in both research and education, for example, it has been observed that male students dominate the classroom. It has also been noted that hegemonic masculine-framed foundations of entrepreneurship are often taken-for-granted and unchallenged (Jones, 2014, 2015). As educators, we shoulder a responsibility for taking a critical approach to entrepreneurship and for what we do in the classroom. The fundamental question we should respond to is: *Do we acknowledge classroom gender issues when we hand out student assignments?* We cannot disregard the fact that the stable and seemingly immovable academic context (backstage) of entrepreneurship operates as a stereotypical gendered process that draws on masculinised theoretical knowledge, combined with a suitable-for-male action-oriented attitude. The failure to address these issues and the (seemingly) non-negotiable imperatives with respect to developing entrepreneurship education affects the aspirations of female students negatively – a group of people who represent 50% of both the graduate- and undergraduate students.

The training of entrepreneurs constitutes an integral concern of entrepreneurship education. During the last few years, we have witnessed a growing interest in occupational education and the training of entrepreneurs for venture creation (Fayolle, 2010; Penaluna et al., 2012). Most universities, in their role as educational institutions, are encouraged by policy makers (who also make decisions regarding their funding) into directing entrepreneurship education towards venture development and wealth creation. Accordingly, deploying a critical framework in such a context is appealing because it can substantially contribute to our understanding of, and engagement with, entrepreneurial practices in the classroom. Inspired by Heinonen and Hytti (2008, 2010), we will now discuss some of the content of entrepreneurship education and what relationship this content has in relation to its purposes, especially with regards to transforming entrepreneurial students into business actors. Given this approach, we decline from providing a review of the current literature on entrepreneurial learning at this point.

In general, one can state without controversy that entrepreneurship is an applied discipline (Simon, 1996) that takes place in real life and is thus contextually situated. Simon's (1996) seminal analysis asserts that this applied discipline can be enhanced by a design-supported educational curriculum. However, this progress often appears to lag behind the development of the programme. Design, in this context, can include tools such as creativity, personal skills, experiences, professional and economic knowledge, know-how and know-what; and problem-solving qualities, to name a few. Applied entrepreneurship curricula can also be designed to equip entrepreneurship students with tools for uncovering opportunities and creating opportunities (Sarasvathy, 2008) for business creation. Indeed, there is a prevailing assumption that entrepreneurship education is slowly transforming from focusing on management-oriented theories and planning skills to focusing on a more entrepreneurial approach, where innovation theories and mind set-oriented skills are in focus. Following the introduction of a number of theoretical developments in the field of entrepreneurship, including effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001), bootstrapping (Winborg and Landström, 2001), and bricolage (Baker and Nelson, 2005), it has been recognised that entrepreneurship is about doing much with little resources. This, in turn, demands an entrepreneurial mind set (McGrath and MacMillan, 2000) and entrepreneurial ways of thinking and acting (Neck and Greene, 2011).

If practice and action is central to schooling students in entrepreneurship, then we believe that a learner-centred approach is appropriate for entrepreneurship education. An adult student-centred approach requires an educational method that applies and takes advantage of the student's previous experience, gender predisposition, and knowledge. Andragogy (see Forrest and Peterson, 2006) – in contrast to subject-centred pedagogy – assumes the student to be an adult who possesses a repository of practices and previous experience that should be used in the education situation, so as to allow for deeper educational experiences and to allow for the educational experience to be gender relevant. Furthermore, whilst the andragogical teaching method is focused on creating reflective, self-directed individuals, in contrast, heutagogical students are seen as self-determined (Jones et al., 2014). Consequently, andragogical students are seen to be self-directed when they apply themselves to practical tasks, while heutagogical students are self-determined in the sense that they are ready to proceed to achieve the educational goals that are determined by the teacher; a situation which often make gender invisible.

