



# Momprenneurship as a Challenge to the Growth Ideology of Entrepreneurship

*Mompreneurs are female business owners actively balancing the roles of mother and entrepreneur. This concept contradicts and challenges the assumption, prevalent in entrepreneurship literature, that economic growth is the raison d'être of entrepreneurship.*

*By Steffen Korsgaard*

Entrepreneurship has received increased attention in the last 10 to 15 years. It is now widely recognised that small- and medium-sized new businesses are very important for the economic welfare of national economies as they contribute significantly to innovation and job creation. In Denmark, the government has launched a number of initiatives to support new venture creation. Politicians and bureaucrats have thus placed entrepreneurship at the centre of their political vision. The amount of research devoted to the study of entrepreneurship has also increased substantially during the same period. Both research and policy concerning entrepreneurship are characterised by a very strong growth ideology, an ideology which stakes the claim that the reason why we need to study entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurs contribute significantly to the growth in national economies. The purpose of entrepreneurship research thus becomes to understand and facilitate new venture creation and growth. Growth thus becomes one of the key concepts in entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship at the individual or firm level is seen as an instrument to generate economic growth in society as a whole. Growth equals development and hence becomes the criterion according to which entrepreneurs are judged. This makes it difficult to adopt a deliberate non-growth strategy. It also results in a number of entrepreneurs talking the talk of growth but walking a different walk. That is, they claim to pursue growth but in fact they do not.

Female entrepreneurs have also received increasing attention over the last decade or so, as the percentage of female entrepreneurs has increased consistently during the period. Even with this increase however, the ratio of women entrepreneurs to male entrepreneurs in Denmark is still only 0.43. This would indicate that women constitute an untapped resource in relation to new business creation. In regard to growing their businesses it is often argued that women tend to have smaller businesses than men, so many studies of female entrepreneurs are centred on the questions of why there are fewer female entrepreneurs and why they perform differently than their male counterparts. It is assumed that female entrepreneurs will score lower on the traditional measures of success, namely survival and growth. A number of different reasons are given for this. These include but are not limited to: a desire to balance family life and entrepreneurial life, difficulty in obtaining financial capital, lack of ambition, and lack of

managerial experience.

Public debate has revealed the beginning of a new scepticism concerning the traditional concepts of growth among some female entrepreneurs in Denmark. The network "Morgendagens heltinder" [Heroines of tomorrow] has aired the scepticism. Hoeck (2004), a key member of the network, admits that the women in the network may not generate visible growth in terms of employees and turnover, but argues that this does not mean that they are unable to run a successful company or to turn a profit. It is further indicated that some female entrepreneurs feel there is a lack of public appreciation for their efforts and that the political initiatives are not attuned to the demands and wishes of female entrepreneurs. This suggests that the concepts of growth and thereby the measure of entrepreneurial success are embedded in a traditional masculine value system, which emphasises male values over female, making it relatively more difficult for women to succeed.

## **The concept of growth in entrepreneurship research**

Entrepreneurship as a field is by no means characterised by a harmonious agreement on basic models, assumptions and methods. On the contrary, a myriad of different understandings of the field's object exist. One group of scholars focus on innovation as the key concept and understands the entrepreneur as the person(s) who realizes an innovation. Another group focuses on the formation of a new firm, and consequently the entrepreneur is here the person(s) starting the firm. Across these divides one thing seems to be broadly agreed on: Entrepreneurship must be studied because it contributes significantly to the economy. Schumpeter simply defines the entrepreneur as the one who brings about innovations which are what creates real development in the economy. Without the entrepreneur, the economy would grow (too) slowly. Later developments vary little from Schumpeter's original suggestions. Low and MacMillan (1988: 139) argue that "new firm creation is a critical driving force of economic growth, creating hundreds of thousands new jobs". Venkataraman (1997: 133) states that the connection between the individual entrepreneur's profit-seeking behaviour and the creation of social wealth is "the very raison d'être of the field". To put it bluntly, only because the entrepreneurs create growth in the economy as a whole, are they a worthy object of study.



Even in studies of female entrepreneurs the argument most commonly used to establish the relevance of the study, is that entrepreneurs are important for the economy. This argument is presented in spite of the fact that female entrepreneurs are not usually associated with high growth.

An unfortunate consequence of this approach to why we should study entrepreneurship is that the overall societal goal of growth is translated into a demand that the individual entrepreneur should grow his or her firm. The typical attitude of entrepreneurship researchers is cogently expressed by Wiklund et al. who wish to persuade the entrepreneurs to grow. They argue that

[...] if relevant information about the positive consequences of growth — and methods to circumvent negative effects — were made available to small-business managers, this could lead to a more positive attitude toward growth. (Wiklund et al., 2003: 266).

