

Doing Gender, Doing Entrepreneurship: An Ethnographic Account of Intertwined Practices

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Traditional literature and research on entrepreneurship relies on a model of economic rationality alleged to be universal and agendered. This article presents a description of the processes that position people as 'men' and 'women' within entrepreneurial practices and as 'entrepreneurs' within gender practices, relying on an ethnographic study carried out in small enterprises in Italy. Our analysis shows how gender and entrepreneurship are enacted as situated practices and how the codes of a gendered identity are kept, changed and transgressed by constantly sliding between different symbolic spaces. In particular we highlight five processes of the symbolic construction of gender and entrepreneurship: managing the dual presence, doing ceremonial and remedial work, boundary-keeping, footing and gender commodification. We then propose a final metaphor which conveys a summary image of these processes. In concluding, we link our analysis to the original purpose of our investigation, highlighting not only how entrepreneurship is equated with the masculine, but also how alternative and possible forms of entrepreneurship exist, in the same way as different forms of gender.

Keywords: gender practices, entrepreneurship, ethnography, performativity

Introduction

As well as being an economic phenomenon, entrepreneurship can also be read as a cultural one. Entrepreneurial action is an archetype of social action and, as the institutionalization of values and symbols, it can be related to gender for a cross-reading of how gender and entrepreneurship are culturally produced and reproduced in social practices. Doing business is a

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social practice and so too is 'doing gender', but the latter is less evident than the former because commonsense attributes gender to the corporeality of persons and therefore to their being, rather than their doing.

If, in the classic literature, the features defining entrepreneurial figures are intrinsically connected with masculinity (the entrepreneur as the conqueror of unexplored territories, the lonely hero, the patriarch), more recent studies — even those examining female entrepreneurship — have also involuntarily contributed to a process of 'othering' the non-male, making the masculinity invisible and sustaining a model of economic rationality alleged to be universal and agendered (Bruni *et al.*, 2000).¹ This process seems strengthened by the research patterns used for the analysis of entrepreneurship, where the assumptions, variables, measurement models and methodologies contribute to casting the female entrepreneur as 'the Other' (Jonson Ahl, 2002).

We intend to offer a different point of view; one that embraces at the same time gender and entrepreneurship not as substances, but as practices learnt and enacted in appropriate occasions. Assuming a sensibility moulded by anti-essentialist assumptions and inspired by a feminist theory of identity as performativity (Bell, 1999; Butler, 1990, 1999), we may state that identity is the effect of a network of relations which give material form and stability to an artefact. The idea is that enactments are not deliberate and motivated performances — even though they may partly be such — but that subjectivity and objectivity are produced together within situated practices. Identity, therefore, may be seen as the product of a heterogeneous engineering of material and discursive practices (Bruni and Gherardi, 2001).

Relying on two ethnographic observations conducted in small enterprises in Italy, we discuss how gender and entrepreneurship are enacted as situated practices and how the codes of a gendered identity are kept, changed and transgressed by constantly sliding between different symbolic spaces. In particular, we intend to interpret and highlight the main processes of the symbolic construction of gender and entrepreneurship: managing the dual presence, doing ceremonial and remedial work, boundary-keeping, footing and gender commodification.

In the conclusion, we link our analysis to the original purpose of our investigation, highlighting not only how entrepreneurship is equated with the masculine, but also how alternative and possible forms of entrepreneurship exist in the same way as different forms of gender.

1. Entrepreneurship as a form of masculinity

The symbolic meaning of the enterprise is encapsulated by the mythological figure of Mercury, and by the mercurial personality: shrewd, pragmatic, creative, open-minded and adventurous. The features of entrepreneurship reside in the symbolic domain of initiative-taking, accomplishment and

relative risk. They therefore reside in the symbolic domain of the male and when these same features are transposed to the symbolic domain of the female they become uncertain. It is necessary to justify female entrepreneurship because it is not an immediately shared and self-evident social value. The symbolic order of gender assigns the sphere of activity and proactivity to the male, while it associates passivity, adaptation and flexibility with the female. In any culture, however, the symbolic gender order is not immutable: it is not static but dynamic and therefore varies across time and space. The meaning of gender itself, in so far as it is historically and culturally situated, lies in its deferral by gender relationships (Gherardi, 1995). Contextualized, situated and historicized gender relationships attribute a circumscribed meaning to male and female in any culture and they always do so in relation to the archetypes of maleness and femaleness which define difference and found the order of language.