However, when the aim of an educational programme is to create more profound entrepreneurial knowledge (including theoretical aspects of entrepreneurship) from a learner-centred approach, then the student's ability to engage in critical analysis becomes a central function within institutions that provide entrepreneurship education. Critical analysis is crucial for the development of self-awareness, and a well-developed self-awareness enhances gendered self-confidence (Pavlovich et al., 2009). A gendered self-confidence is necessary for reflection and may change a student's worldview in to male-dominated everyday practice within which they find themselves. When andragogy serves as a teaching method, and critical analysis is argued to be a crucial component of entrepreneurial portfolio development, then skills required to enhance students performative capacity and self-development are necessary.

Shinnar et al. (2014) find that the effect of training on, for example, entrepreneurial self-confidence is more visible among men. They show that gender is an important factor to take into consideration and incorporate into studies on entrepreneurship education. They argue that entrepreneurship education might not be effective in attracting female students for future careers as entrepreneurs. However, there are studies that show that training has a larger positive influence on women's entrepreneurial skill development, compared to men's (Wilson et al., 2007). However, female students have been shown to display lower levels of entrepreneurship intention than their male counterparts after having gone through entrepreneurship training (Westhead and Solesvik, 2016). In summary, although they are inconclusive at this time, research findings suggest that entrepreneurship education has not been developed to target women specifically, and that, in some cases, women benefit less from such education (although studies exist that conclude the opposite) (Shinnar et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, Nabi et al. (2017) argue that our knowledge of the role of gender in entrepreneurship education remains incomplete.

In their review of entrepreneurship education research, Nabi et al. (2017) note that most research on the effects of entrepreneurship education suffers from the adoption of a short-term perspective. The authors argue that scholars possess limited knowledge about the long-term effects of such training. They also argue that we need to consider a variety of outcomes relating to students' emotions and mindsets, for example. Given that the short- and long-term effects of entrepreneurship education seem to be relatively unknown, it is of interest to note that many educational programmes offer very similar structures and activities.

3 A note on our methodology

In this paper, we argue that the relationship between invisible power structures, i.e., backstage, and educational activity discourses, i.e., frontstage activities, sheds light on gendered entrepreneurial education. Constructionist ontology draws our attention to how educational reality is created and understood. We do this by interrogating how in practice students are exposed to the entrepreneurship business world (within the educational programme) and by discussing the silent implications that a chosen approach may give rise to (in terms of what is omitted from the educational programme).

We see the interpretive framework that is inspired by the hermeneutic tradition as fruitful and appropriate for our enquiry into entrepreneurial education in the academic context, as we examine assignments, and practices used in the programme for training purposes. Note that the assignments and practices are compulsory parts of many courses and programmes in entrepreneurship. In qualitative research, the notion of 'interpretation' remains distinctly pervasive, and is often used interchangeably with 'hermeneutics'. Methodologically, we are inspired by critical hermeneutics, a method that is based on the ideas of Habermas (1990). Hermeneutics is fundamentally concerned with the content matter of texts and the practice of textual interpretation. In brief, the hermeneutic tradition offers a critical view of interpretations of texts – in our case, the assignments and female students' understandings of those.

The critical hermeneutic method is very useful because we are enabled to enter both the linguistic world (the rhetoric used in the assignment texts) and the mindset of the students (Bauman, 1978). The frontstage rhetorical elements informed us of the purpose with the assignment, while a focus on backstage sheds light on the context. Both perspectives are critical to developing a more meaningful understanding of entrepreneurship practice, as exemplified in educational aims.

3.1 *Representation in the programme is of importance*

Since we have a genuine interest in understanding gender representations, we started to identify and examine large gender disparities in our everyday practice. Further to this, we initiated dialogues about gender disparities with our colleagues and students. The initial set of relevant observations emerged in a dialogue between one of the authors (a teacher at the entrepreneurship programme) and a master's student. The conversation was on gender and critical theory. In a very honest and frank discussion about the programme, the student reported that he considered himself as 'a misfit' in the programme. This remark came as a surprise because this student had been praised by many teachers as a successful student, who seemed to enjoy the programme a great deal. The opinion he shared created the uncomfortable feeling that we might miss what was going on in the programme. The student reflected upon the importance of taking a very active role in the classroom. Surprisingly, he reported that whilst he was not enjoying presenting and pitching his work in the classroom, he greatly appreciated the theoretical components of the programme. Based on this discussion with the student, we asked ourselves how he could consider himself a misfit. What did we do wrong? This reflection was of some importance to us because it emphasised the 'other', some form of deviance from the norm.