Many studies, however, show that the entrepreneurs are not necessarily interested in growing their firm.

#### **Feminist critiques of entrepreneurship**

Mainstream entrepreneurship theory has been criticised for being based on and promoting masculine values. Bird and Brush (2002) point to a number of issues that are problematic. They show that the entrepreneur is typically depicted as a man, which might be historically correct, but does not adequately reflect reality at present, as an ever expanding percentage of the entrepreneurship population is female. So that the mainstream theoretical models are based on assumptions driven by an understanding of what is mostly if not entirely male behaviour. Thus they can be seen by default to promote inherently male value systems. Thus, as a consequence of this, entrepreneurship is framed as a linear process aimed solely at profit and growth.

In a similar vein Stevenson (1990) argues that as the theories of entrepreneurship were generated on the basis of male behaviour, the resulting “objective” standards for evaluating entrepreneurs are in fact male standards. If this is the case, then it should come as no surprise if female entrepreneurs should be deemed to perform worse when evaluated according to these standards. The problem, thus, might not be that women entrepreneurs are less ambitious, less adept and less successful than male entrepreneurs, but that it is simply a measurement problem, in that the measures are incapable of presenting the real value, success, and therefore also the real problems as well as successes of female entrepreneurs.

#### **Mompreneurship**

The study of mompreneurship presented here is based on a discourse analysis of internet documents on the subject. As a discourse analytical study the focus is on the discursive construction of the emergent concept. Whether the activities subsumed under the concept as such are new, is a question untouched by the analysis.

What is in focus is what might be termed the framing of the activities. How are they understood and represented by the protagonists. For further details the study is presented in more detail elsewhere (see Korsgaard and Neergaard, 2007). The study included 17 information-rich documents that were carefully coded and analysed according to discourse analytical procedures. In the following, a short presentation of the phenomenon *mompreneurship* is given, and thereafter a more detailed discussion of the elements of the study relating directly to the concept of growth.

Mompreneurship is an emergent phenomenon, which has yet to settle on a widely accepted definition or be researched from a social scientific point of view. The very small-scale study mentioned above is the first of its kind as far as the author is aware. A preliminary definition of a mompreneur could be the following: “a female business owner actively balancing the role of mom and of entrepreneur” (Entrepreneur.com 2006: 1). The concept of mompreneur thus links to the definition of entrepreneurship as the formation of new firms.

The analysis of the documents revealed three elements that are central in this phenomenon: 1) a need to strike a balance between the needs of one’s workplace or career on the one hand and the needs of one’s family on the other, 2) the desire for a work environment unencumbered with an immediate supervisor impervious to and unconcerned with the needs of one’s family and 3) the desire to combine the first two elements with exciting and challenging work experiences. This can be seen in the following quotations from the study cited earlier:

I really enjoy that I can set my own hours, work late if I want and work in my pyjamas. I am a single mom, and it was important to me to be able to be home for my daughter. (Parlapiano and Cobe, 2006c: 1).

...I only answer to myself, and that makes a huge difference. I don’t have to call anywhere feeling guilty because I’m taking Jonas to the school dentist at nine o’clock. (Futtrup, 2006: 42-44. My translation SK).

I needed a creative outlet in addition to the wonderful time I spend with my daughter. (Bechthold, 2006: 3).

The three elements mentioned above may be subsumed under the concept of continuity. Thus it can be seen that the overall strategy of mompreneurship is to create continuity between the different spheres of the life of the mompreneur. A flexible professional life is a precondition for finding the appropriate balance between dedicated motherhood and work. The same goes for the absence of the stress of accountability to an immediate superior, the deletion of this relationship from the workplace equation can thus be seen as a strategy employed to minimize the conflict between family responsibilities and a career. The easiest way of removing the potential conflicts would be to stop working, but as the last element demonstrated this is not an option for the mompreneurs. They still want challenging work ex-



periences. To sum up: mompreneurship is a strategy used to create continuity and to minimize conflict between the relevant spheres of life (motherhood and work).