Entrepreneurship is historically located in the symbolic universe of the male (Bruni, 2004; Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996) and, as Connell (1995) notes, hegemonic masculinity is also embodied in the figure of the entrepreneur: not the Schumpeterian innovator, but the Spanish conquistadores and the frontiersmen of the West, synthesis of two occupations pursued by segregated men (the professions of soldier and the maritime trader). The creation of overseas empires was an entrepreneurial activity in every effect, with the opening of new markets and the start-up of new productive activities (Mendelssohn, 1976) and it was also an enterprise with sexual connotations. The first Europeans to land in the New World were lone men (soldiers and traders) and, if they were followed by women, these were always wives or servants.

For that matter modern economic rhetoric has also often described entrepreneurship as an activity geared to the 'discovery of new lands' and undertaken by (male) 'explorers' (Bull and Willard, 1993; Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff, 1991; Pitt, 1998).

Whilst it can be argued that economic theory has still not furnished a thoroughgoing definition of entrepreneurial activity (Bull and Willard, 1993; Low and MacMillan, 1988), one may nevertheless note that what we know about entrepreneurship derives mainly from the early and classic studies of the 20th century (Ogbor, 2000): Knight's theory of risk (1921), Schumpeterian theories (Schumpeter, 1939), the theories of Cole (1959) of 'enterprise creation' and Collins and Moore (1964). According to these authors, the distinctive feature of entrepreneurial activity is a capacity for innovation. This, however, is regarded as being essentially a quality intrinsic to persons, rather than simultaneously a set of practices, so that even in the writings of so fine a theoretician as Schumpeter one finds descriptions of the entrepreneur as someone endowed with 'super-normal qualities of intellect and will' (Schumpeter, 1939, p. 82). Other theoreticians have been even more explicit in espousing a Darwinian and heroic model of entrepreneurship, asserting

that: 'However we may personally feel about the entrepreneur, he emerges as essentially more masculine than feminine, more heroic than cowardly' (Collins and Moore, 1964, p. 5).

While this kind of rhetoric has attracted much criticism as a discourse constructed by mingling gender themes with American folklore and western ethnocentrism (Butler, 1991; Calvert and Ramsey, 1992; Ogbor, 2000), it has also served as a legitimating discourse for all those theories that have assumed that the psychological/individual characteristics of the entrepreneur provide sufficient elements for a theory of entrepreneurship (see, for example, Baumol, 1993). In this regard, Fournier and Grey (1999) conduct a detailed critique of du Gay, the contemporary author most frequently cited by socio-economic studies of entrepreneurship (see for example, Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Grint, 1997). Expressions like 'The character of the entrepreneur can no longer be seen as just one among a plurality of ethical personalities, *but must rather be seen as assuming an ontological priority*' (du Gay, 1996, p. 181, emphasis in the original) are cited by authors as attempts to 'institutionalize' entrepreneurial characteristics and practices. The assumption underlying such assertions is that individuals have a natural tendency to be competitive, as well as the (physical) ability to work constantly and be geographically mobile (Fournier and Grey, 1999). It is a discursive practice which tends to marginalize those men who do not fit the construct, or those (historically women) who are unable to take part because they are engaged in domestic activities. A sharp distinction between home and work is taken for granted, with value placed on the unique and rational nature of work, while the emotional component necessary to manage interpersonal relations is ignored (Martin, 1990).