The topic of gender is addressed during the first course of the programme, but very little time is devoted to it. However, the teaching staff within the programme is aware of

the importance of role models, as the guest lecturers might seem to appear, and thus the staff invites both men and women as guest lecturers.

During the process of emphasising the role of a gender framework in entrepreneurship education, we invited the female students to answer a number of open-ended qualitative questions online. We chose to invite the female students simply because we wanted to consider the concept of emancipation. We obtained responses from 15 women, eight of whom had graduated from the programme and seven who were still enrolled in the programme. Their anonymous written answers were used to illustrate the hidden structures in the programme. We focused on one particular educational context; namely, a one-year master's programme in entrepreneurship.

We asked our informants to reflect on gender in the programme and gender stereotypes. We also asked open-ended questions related to what they think they learnt from the assignments entrepreneurial challenge and the trade fair. Finally, we asked if they experienced gender differences, and asked them to share those.

We analysed the open-ended answers. The specific activities we referred to in the questions related to specific activities in the programme. The master's degree programme can be seen as successful, since it attracts many students. The students graduate from the programme once they have successfully finished their thesis work. In fact, many of the students engage in a venture creation process during the programme which they continue working with after their graduation. Feedback on the programme indicates that many students report that they gained knowledge over the course of the year that it takes to complete the programme.

Below, we use the answers provided by our student informants to illustrate a pattern of using male experience and masculine language in the teaching agenda associated with the programme. We also present some of the assignments in the programme. These assignments are not unique to our programme, since they are found in other entrepreneurship courses and programmes. In this paper, we do not consider all of the activities that are included in the programme.

As mentioned in the section above on our research methodology, we employ an 'interpretivist' methodology (see Prasad, 2005). Insights gained from the answers of the open questions allowed us to engage in a critical discussion of entrepreneurship education in general. First, we briefly present the context of the programme, which is followed by samples of assignments. The assignments offer a useful starting point for critical engagement with teaching practices that are used in the classroom. In this presentation, we illustrate a number of typical male-privileged concepts that are invoked within the academic environment of which the entrepreneurship programme forms part.

A critical note on our study is that the female students were invited to answer the open-ended questions. There is a risk that only students with strong opinions on gender should answer. However, in our answers we see a variety of answers. Some students expressed that they did not see or experience gender differences while others expressed that they did, this implies that the 13 respondents have different experience of gender and of being a female.

4 The background: the master's degree programme

The one-year master's programme, which started in 2007, is based on an action-oriented method and thus applies an experiential learning approach. The students take action and

learn through reflecting on what they have been doing in relation to what they have been lectured on in the classroom and on what course materials that they have read. They learn theories of entrepreneurship; those theories facilitate the students' reflection processes and learning processes. Since its inception, the programme has attracted many internationally applicants from almost 30 different countries. It is also a multi-disciplinary programme, since the students who enrol in the programme have different disciplinary backgrounds. Today, the programme can accommodate 50 students across two parallel tracks. One track is focused on new venture creation, and the other is focused on corporate entrepreneurship and innovation. The new venture creation track is the object of investigation in the present study. During the programme the students work with mentors, the majority of them are men. The mentors assist the students in progressing in the right direction with their business ideas and plans. The mentors are recruited from nearby industrial parks and from companies. In the programme, students are also introduced to the activities that take place at the nearby Science Park, which hosts a variety of high-tech businesses. The programme is embedded in the local business context. Students who attend the programme are attracted by the practical approach to entrepreneurship.

