

The Messy and Irregular Experience of Entrepreneurial Life

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Abstract : The growth ideology, and its association with progress, is an important construct in the narrative of modernity. This ideology is embedded in neoclassical economic growth theory which conceptualises growth as linear and predictable, and the entrepreneur as a rational economic manager. This conceptualisation has been critiqued for reinforcing the managerial discourse in entrepreneurship studies. Despite these critiques, both the neoclassical growth theory and its adjacent managerial discourse dominate entrepreneurship studies notably the literature on female entrepreneurs. The latter is the focus of this paper. Given this emphasis on growth, female entrepreneurs are portrayed as problematic because their growth lags behind their male counterparts. This image which ignores the complexity and diversity of female entrepreneurs' experience persists in the literature due to the lack of studies that analyse the process and contextual factors surrounding female entrepreneurs' experience. This study aims to address the subordination of female entrepreneurs by questioning the hegemonic logic of economic growth and the managerial discourse as a true representation for the entrepreneurial experience. This objective is achieved by drawing on Schumpeter's theorising and narrative inquiry. This exploratory study undertakes in depth interviews to gain insights into female entrepreneurs' experience and the impact of the economic growth model and the managerial discourse on their performance. The narratives challenge a number of assumptions about female entrepreneurs. The participants occupied senior positions in the corporate world before setting up their businesses. This is at odds with much writing which assumes that women underperform because they leave their career without gaining managerial experience to achieve work-life balance. In line with Schumpeter, who distinguishes the entrepreneur from the manager, the participants' main function was innovation. They did not believe that the managerial paradigm governing their corporate careers was applicable to their entrepreneurial experience. Formal planning and managerial rationality can hinder their decision making process. The narratives point to the gap between the two worlds which makes stepping into entrepreneurship a scary move. Schumpeter argues that the entrepreneurial process is evolutionary and that failure is an integral part of it. The participants' entrepreneurial process was in fact irregular. The performance of new combinations was not always predictable. They therefore relied on their initiative. The inhibition to deploy these traits had an adverse effect on business growth. The narratives also indicate that over-reliance on growth threaten the business survival as it faces competing pressures. The study offers theoretical and empirical contributions to (female) entrepreneurship studies by presenting Schumpeter's theorising as an alternative theoretical framework to the neoclassical economic growth theory. The study also reduces entrepreneurs' vulnerability by making them aware of the negative influence that the linear growth model and the managerial discourse hold upon their performance. The study has implications for policy makers as it generates new knowledge that incorporates the current social and economic changes in the context of entrepreneurs that can no longer be sustained by the linear growth models especially in the current economic climate.

Keywords : economic growth, female entrepreneurs, managerial discourse, Schumpeter

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