Rosslyn Reed (1996) and Kate Mulholland (1996) interweave the theme of entrepreneurship with that of patriarchy. Considering the latter along the two dimensions of the *private patriarchy* and the *public patriarchy* (Hearn, 1992), they see it as an extension of male power from the domestic sphere to the productive one. They argue that capitalist relations of production and those internal to the family have reinforced each other by virtue of the control exerted over sexuality and female work. Although masculinity does not constitute a homogeneous class, men have a 'class' interest (in Marxist terms) in maintaining power over women. The entrepreneurial literature has never concerned itself with exploring the power relations comprised in economic structures, establishing instead an automatic relation between the qualities of an entrepreneur (leadership, risk-taking, rational planning) and a model of male rationality (Mulholland, 1996).

However, the construction of entrepreneurship as a form of masculinity has not worked simply through male bodies. It has also and especially come about through the images and representations associated with masculinities, some of which are more aggressive and geared to personal profit, others being more altruistic and intended to ensure the economic well-being of

one's family (Reed, 1996). In the economic rhetorics that have accompanied it, entrepreneurship has been frequently associated (according to the historical period) with the dimensions of leadership and management. The 'entrepreneur' (he who discovers new worlds), the 'leader' (he who exerts control) and the 'manager' (he who imposes the order of rational management) are thus interpreted as archetypal figures which allow us to find our bearings in the everyday activity of organizations and which serve as symbolic expressions of the fears and hopes of performance by the firm (Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff, 1991).

Thus, we may state that the concept of entrepreneurship itself comprises a gender subtext (Benschop and Dooreward, 1998; Bruni, 2004) which renders maleness invisible and thus sustains the acritical reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, to study women entrepreneurs without examining the gender structuring of entrepreneurship is to legitimate the gender blindness which renders masculinity invisible and to turn masculinity into the universal parameter of entrepreneurial action. When masculinity is made invisible, the male entrepreneurial model is universalized and stripped of gender. Thus made universal, it is proposed or prescribed independently of a person's gender: women who wish to become entrepreneurs are required to comply with an apparently neutral set of values, while men are required to comply with those of 'entrepreneurial' masculinity.

2. Investigating gender and entrepreneurship

Studying gender at the level of interactions and discursive practices; that is, the social practices which constitute gender among historically situated men and women, informed our choice of methodology. An ethnographic account of gender as an entrepreneurial practice and of entrepreneurship as a gender practice (or, in other words, a description of the processes that position people as 'men' and 'women' within business practices and as 'entrepreneurs' within gender practices) is an approach still underutilized in the literature. Inquiries similar to ours include those of Kondo (1990), who examined the relations that construct people as males and females in a Japanese confectionery factory, and Fletcher (1999), who studied the processes of subject-positioning by six entrepreneurs (as 'women' and 'engineers') in a predominantly male organization. These studies, however, resemble ours more in their style than by virtue of any deliberate methodological choice.

Studying gender as performance calls to mind, from a methodological point of view, two studies — 'Agnes' (Garfinkel, 1967) and 'Gender display' by Goffman (1976) — which are widely cited in the literature on 'doing gender' (Butler, 1990; Gherardi, 1995; Kessler and McKenna, 1978; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Justifiably called classics, these studies underscore the fact that gender is a social practice, not a biological attribute, and that it

must be looked for in everyday interactions, read in relation to broader symbolic-cultural domains and considered as the outcome of mediation and representation work in these various domains.

We decided not to investigate exemplary cases, given that the literature on women entrepreneurs already abounds with histories constructed around 'exceptional figures'. Our theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) consisted in a search for situations in which entrepreneurship was not concentrated in a single individual and in which the gender of the entrepreneurs mingled with the gender inscribed in the product, in keeping with the idea that gender is evinced not only in organizational dynamics but also in the artefacts that these dynamics produce.