5 Programme activities

Here we present a number of key activities that are included in the programme, they constitute a purposive sample, in the sense that it is a non-probability sample of practices from the programme. We combine qualitative processes, such as the content of the answers that were provided by the students, and a qualitative interpretation, with the goal to "uncover ideologies and evidence for disadvantage" [Baker, (2006), p.5].

5.1 The entrepreneurial start-up challenge assignment

Description: The start-up challenge is a group assignment and it represents the most basic individual-based tenets of entrepreneurship. It is concerned with understanding money, trade, and how the marketplace and economy work. The challenge is simple. The master's programme in entrepreneurship provides students with 100 SEK in seed financing, and they compete to earn as much money from this initial investment as possible in five days. The start-up challenge is very important, because it stimulates the students' awareness of money making in practice. Students must also carefully document their transactions over the 5-day period and the learning outcomes.

The assignment is assessed on the quality of the documentation that is produced by the student, the achievement of learning outcomes, and the student's success in making a profit. This assignment is part of the first course and takes place during the very first weeks of the programme. The assignment also provides the students with an opportunity to get to know each other. For the assignment, the students are organised by faculty members into groups.

The student informants were asked to respond to the following question: *Reflecting back, what do you think you learned from the entrepreneurial challenge assignment?* One answered:

Reflecting back in relation to the gender issue and with my own team, I feel that my male counterparts were overwhelmingly dominant, which upsets me a little at my own passiveness. (Respondent A1)

This student reflected quite a lot on gender issues during the program, she wrote in her open answers that she was 'seeking out female examples' during the programme, and she felt that she was 'defending' herself and her ideas in the programme, compared to her male counterparts. She writes that in the programme gender was discussed from a theoretical perspective, but in practice male stereotypes dominated.

The assignment *the entrepreneurial challenge* acts as a starting point at the very early stages of the programme that provides us with a 'frontstage' perception that is learnt 'onstage'. We note that the students score the masculine characteristics of their interaction with other students as being greatly congruent with entrepreneurship, in general. Another respondent provided arguments with respect to the presence of an 'entrepreneurial personality' and whether the 'one-size-fits all approach' should be applied in entrepreneurship:

For me, the biggest learning experience was that taking a risk is worth more than having a safe but unoriginal idea. In my group, we picked a fairly straightforward, but not particularly inspiring, idea (at least in my eyes). And even though, after one week, we were the group with the second highest earnings, I was more impressed with some of the other groups that, in my eyes, had been more creative. I think it was throughout the entrepreneurial challenge that I realized that I would rather try something a bit more creative than something boring but safe. I wasn't able to convince the others that time to try something more daring but was able to add my own touch to the idea that we had. Also, when there was a conflict with one of my colleagues, I stood my ground and defended my view points and convinced the others that that course of action was the way to go. (Respondent A4)

This thoughtful response illustrates to us that, even if the intention behind the assignment was to spur on the students' creativity, the backstage elements of the situation do not necessarily make it possible to do so. Instead, the backstage pushed the students to act in a normative, safe way. Assignments similar to the entrepreneurial challenge are used in many entrepreneurial programmes all over the world. It may be the case, however, that the original idea behind the assignment does not properly correspond to the gendered action and the output of the assignment. It might also be the case that the assignment allows for the communication of potentially damaging stereotypes for both men and women. From previous research, we know that entrepreneurship takes time, since most entrepreneurs still struggle to achieve their goals during the first 5–7 years of their journey as an entrepreneur. In addition, entrepreneurship may also involve failing to achieve one's goals, and the question is whether there is room for failure in this entrepreneurial challenge assignment. Consider the following remarks made by one student:

The practical side of setting up a business in a very short time was being involved across all the requirements, from brainstorming, launching, to completion of the project and reporting. This required the team to be flexible and open with each other. Not losing sight of the goal while adopting an agile mind set. (Respondent A3)

