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To play or not to play: That is the question: Entrepreneurship as gendered play



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Abstract How can play be used to unravel the discourse of the gendered hero entrepreneur and instead describe mundane entrepreneurship? Further, how can the doing of gendered social orders be problematized when entrepreneurship is equated with play? In this article we answer these questions by engaging with the French social theorist Caillois' (1961) conceptualization of play as being at the heart of all higher culture. Two ethnographic cases act as our vehicle in analysing play as entrepreneurship. From a rich description of these cases we find that it is not a question of playing or not playing, but about how to play. All four forms of play described by Caillois are present, which illustrates the variation of entrepreneurship and the richness of activities conducted in the 'doing of entrepreneurship'. Further, both ways of playing discussed by Caillois are found. Whilst these two ways are interrelated on a continuum in the theory of play, they have been separated in entrepreneurship discourse, where they underpin the tendency to differentiate between the hero entrepreneur and ordinary people. Finally, we engage in a more interpretive and reflective discussion on entrepreneurship as performative acts through which social orders can be not only reproduced but also transformed.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship has attracted considerable interest in recent decades, in line with a society that cherishes an enterprise culture, giving prominence to the creative human

being (Meier Sørensen, 2008). Entrepreneurship discourses pander to entrepreneurs as creative, masculine, competitive and energetic frontrunners that undertake innovative actions in their pursuit of prosperity and development for all of us (c.f. Ogbor, 2000). Entrepreneurship is thus typically presented as indispensable, and entrepreneurs as creative and admirable, whilst the mundane doing of it – entrepreneurship – is obscure and mystified. In this article, we return to what Gartner (1988) had already argued is the right question, i.e. the focus on what entrepreneurs really do, hence contributing to the theoretical development and

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understanding of entrepreneurship (c.f. [Johannisson, 2011](#); [Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009](#); [Steyaert, 2007](#); [Tobias, Mair, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2013](#)). Central to this movement is the acknowledgment of process – creating knowledge of entrepreneurship (the verb) rather than reconstructing mainstream understandings of entrepreneurship (the noun).

It has been suggested that entrepreneurship involves passion, creation, discovering and dreaming which together act towards emancipation with a broad change potential ([Rindova et al., 2009](#)). However, even though emancipation is proposed to be inherent in entrepreneurial processes of social change, the entrepreneurship discourse has for a while been criticized for being gender-biased, ethnocentrically determined and excluding entrepreneurship discourse ([Ahl & Marlow, 2012](#); [Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004](#); [Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009](#); [de Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2006](#); [Mirchandani, 1999](#); [Wee & Brooks, 2012](#)). Whilst the heroic man has become synonymous with the entrepreneur, the woman has become synonymous with the non-entrepreneurial being ([Ahl, 2006](#)). Criticizing the excluding heroic entrepreneurship discourse has coincided with organizational scholars' critique of mainstream entrepreneurship research to reproduce naïve and narrow understandings of why some may be referred to as entrepreneurs and why others may not (e.g. [Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004](#); [Jennings, Perren, & Carter, 2005](#); [Jones & Spicer, 2005](#); [Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009](#)). It has been claimed that talk of entrepreneurship is often far too abstract, leaving out the richness of mundane everyday life with its privations and hardships, as well as its joys and bright moments ([Bill, Janssen, & Olaisson, 2010](#)). Not only does entrepreneurship grant inadequate attention to women entrepreneurs, but it also tends to mythicize entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship and entrepreneuring. Common to this research is its efforts to de-mystify entrepreneur/ship. Entrepreneuring, emphasising the unfinished character of entrepreneurial processes and acknowledging social creativity and playful adventuring, is thus pointed out as a promising path to recognizing contrasts, oppositions and alternatives of entrepreneurship.