Fieldwork lasted a working week in each organization. During this period, the researcher shadowed (Bruni, 2004; Fletcher, 1999; Sachs, 1993) the entrepreneur, constantly taking notes on the subjects' actions and soon and inevitably becoming an integral part of the scene observed. In a reflexive conception of their role, ethnographers participate and observe just as much as they are observed and made participants by the people whom they meet. They help to bring about, make visible and collaboratively interpret the 'small events' or incidents caused by their presence and their identity is derived and fabricated from the practices, discourses and relations produced in the action space of the fieldwork (Bruni, 2004; Navarini, 2001). The choice of shadowing as a research technique seemed appropriate by virtue of the fact that entrepreneurial action is one of those activities that is constantly constructed through daily routines. It does not have rigidly pre-established boundaries (spatial and temporal) and tends to eliminate the dichotomy between public and private.

Each day's fieldwork concluded with an audio recording of an interview on the following topics: the history of the firm, entrepreneurial risk, innovation, the money factor and future prospects. These topics were selected in order to open an interpretative window on the construction that the male and female entrepreneurs put on their activities (and on themselves) as institutional action (and subjects).

A heterosexual male conducted ethnographic fieldwork during the first five months of 1999. We would emphasise that gender difference, as well as sexual orientation, was an important factor in the ethnographic observation (Bruni and Gherardi, 2001) that as the researcher (male and heterosexual) sought to adopt the perspective of the subjects observed (female and/or homosexual), he contaminated his sense of male self, taking it as an opportunity to observe (and question) the gender bias acting in the relationship.

Inspired by the postmodern debate on organizational ethnography (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Manning, 1992; Traweek, 1992), we sought the relationship between the observer and the subject observed as a relation of reciprocal implication and participation: while the researcher observes, s/he is observed, so that ethnography can be viewed as the result of a textual

collaboration, as the outcome of this dual hermeneutic process (Bruni and Gherardi, 2001). Ethnographers are considered to be engaged in a symmetrical reflective exercise (Linstead, 1993) and, far from being 'alien', ethnographers convey cultural assumptions and preconceptions and enjoy an active presence which makes their role different from that of the 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1980) as an uncontaminated expert (Tedlock, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988).

Symbolically, moreover, this approach also represents a gendered choice. Science and knowledge production, too, are domains that implicitly signify male, determined as they are to extol a 'rationality' and an 'objectivity' which obscures subjective and emotional meanings, giving rise to a dichotomous view of reality (Keller, 1985). Collecting qualitative (and thus contestable, ambiguous, inconclusive) data is another way to unmask the assumptions of masculinity that underpin scientific research. As Gherardi and Turner (1987, [1999]) state in the title of an article on qualitative research, 'Real men don't collect soft data!'

Describing the context: an anti-heroic story of two sisters doing welding and the editorial office of a gay and lesbian magazine

In order to investigate gender as an entrepreneurial practice and entrepreneurship as a gender practice we present two ethnographies. The first one was conducted in a production enterprise owned by two women, while the second is a 'cultural' undertaking, a gay and lesbian magazine, managed by five men.

The data will first be presented in largely 'raw' form, as fieldnotes shorn of interpretation, to enable the reader to construct his/her own impressions of the cases. The extracts in italics represent direct speech transcribed in 'real time'; they are consequently reported exactly (though translated) as they were expressed. There are a number of statements and questions by the researcher which have also been transcribed. Furthermore the ethnographies are recounted as a series of episodes. This is not only a narrative expedient with which to evade the pure temporal sequence of the events — without thereby dismembering the underlying processes — but also as a deliberate strategy to construct units of action/interaction on which to dwell during the stage of theoretical sense-making. After this first part, we present our interpretation of the stories collected, finally proposing our view of 'doing gender' and 'doing business' as interrelated practices.

3. Asie Welders

Asie Welders is a company owned by two sisters who inherited it from their father, who in his turn had inherited it from their grandfather. The company has 20 employees and it manufactures industrial welding machines.