Students are encouraged to adapt an agile mindset. Literature that refers to 'lean start-ups' has influenced entrepreneurship educators all over the world and has

subsequently become part of many entrepreneurship educational programmes. Given this, we ask whether we can identify any implications that may follow from this in terms of individualism or insensitivity towards others. The agile approach to entrepreneurship has, unfortunately, an undertone that the entrepreneur should act and test. The following respondent expressed the following reflection related to the assignment *the entrepreneurial challenge*:

The high level of egoism that got in the way of development. The lack of open-mindedness to approach and willingness and ability to recognize different skill-sets is obvious. (Respondent B4)

A relevant question that entrepreneurship educators may ask is: *What happen frontstage when competition is introduced?* A competition implies that there are rules to be adhered to, and, of course, there are winners and losers.

Another student observed that:

[R]egardless of how hard you worked to achieve success, your appearance can come up as a perceived factor for success. When we won, I heard comments about the reasons for us winning. If anything, however, I learned more about differences in business culture than I did about gender differences. (Respondent A5)

The programme requirement that the students engage in an entrepreneurial challenge was based on good intentions, but the remarks that were made by the female students inform us that there are certain side-effects associated with this engagement that need to be dealt with by the programme teachers in order to avoid the provision of gender-blind education.

5.2 *The trade show assignment*

Description: This assignment involves the organisation and participation in a functional trade show. The trade show is completely organised by the students. They are tasked to bring visitors to the show and to persuade visitors and other exhibitors to contribute in creative ways to the students' business ideas, for example, by offering to supply resources/equity, or buy goods/services.

As part of the assignment, the students submit a trade show plan that describes the actions that they will take to generate interest in their trade show booth. This includes information about their goals, marketing efforts, the design of the booth, and what presentation preparations (for different stakeholders) the student has made, and so forth. The trade show takes place on the university's premises. After the trade show, the students are required to submit an evaluation of the trade show, including a report on any sales that they made, valuable new contacts that were established at the show, and their reflections over the event. The student evaluation report of the trade show is expected to be no more than two pages in length. The assessment of the student's performance is based on the planning, attractiveness, and evaluation of the show. The quality and interest that is shown in each trade show booth are evaluated by a panel of judges. An award for the best booth is presented at the programme graduation ceremony.

In the online survey that was conducted for the purpose of the present study, the students responded to the following question: *Reflecting back, what do you think you learned from the trade fair assignment?* Only alumni students answered this, because it is an activity that takes place at the very end of the programme.

Previous research (Acker, 1990) has shown that work-related tasks are often gendered. For example, planning and organising a trade fair demands that work be done behind the scenes, as it were. These tasks are often carried out by women, as evidenced by the following report:

I learned that a committee can easily become one person doing everything.
(Respondent A5)

Another student explained their experience in the way:

To be honest, I felt I learned more from the coursework than from the trade fair. I had fun with my team. When you're not representing your own idea and don't think it is viable in real life, it is hard to learn from pitching it to customers who aren't your customer segment anyway. (Respondent A1)

Even though the ventures the students plan for and work with should be realistic and possible to launch on the market, the above remarks shows that this was not the case for every student. When some students work with fictive project side-by-side with students who work with real project, this might influence the students' experiences of the programme.

More than anything, it just felt rewarding to finally be able to present my idea, to have a rough prototype ready and show people how it worked and get feedback. I learned that you have to be open and approachable in order for people to engage with you and to listen to their input and comments in order to hear what they want and need, what they like about the product and what could be better. (Respondent A4)

5.3 The series of 'dragons' competitions

Description: These competitions are organised at the university for individual students or groups. Students pitch their business ideas to a panel of venture capitalists and business angels. The venue is provided by the university, and the competitions are guided by teachers. The panel of venture capitalists and business angels is physically arranged by the university to create a business environment that is as close to real life as possible. The formal business environment provides students with an opportunity for a practical, experimental framework and is designed to equip the students with the ability to apply innovative business principles by training them in real-life situations.

We did not ask the students any feedback questions about this activity. However, we note that *pitching* has come to represent entrepreneurship in some general sense. During the academic year, the students are invited to participate in an activity called *pitcher's corner*. In this activity, which takes place at the Science Park every second week, entrepreneurs are invited to participate in a pitching competition.

