

Gender, intersecting identities, and entrepreneurship research: an introduction to a special section on intersectionality

1703

We are delighted to present this special section of *IJEER*. It brings together a collection of innovative research addressing gender and entrepreneurship from an intersectionality perspective.

An intersectional perspective recognizes that no single identity category can satisfactorily explain how we respond to our social environment or are responded to by others. People experience multiple identities and these identities are both fluid and stable. We focus on gender as the common identity category in this special section because, while it is not always and everywhere the most important social identity, gender is the most pervasive, visible and codified (Shields, 2008).

Many feminist authors follow an intersectional research approach because of their strong belief in its radical potential to change social practice and its ability to “free individuals and social groups from the normative fix of a hegemonic order” (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). In entrepreneurship, researchers may be drawn by the promise of intersectionality in enabling more complex and inclusive understandings of experience. These convictions are particularly palpable in the first two papers presented in this collection.

First, in their conceptual paper, “New direction for entrepreneurship through a gender and disability lens,” Williams and Patterson examine the neglected nexus of disability and gender. They bring together literature on women’s entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship and disability, and feminist disability to identify a number of theoretical synergies and variances in the extant work. Different ways of construing intersectionality – by different researchers and within and between disparate disciplines – often make it difficult to ensure that the academic conversation begins from the same point of reference (Shields, 2008). Patterson and Williams paper succeeds in bridging research across a number of disciplines and reconciles the reader with the tremendous potential of intersectionality for instigating real social change.

Following this, in their article, “Intersectionality and mixed methods for social context in entrepreneurship,” Dy and Agwunobi explore the conceptual possibilities of intersectionality and connect with recent calls for more contextualized entrepreneurship research throughout the field (Welter, 2011; Zahra and Wright, 2011). They propose intersectionality as a powerful interpretive frame for understanding social context, entrepreneurial activity and outcomes with a particular regard for agency and resource access. While many gender and entrepreneurship researchers have recognized the importance of studying varying social identity intersections in context, not many have yet taken up the challenge. In conventional social and behavioral research, intersectionality is frequently defined as a methodological challenge (Shields, 2008). Indeed, the suite of methodological tools available can impede the “radical” thinking transformation about research processes that is needed to incorporate intersectionality in a meaningful way (Bowleg, 2008). This is why Dy and Agwunobi’s paper is a welcome addition. They advocate a mixed methods approach to intersectional research and engage in a pragmatic discussion of methodological options and issues facing researchers as they frame and explore intersecting social categories. Their detailed

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tables addressing quantitative and qualitative concerns provide a rich resource for researchers willing to take on the “urgent” challenge of intersectional research (Shields, 2008).

In concert with Dy and Agwunobi’s call for intersectionality to be studied in context, Stirzaker and Sitko use positionality as a lens to lend greater insight into the complexity of lived multiple identities in their paper, “The older entrepreneurial self: intersecting identities of older women entrepreneurs.” In particular, Stirzaker and Sitko examine the intersection of age and gender, questioning the primacy of agency and highlighting the role of context and structure in constructing entrepreneurial identities. Based on typical understandings of “successful” entrepreneurs, many older women entrepreneurs in this UK-based empirical study did not recognize themselves in the stereotypical figure of entrepreneur. For example, their failure to profit maximize was held up as a marker of this misalignment. Stirzaker and Sitko conclude that many older women entrepreneurs reject the masculine-oriented traditional entrepreneurial identity and attempt to develop their own understanding of their professional identity. This paper lends fascinating insights into the ways in which society constrains the identity construction of older women in entrepreneurship, pinpointing acute tensions between traditional social and professional identities.

With similar reference to context and emphasizing the multiple identities of women entrepreneurs as a social actors, Wang explores the intersection between gender, race and place in the paper, “Gender, race/ethnicity, and entrepreneurship: women entrepreneurs in a US south city.” Building on the results of semi structured interviews with 40 women in a new immigration destination in the USA, the paper highlights the impact of the interactions between individual (agency) and institutional (structural) context in shaping the different identities of female entrepreneurs. By expanding the “5M” model (markets, money, management, meso/macro environment and motherhood) proposed by Brush *et al.* (2009), the study adopts a broad view that emphasizes the interaction and embeddedness of female entrepreneurs within their local communities, yielding multiple identities which may shift over time and space. This paper adds to the literature by conceptualizing the institutional and macro variables as leading forces of women entrepreneurs’ experiences that shape and are shaped by their communities. Wang concludes that the dialectical relationship between immigrant women entrepreneurs and their communities play a crucial role in their entrepreneurial activities.

Finally, in the last paper in this collection, Constantinidis, Lebègue, El Abboubi and Salman mobilize an intersectional approach to explore the heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs in Morocco, focusing on gender and social class, in their paper “How families shape women’s entrepreneurial success in Morocco: an intersectional study.” This study illustrates varying perceptions of entrepreneurial success among women entrepreneurs according to socio-economic status. Their data reveal the relative power that women from varying socio-economic backgrounds yield when it comes to navigating the oft-cited work/family balance issues associated with entrepreneurship (Loscocco, 1997; Cliff, 1998). Intersections create both oppression and opportunity (Baca Zinn and Thornton-Dill, 1996) and this study shows how higher socio-economic status women entrepreneurs are liberated from a certain level of patriarchal oppression by their access to financial backing and childcare support. They are also “privileged” relative to their lower socio-economic counterparts in that they are permitted to pursue their personal (intellectual) fulfillment as entrepreneurs. At the other end of the spectrum, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds – classified here as “cooperators” – enjoy increased societal status as simultaneous women entrepreneurs and main breadwinners. However, their functioning in this role relies heavily on the (unpaid) support of family members (often older daughters). Hence the (re)production of gendered inequalities persists.

Together, we consider these papers provide a strong contribution to our knowledge about gender and intersectionality. They also provide much food for thought. In particular, this special section exposes the need to develop methodologies and approaches to studying intersectionality and entrepreneurship as practices in contexts. More generally, the need for more engagement with intersectionality in the entrepreneurship domain is advocated, and this special section provides a first port of call to researchers seeking to address that need.”

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Further reading

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