When I arrive Franca Somma meets me. It is she who tells me about the company. She introduces me to her sister, Enrica Somma (*She's the real businesswoman, I play second fiddle . . . If it had been my choice, I would have preferred to be a dressmaker*) and to the Engineer (a man), who is ready to explain all the technical characteristics of the welding machines made by the company.

Home versus work. *You're split between two camps, in the sense that when you're here you never stop doing the things here and when you're at home you never stop doing the things there.* The home of the two sisters is close to the factory and *that's very important for women running a business, because if you think about the travelling involved . . .* Franca Somma explains how she has to take her son to school and then pick him up in the afternoons and that it would take a great deal of time if home, work and school were distant from each other. The two women come in to work as soon as they have taken Franca's son to school. They both accompany the boy because, of the two, only Enrica has a driving licence and it is she who goes to collect him from school every afternoon. On days when she brings the boy into the office from school, the Somma sisters cannot linger too long at work because he has to do his homework. When he is not there, they are able to stay longer, but this happens only rarely.

The sisters live together, in the house where their father, mother and grandfather lived before them. Because of the demands of their children (Enrica has a daughter), the communal running of their household is essential. They describe, for example, how the grandmother (their mother) looked after Franca's boy when he was a baby and how she used to telephone Franca at work when he was clamouring to be fed. 'Signora,' the workers would shout, 'the baby's hungry!'

The atmosphere in the company, indeed, is very 'family'. When Franca Somma and Miss Sabrina (the secretary, *who doesn't need to work because her husband's the director of a bank*) talk on the telephone, they discuss laws, payments and bureaucracy. There seem to be no rigidly fixed roles and the Somma sisters and Sabrina fit together perfectly. The Engineer, on the contrary, takes absolutely no part in these activities.

The Engineer: a matter of image. The Engineer never remains seated for longer than ten minutes at a time. He is the only person in the office with a cordless telephone, so that when he is speaking to someone on the telephone, he can move around. Nor is he obliged to remain seated at his desk when he takes a call. Yet, although his cordless telephone is always in his pocket, he is the only person in the office who never answers incoming calls. It is he who discusses the design and engineering of new welders; it is he who travels for the company (to present its machines); and it is he who handles relations with the other engineers and designers (all men).

Moreover, the company has a fleet of cars. The Somma sisters are not interested in the make, as long as they work. But *that's because we're women . . . The*

Engineer, for example . . . wants a nice car, because he says 'If I go to Alfa Romeo with a nice car, they'll let me through the main gates, otherwise . . . ' and also because he does a lot of travelling, whereas we're always here. I know it's a matter of image but . . . really I couldn't care less, as long as the car takes me where I want to go.

The two sisters tell me that they are now setting up a new company with the Engineer, *in which he'll be given the position he deserves, after so many years . . .* The sisters will be the partners and the Engineer will be the managing director. It's a question of image (Enrica explains), because a company whose managing director is an engineer has a reputation for being reliable, as opposed to the image conveyed by the two sisters. How come? *Because there are a lot of bogus companies around . . . registered in the name of somebody's wife just to qualify for tax relief. Every so often these companies . . . PUFF! They disappear! If there's the name of an engineer, though . . . Mind you, we don't give a toss . . . but in the market . . . it's like the question of the car.*

The only problem with the Engineer (the sisters tell me) is that sometimes he 'falls in love'. He falls in love with 'strong', rational entrepreneurs who 'conquer' new markets. He trusts them completely and sings their praises; *but then they always let him down!* Either they disappoint him, or they go off with a larger company, or they disappear. And he takes it badly, the sisters say, *he suffers.*

Secretaries versus entrepreneurs. Someone telephones about modifications to be made to a welding machine. Enrica Somma tells the Engineer to ring the person back and explain the situation (the technician is off sick and the technical department is entirely taken up with testing a new machine). But the Engineer is reluctant to make the call. As Franca Somma and I watch, she explains to me that it is the Engineer that should phone, because the customer believes that he has spoken to a secretary and might therefore think that he is being fobbed off.