The pitching exercise employs powerful, masculine language that is rooted in official entrepreneurship discourse; a discourse that masks taken-for-granted gendered concepts and situates them as being neutral, and unmarked (Bruni et al., 2005). Touching on this, two students reported that:

There's also a complete ignorance of the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs – like getting venture funding, for example. (Respondent B5)

There is still far more pressure on females to conform to certain roles versus male counterparts, and with that, other achievements are undermined. (Respondent A2)

When university programmes involve a range of practical activities, one might ask whether the male-gendered entrepreneurial scene should be explicitly addressed and questioned or not. By remaining silent about it, we accept it.

6 Discussion: situating practice

In answering our research question, *to interrogate how in practice students are exposed to the entrepreneurship business world (within the educational programme)*, we invoked a critical framework and identified what might be omitted or missed because of the chosen approach. We implicitly critiqued the notion of ‘gender’ and, instead, argued that a new educational philosophy that is based on a critical framework may have the capacity to enhance the students’ affinity for entrepreneurship, their trust, and their degree of engagement with the programme. Therefore, understanding:

- 1 the role that education institutions play in practice in shaping social and business realities
- 2 the associated silent resistance to these realities is central to our critical analysis.

Furthermore, our critical framework holds that many of our norms, established patterns, meanings are included in the provision of education and the educational process. This process ultimately provides elements of shared business practices and a societal worldview that strengthened the order and practical meaning of the programme for the students in a Swedish context. Above all, this process also prevents students from fulfilling their tacit expectations by creating false expectations of gender equality. These false expectations mask social and business contradictions and limiting business opportunities and individual potential. For instance, the current dominant position and thinking about gender powerfully prescribes specific, but limited, roles for both women and men in public life.

In the following discussion, we shed light on various aspects of hidden scenarios that exist in gendered power relations in the classroom. These scenarios came to light in the empirical examples that were followed up on by interviews and the students’ reflective statements.

6.1 *Benefitting from assignments in the courses*

Philip Jackson (1968) was the first scholar to use the term *hidden* to refer to educational systems that reproduce the basic power structure of a country’s business culture. The term characterises a school life that teaches students to fit into business society’s hidden elements throughout the educational process. This message of conformity is communicated through official statements about the programme and relates to certain attitudes, values, and beliefs by means of the use of language and exercises that may invoke negative connotations.

The entrepreneurship start-up challenge, for example, serves as preparatory practice for new venture creation. It is an assignment in which the focus of entrepreneurship is placed on in a short period of time coming up with an idea and increase the economic capital. They are provided with 100 SEK as business funding capital, primarily so that they can learn and understand how borrowed money works in practice.

During their completion of the assignments, the students gained their first practical experience with markets, products, the language of business, and small-scale profits. The activities that the students were tasked to perform demonstrated relatively limited business practices that were contextually situated and prompted positive associations with the business world. Understanding economic reality and one's personal constraints offers the student valuable insight into the daily work that is done by an entrepreneur. The nature of the activities implies to the students that entrepreneurship is useful only if it can be translated into action (Fayolle et al., 2006) or practically applied. However, it also reveals to us the fundamental fallacy of including a gendered perspective on the action that is required. Accordingly, the female students became invisible in the master's degree programme's institutionalised setting.