This is in stark contrast to mainstream understandings of entrepreneurship where the motivation to become an entrepreneur usually is understood to come from a need for profit and achievement or the discovery of some potentially profitable business opportunity. The logic of mompreneurship is different. In mompreneurship the entrepreneurial venture is started in order to solve specific problems in the everyday life of the mompreneur. An example will demonstrate this (this is another quotation from the documents):

My previous job was so stressful that I would wind up yelling at my children, and then go to bed mad at myself because I wasn't the mother I wanted to be. So my husband and I looked for a more affordable place to live, where we could survive on his income for a while and I looked for a more flexible way to work. I am very creative, and I mastered customer service skills at my previous job. Because I had knowledge of the corporate world, I chose corporate gift-giving as my niche, specializing in gourmet gift baskets. (Parlapiano and Cobe, 2006a: 1).

This quotation demonstrates that it is not the need for profit, achievement or the presence of a unique business opportunity that pushes this woman into entrepreneurship. It is the simple everyday experience of stress and guilty conscience about not feeling that she can be a good enough mother while working a traditional job.

The outset of the entrepreneurial process, of course, partly determines the path that the entrepreneurial venture takes. The mompreneurship venture is a blurry hybrid of motherhood and business and as such probably would not follow the expected path of business ventures, as mapped out in life-cycle models of firm development. It is here that the question of growth enters.

### **Mompreneurship and growth**

How do the mompreneurs relate to growth? Do they want to grow their businesses, and why (not)? The empirical evidence points to a very limited desire for growth, as the following quotation indicates:

Moms have small children. They want to be with them. A steady pace is fine with them right now. (Bower, 2005: 2).

In keeping my bottom line low, I have been able to continue to let my business grow without any large investments. (Parlapiano and Cobe, 2006c: 1).

Diane has managed to grow her business at her own rate so she doesn't become overwhelmed and forget her priorities. (Parlapiano and Cobe, 2006b: 2).

Without even addressing the issue of whether these mompreneurs understand the same thing as entrepre-

neurship researchers by the term *growth*, it is easy to see that growth is not that important for the mompreneurs. Or at the very least, that it is less of a priority for this group of entrepreneurs than succeeding at the tasks of motherhood. This means that by the mainstream standard of entrepreneurial success, namely growth, mompreneurs are simply not good entrepreneurs. They don't expand their businesses rapidly enough, they don't hire employees to any significant degree, nor do they present massive increases in sales. But are they really bad entrepreneurs, do they lack ambition and ability? I would argue that no, this is not the case.

The analysis of the mompreneurship phenomenon reveals that entrepreneurship is not just an economic activity that takes place only in the business sphere. Rather it occurs in and across different spheres of life. So that in placing the purely economic concept of growth at the centre of entrepreneurship research and making it the standard against which we evaluate entrepreneurs, I would argue that what we end up with is a very narrow and insufficient picture of the possibilities and potentialities of entrepreneurship.

### **A new generation of entrepreneurs?**

Do mompreneurs represent a new generation of entrepreneurs? Various arguments could be made both for and against this question. In the following, some of these arguments will be unfolded.

*Yes:*

Historically, entrepreneurs have been men, as have all the positions in society with power and prestige associated with them. But over the years, women have increasingly entered professions and positions of power and prestige: CEOs, politicians, judges etc. In the case of entrepreneurship, the increasing number of female and other types of what I have elsewhere referred to as hyphen-type entrepreneurs (e.g. grey entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs), have qualitatively changed the face of entrepreneurship. It is becoming an increasingly differentiated phenomenon. It is spreading from the sphere of profit-manic, high-powered elite business life into other social spheres. All kinds of people are starting businesses for all kind of purposes. Entrepreneurship is being democratized.

*No:*

Mompreneurship is rooted in the everyday existence of the mompreneurs. It is worth considering if this is not the case with most entrepreneurs. There is no such thing as "strictly business". Entrepreneurial activity is always entangled in all kinds of other activities. It necessarily unfolds in and across social spheres. As such, entrepreneurship becomes one of many expressions of the creative and problem-solving nature of human beings.

They represent a new generation of entrepreneurs. Or rather a kind of entrepreneurs that has probably always been around, but is now emerging as an interesting



social phenomenon, staking a claim for public recognition. As such, they are new partisans in the continued struggle over the meaning of entrepreneurship. The thing about mompreneurship is that it makes things visible to a very great degree. Dedicated motherhood and entrepreneurship seem at the conceptual level to be in complete opposition to one another. But by creating continuity between the two concepts, mompreneurs bring to light the notion that the two concepts are inherently entangled and expressed side by side in practice. By their actions they demonstrate that entrepreneurship is inherently democratic. The focus on the high-powered elite entrepreneurs (Steyaert and Katz 2004) was always a misunderstanding.

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