According to the Somma sisters, being mistaken for a secretary sometimes proves useful, because it enables them to follow negotiations from the inside while appearing to be outsiders: especially because they often have insufficient information to gauge a situation, so that being taken for secretaries gives them a chance to acquire it. *We've got an excuse because we're women.*

By way of example, they mention an episode when a customer telephoned (somewhat irritated) about a malfunctioning machine and Franca Somma put him off until the Engineer arrived. By the time the Engineer did so, the situation had resolved itself. When the customer spoke to the Engineer, he asked him to *apologise for me to your secretary* (she laughs). They tell me about another occasion when it was the Engineer who pretended to be a secretary (imitating a women's voice) to 'get shot' of someone who kept on ringing him.

Franca Somma gives me another example: there are two firms, both equally good, offering the same product, except that there is a difference of 25 euros between their prices. Obviously, she wants to buy the one that costs less. *Only that if you're the owner you're a skinflint, if you're a secretary (so*

you're pretending to be someone else) then you're . . . 'careful'. (. . .) That's the point: I couldn't care less about money, but I think that as a businesswoman I SHOULD care about it. And so I'll haggle over even five lire, I'll create such a shenanigans . . . only on a question of principle, though (laughs).

They tell me about their relations with 'shabby' businessmen. For example, there was one that had made an order and then did not pay. Franca telephoned him and he used his secretary to stall her. After a while, her patience ran out (*because being busy is all very well, but after a while it was obvious that he was doing it on purpose*) and she complained 'vigorously' (*but without getting personal about it, mind you*).

Asie Welders: an anti-heroic story

The first of our stories describes a reality poised between the two worlds of business and the family which accounts for our decision to present the experience of the two businesswomen in dichotomous terms. The first of the two terms in the dichotomy (business) is a goal to achieve; the second (family) is a heritage impossible to shake off. Here, however, we shall concentrate on the dialectic between this dichotomy and its implications for gender and entrepreneurship.

The patriarchal element. Patriarchy constitutes the subtext for the entire organizational history of Asie Welders. The company was created on the initiative of just one man (the grandfather of the two female entrepreneurs) who devoted his entire life to its nurture. Thereafter, the company became the family's 'inalienable' property, handed down from one generation to the next, acquiring the significance of something made exclusively *for* the family — as Mrs Somma repeatedly emphasises.

The two businesswomen seem to interpret their business activity in entirely these terms. It is apparent in all the ethnographic episodes illustrated, where Enrica and Franca Somma seek to play down their role as women in the organization; an organization, moreover, which manufactures industrial welders and therefore operates in a sector historically and implicitly signify as male. All those with whom the two sisters have dealings in their day-to-day work — whether employees or businessmen — are of the male gender. The only exception is Miss Sabrina; but she, they say, does only office work and anyway (as emphasized in one of the very first conversations) she has no need to work because her husband has a good job. The Engineer, of course, enjoys all the privileges attaching to his masculine status within the company, occupying a position which advantages men and masculinities in the entrepreneurial activity. He is the acknowledged 'authority' who deals with all aspects of the design work and the organization's external relations. Above all, no one ever questions his actions, which are taken to constitute the norm. The Engineer is also attributed with a form of business acumen that the two sisters fail to recognize in themselves. His aptitude

for business is manifested in his close concern for the company's image *vis-à-vis* its various interlocutors and in his (excessive) faith in those, like him, trying to expand their range of action (and who invariably let him down).

Against the background of this 'gender' sub-text, more detailed analysis of certain of the episodes recounted will shed sharper light on the events observed in Asie Welders.

Balancing home and work. It is evident that a large part of the entrepreneurial activity of the Somma sisters is conditioned by the imperative of maintaining a dual presence at home and at work. Their acknowledged responsibility for another organization (the family) forces them to set limits on their lives in the company, which are frequently subject to time constraints and deadlines.