The entrepreneurship start-up challenge assignment relies on the application of student training that uses a masculine vocabulary, whilst simultaneously provides a limited number of role models and neglects attitudes toward gender issues. As this assignment is the first practical application of entrepreneurship that the students are tasked with it becomes a point of reference. A thorough understanding of the nature of these broad challenges and realities may provide the students a way to successfully exploit early opportunity creation. However, the experience that the students acquire is one that demonstrates that entrepreneurship is a profit-maximising activity and that they are to make use of the resources at hand. We thus note that the range of formative living practices that are in play affects the implementation of ideas and the application of ideas in action. Formative living practices differ across different contexts. The programme assumes that these can be re-shaped or re-drawn in business-related situations suited to match dominant masculine norms. The personality that individuals possess before their attendance on the programme has been forcibly endowed with idealised male characteristics; characteristics which are taken as self-evident and as representing the norm. For example, the entrepreneurship start-up challenge assignment provides students the opportunity to develop and apply their own ideas as business practices. It prompts the students to use their imagination but also their critical thinking skills about their own role and position as entrepreneurs. One respondent described how her male colleagues have been vocal about their feelings about gender roles in business, she wrote:

They verbalized their feelings around what kinds of businesses women should run and also displayed attitudes that made many women feel like their opinions were not listened to or appreciated. Nonetheless, I find that a major hurdle in this matter is actually a feeling of oppression or unfairness on the part of us females. History is full of male examples, that's just a matter of fact. If we want to change it so that more women are represented, we should only allow ourselves so much time to get discouraged and instead spend time starting businesses that show other women that it's doable. That gender is a factor but not the defining one in our ability to make it as entrepreneurs. (Respondent A5)

Significantly, this quote indicates that the student put responsibility on herself rather than attributing any failure to the educational structure. The quote also suggests that the student wishes to be a visible role model as an agent of change, thereby rendering the masculine educational structure invisible.

Another goal of the programme assignments is to make the students aware of the possibility of self-employment. In relation to the key area of applied entrepreneurship practice, for the first time it becomes evident to students that what they can do in their future career paths and how different possible alternative business avenues can be taken.

This freedom of choice leads to a situation where apprentices dream to become entrepreneurs under the condition that they accept masculinised business norms. As Jones (2018, p.139) refers to Giroux (2011, p. 6) and writes:

[C]lassroom learning embodies selective values, is entangled with relations of power, entitles judgement about what knowledge counts, legitimates specific social relations, defines agency in particular ways, and always presupposes a particular notion of the future.

All of the points made above have been contested by our students and are inextricably linked to the applied values of the programme.

Consequently, the visibility of masculine norms and beliefs in the business context is apparent through the enforcement of gendered stereotypes of successful entrepreneurs. Returning to the literature on this topic, we note that the start-up challenge reflects the view of Simon (1996), who observes that applied entrepreneurship takes place in real life, is contextually situated, and is institutionalised by society as a non-negotiable imperative. The universal approval granted by educational institutions to regimented blue-prints appears to run counter to their (heroic!) expectations about starting a new venture in the future.

6.2 Taking a critical approach – a way forward

The two aims of this paper:

- 1 to interrogate how in practice students are exposed to the entrepreneurship business world (within the educational programme)
- 2 to discuss the silent implications that a chosen approach may give rise to (in terms of what is omitted from the educational programme).

In the paper we argue for the claim that entrepreneurship education has a hidden normative component of gender imbalance. Our argument is that the contextual business ‘backstage’ influences the ‘frontstage’, a situation which often works against entrepreneurial choices. In particular, the rhetorical elements of the ‘frontstage’ inform the students about what is considered to be important. Thus, an examination of the backstage will shed light on these rhetorical elements.

The value of entrepreneurship practice lies in allowing the expression and clarification of individual experience within the entrepreneurship process. This expressive self-clarification is one of the fundamental components of the education process which represents an unchallenged set of values and beliefs. The challenge that both teachers and students is faced with is to remain reflective about the process, make sense of one’s own experiences in a business context, and thus become an active and thoughtful practitioner. This is in agreement with what Raelin (2007) would call an epistemology of practice.

In an important sense, our research problematises the exercises and assignments that are used in entrepreneurship education and suggests that students actively construct their own versions of practice. One version of this practice is formally masculinised by content issues and the use of specific language and is predictable. The other version is private, invisible, and unseen and is difficult to describe in concrete terms.