Even in his early writings, Schumpeter described the entrepreneur as an “Action Man” motivated by the power and joy in breaking the mould, which he referred to as ‘creative destruction’ ([Swedberg, 2006](#)). This is now echoed in the emphasis of the creative entrepreneurial human being. In Schumpeter's description, entrepreneurial activity is mainly seen as liberating – as the emancipatory act [Rindova et al. \(2009\)](#) point to, or as a tactical process that operates from the margins ([Hjorth, 2004](#): 428). Furthermore, play is sometimes referred to as unstructured and emotional, which runs contrary to the rational view of entrepreneurship typically portrayed in popular management books ([Sarasvathy, 2001](#)). To better understand entrepreneuring, it has therefore been proposed that entrepreneurs should be seen as creative and playing human beings; as *homo ludens* in contrast to *homo economicus* ([Hjorth, 2004](#); [Johannisson, 2010](#)). In this article, we turn to French social theorist [Caillois \(1961\)](#) to further explore how play can be used to unravel the discourse of the gendered entrepreneur, analyse mundane entrepreneuring, and problematize how social orders may be challenged and/or preserved in entrepreneuring. For Caillois, play is not to be dismissed as frivolous or peripheral, but is at the heart of all higher culture. The discourse of entrepreneuring could be enriched through

the conceptual framework of play, where Caillois (1961) distinguishes between *ways of playing* and *forms of play*.

Hence, two types of questions drive our motivation for writing this paper. One is the lack of discourse that, instead of reifying the ‘creative human being’, addresses how play is involved in everyday and mundane entrepreneuring. To answer this first question we use [Caillois' \(1961\)](#) conceptual framework of play as a theoretical lens. Two ethnographic cases work as our vehicle in analysing play as entrepreneuring. The cases provide close observations on how entrepreneurial processes are enacted in situ as well as over time. Our second question concerns the paradox of ascribing entrepreneuring an emancipatory potential at the same time as entrepreneurship is criticized for being excluding. Through conceptualizing entrepreneurship as play we also problematize how social orders are gendered in entrepreneuring. In response to our second question, we engage in a more interpretive and reflective discussion on entrepreneuring as performative acts through which gender is constituted ([Butler, 2006/1999](#); [Davies, 2003](#)).

Next, entrepreneurship, play and doing gender are further elaborated. Then follows a section on methodology, outlining how the case studies have been longitudinally conducted, as well as the inspiring and illustrative role of the cases in this paper. Subsequently, both cases of entrepreneuring, the Freja Midwifery Clinic and the Moon House Project, are discussed from a play perspective, showing how all of Caillois' forms and ways of play are enacted in entrepreneuring. Our conclusions on entrepreneurship as gendered play are outlined at the end of the article.

Entrepreneuring, play and doing gender

In 2007, Steyaert proposed turning entrepreneurship into a “conceptual attractor” to make a breakthrough towards a more generally visible and accepted processual theory of entrepreneurship underpinned by a social ontology of becoming (e.g. [Chia, 1995](#)). Even though this concept had been put forward earlier, theorizing entrepreneurship had been largely neglected. To change the situation, a number of processual approaches are introduced by [Steyaert \(2007\)](#), who discusses their potential to break with the traditional “discovery view” which speaks of entrepreneurship as equilibrium based. It is argued that entrepreneurship has mainly been studied through an entitative approach, treating it as a “thing or entity with distinct features which are independent of the process or context” (p. 473). Entrepreneuring is seen as a theoretical concept with potential to ‘shake’ this view:

I see the term entrepreneuring as a travelling concept, as a potential space for theorizing and undertaking conceptual experimentations in relation to the idea of process, rather than freezing or stabilizing the thinking that has just begun. ([Steyaert, 2007](#): 471).

The concept of entrepreneuring has, seven years later, been picked up to conceptualize entrepreneurial processes in different ways. [Rindova et al. \(2009\)](#) theorize entrepreneuring as acts towards emancipation through which entrepreneurs can free themselves and others. [Uhlauer, Kellermanns, Eddleston, and Hoy \(2012\)](#) suggest that “the entrepreneuring family” can form a new paradigm for family business research. [Mair, Battilana, and Cardenas \(2012\)](#) develop a typology of

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