In order to juggle these various aspects and needs, the two business-women have blurred the confines between the domains of work and family so that they can move smoothly between them. They stress that their communal management of day-to-day life enables them to organize the two domains without having to dichotomize them (and themselves) too drastically. Moreover, they also find it easy to alternate physically between them, given that their home is situated close to the company's premises. Thus taking Franca's son to school is simply a staging post along the way to work and going to pick him up is a daily chore that sets the cadence of organizational time; just as going to the bank on Fridays to withdraw the cash needed by the business for the following week is also an opportunity to cater to the family's needs over the weekend.

From this point of view, the male presence of the Engineer serves the purpose of exonerating the sisters from any need to represent the firm in the market. Such activity would require them to undertake frequent business trips around the country, which would be impossible to reconcile with important aspects of their daily lives. It would also require their compliance with certain canonical and aesthetic principles of consumption in the business world (like driving the right kind of car, for example).

A matter of visibility? A rather curious aspect of corporate life at Asie Welders is the reluctance of the Somma sisters to be recognized as business-women. Although what they say about the advantages of not performing a particularly visible organizational role is true (because they can turn the ambiguities of the situation to their own advantage), it is equally true that a organizational position is nevertheless attributed to them: everyone, in fact, who enters the premises takes them to be secretaries. The process is exemplified by the section entitled 'secretaries versus entrepreneurs':

1. Not being identified as 'entrepreneurs' provides them with an alibi: it enables the sisters to shed numerous responsibilities inherent to business activity, both commercial and financial.

2. Not being identified as 'entrepreneurs' provides them with a motive: the people with whom the sisters have dealings would expect them to behave in a certain way if they saw them as entrepreneurs. It also provides the sisters with a justification for 'not doing what an entrepreneur should do' and also for 'doing what an entrepreneur should not do'.
3. Not being identified as 'entrepreneurs' yields an advantage: that of being privy to what is going on in all the intermediate phases of a negotiation. Although these phases may not have a crucial bearing on the eventual outcome, being in on them enables the sisters to monitor developments.

In all three cases, however, the non-identification of the sisters as entrepreneurs is apparently determined less by any particular action on their part than by the association of their femaleness with the role of women in business organizations. And this seems to be a socially shared process, given that when the Engineer had to 'dodge' someone on the telephone, he did not resort to any particular stratagem but merely imitated a female voice. The situation is ironic to the point of paradox: the Somma sisters (although they are the entrepreneurs) are not required to do anything in order to conceal their role; they need only speak on the telephone; the Engineer (who is not the entrepreneur) must instead resort to stratagems to demonstrate his 'extra-neousness', as if to say that, while it is difficult to combat the socially shared image of women in organizations as 'secretaries', it is even more difficult to counteract that of men as 'entrepreneurs' (or managers), precisely because it is not explicit, but taken for granted.

Defining oneself by default. Apart from the strategic advantages of not being taken as entrepreneurs, it is unclear why the sisters should play down their importance in the company to such an extent. The formula with which Franca introduces herself and her sister (*She's the real businesswoman, I play second fiddle (. . .) If it had been my choice, I would have preferred to be a dress-maker*) is overly self-effacing, given that both of them have degrees and they contribute equally to the running of the company. However, if analysed carefully, this curious introduction is indicative of two aspects taken into account by Franca Somma when defining her notion of entrepreneurship:

1. In the first part of the sentence Franca states that there exists a shared image of the 'entrepreneur'. Besides relating more to a man than a woman (as illustrated by Enrica's explanation of why they have decided to register the company in the Engineer's name), this image conveys an ability to be ruthless in dealing with others. Franca Somma is indeed able to behave in this way (as when she protested 'vigorously' to a defaulting customer), but she does not see this as something that comes naturally to her. It is this that prevents her from seeing herself (and being seen) as a 'real' entrepreneur. The same applies to matters of money (see the section 'secretaries versus entrepreneurs'). Franca Somma is not interested in money.

However, as an entrepreneur, she feels that she should be and in this manner that demonstrates her position in the market and her close attention to the financial aspects of bargaining.