Our paper makes two contributions to the field of entrepreneurship education. First, it shows the relevance and importance of a critical perspective in entrepreneurship

education. Second, it demonstrates that entrepreneurship practice clearly has an impact on a student's entrepreneurial activities. When theory and practice are combined by using a critical lens, certain benefits follow, and the very fabric of entrepreneurship education can be enhanced.

7 Conclusions and implications of the study

In conclusion, the purpose of our discussion has been to critically advance our understanding of practical assignments that superficially appear to be successful in training students across various educational systems in the domain of entrepreneurship education. Our research has illuminated the construction of hidden elements of gender in the educational system. It provides an important contribution to academic teachers who are involved in entrepreneurship education, whilst identifying the drivers and consequences of silencing gender issues in the classroom. Understanding the interplay between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' factors helps us to illuminate the distinct nature of entrepreneurship education and may thus reveal valuable implications for the practice of entrepreneurship education. We posit that the hidden reflexivity that exists in entrepreneurship education programmes has a largely detrimental effect on the process of education as it is instantiated as an intimidating business mechanism. Educators should understand and make a distinction between a formal understanding of the subject and their students' formal and informal reflexivity. We contribute to a more nuanced understanding of entrepreneurship education as something which is socially situated and operationalised by practice. The practice that was identified in this paper was found to be especially illustrative of the gendered interests that lie hidden in gender-neutral language and practices.

This study's other contribution, in terms of academic critical tradition, is its empirical demonstration of how entrepreneurship education practices are used and how the practices arise and are developed in the master's programme. In teaching entrepreneurship, teachers must focus on a constant re-evaluation of traditional wisdom; an approach which may make them more willing to experiment with new, critical views on the subject. Finally, our analysis also demonstrates the complexity that is involved in the process of teaching entrepreneurship.

We have demonstrated that, in entrepreneurship education, gender is approached silently. This approach masks stereotypical concepts and models of who can be an entrepreneur. This is done by enforcing gendered stereotypes of successful entrepreneurs with related skills sets and behaviours. We also contribute to developing an understanding of what we have omitted in our provision of entrepreneurship education. The illustrative examples that are included in the article demonstrate that gendered norms remain accepted, while educators and students alike formally misrecognise the masculinisation of entrepreneurship education; something which they perceive as natural and do not question.

What is implied by entrepreneurship education is that practical education in combination with a theoretical framework contributes:

- 1 to limiting opportunities for female students
- 2 to positioning female students as inherently deficient.

A critical framework should be included in entrepreneurship education so as to encourage students to re-think their embedded positions when they come to challenge gender bias in their future professional lives. We suggest that a critical approach to entrepreneurship studies can augment existing understandings and offer many insights into the development of a more gender balanced entrepreneurship educational strategy. One crucial issue that deserves further study is to examine how institutionalised practices and business structures contribute to silencing gender inequality at university. Most importantly, we claim that educators are responsible for making certain hidden aspects (such as gender) as explicit as possible. Those aspects arise from hidden or silent values, norms, beliefs, and practices that have been learned implicitly from the socio-economic environment and culture that a person finds themselves in.

7.2 Final remarks

This article extends our awareness about entrepreneurship education and argues that its dominant discourse, which is traditionally positioned as masculine, contradicts the basic educational approach of offering every student equal opportunities to be an entrepreneur. Because it is embedded within institutional constraints, education is used in uncritical ways, by not being methodologically robust in terms of explicitly bringing gender and feminist concerns to the fore (Lewis, 2006). The provocative notion that entrepreneurship education serves the male agenda – that is, it is positioned around the male and for the male (Marlow, 2016) – has much to tell us about how entrepreneurship education is framed and silenced. We have challenged those silent, taken-for granted assumptions. Too many courses and programmes remain gender blind, with the consequence that certain visible activities, such as taking action, giving presentations, and pitching ideas are emphasised to the detriment of certain invisible concerns. This gives rise to a situation where masculine norms, values, and skills tend to be reproduced and highly accentuated. For future research, we believe that the development of critical entrepreneurship education which includes an explicitly articulated gender perspective is crucial.

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