2. In the second part of the sentence, the stress is instead on the choice of becoming an entrepreneur. For Franca Somma, hers was not a genuine choice because she inherited the business from her father. She would have preferred a much more 'female' occupation; that of dressmaker, for example. However, the contrast between the image of the 'entrepreneur' and that of the 'dressmaker' is not obvious: from a purely economic point of view, dressmaking is a market sector and, as a form of self-employment, 'dressmaking' could easily constitute entrepreneurial activity. Hence, the image used by Franca functions by evoking other scenarios to do with traditionally male occupations (entrepreneur) rather than female ones (dressmaker) and with domains of competence and interest determined on the basis of gender membership.

In both cases Franca Somma interprets her experiences as an entrepreneur by default with respect to a (male) standard of what is 'normal'.

The dis-entrepreneurs and the dual presence. During one of our first telephone contacts with Asie Welders, the Somma sisters reacted to our announcement of the topic of the research by warning us (ironically) that what we would find in their company was an example of 'dis-entrepreneurs', rather than of an entrepreneurship standing as an alternative to the male equivalent. The reason adduced was that in recent years the company had shed increasing numbers of employees.

With hindsight, this description seems to relate more to their deliberate non-compliance with certain assumptions about entrepreneurship and male corporate performance — principally, that of the entrepreneur as the aggressive, competitive solitary hero who aspires to the conquest of new market shares. Their entrepreneurial experience of the two sisters has value to them, above all, more in its significance for their private and family lives, than for their business life.

Here, we submit the main process by which gender and entrepreneurship are constructed resides in the dual presence (Balbo, 1979; Zanuso, 1987) patterns that characterize and situate the action of the two female entrepreneurs. Firstly, they characterize it as asserting the indivisibility of gender and entrepreneurship as symbolic activities: performing entrepreneurship involves a gender positioning, and depending on how gender is performed, entrepreneurial action acquires different dimensions and levels of legitimacy. Secondly, they permit the constant and fluid movement between different spaces of signification (secretaries/entrepreneurs, housewives/working women) facilitating the breaching of the boundaries of the symbolic gender order, according to the occasion. Gender and entrepreneurship are, therefore, a theoretical dichotomy whose dividing line is constantly blurred, crossed and

denied, but then reconstructed a posteriori by the joint action of several actors.

4. The editorial offices of Atlantis

Atlantis is a limited company, owned by five partners and publishes a monthly magazine for gays and lesbians.

Mr Air arrives at 9 a.m., makes a couple of phone calls and then has a cup of coffee. The office is empty. Mr Air switches on the computer: he has to finish paginating an article by Mr Water (the graphic designer). Mr Air is the chief editor. He arrives first in the morning, because he has the only set of keys and it is he who turns on the central heating and the coffee machine.

Twenty minutes later the two assistants arrive (Mr Fire and Mr Wind, who are a couple). There is no fixed clocking-on time; rather a time-span during which the staff has to come into work (*As you can see our working hours are quite flexible . . . But I should work on my own, I reckon I'd be better off. Why? I'd be responsible for what I do and I wouldn't be accountable to anyone . . . very simple* (laughs) . . . *It's obvious that I can't* (laughs)). Mr Air must go out, so he gives instructions to the other two. The conversation is laconic, but this may be due to the Monday-morning effect. I watch and, for the moment, keep my distance.

A routine morning. We set off for the printers. We take the bus because Mr Air does not have a driving licence. He talks to me about his relations with the printers. He's changed firms frequently and the owner of this one is also his partner: he publishes the magazine. His premises are not far away and are within easy reach. Everyone is very pleasant at the printers. Mr Air hands over his material and we leave.

We get back to the editorial office, where, after Mr Air has made a couple of phone calls to people he failed to contact earlier, he sits down next to Mr Wind and follows the pagination of the magazine. When the phone rings it is almost always Mr Air who answers.

We go out again, this time to the bank to pay some bills. I take the opportunity to ask about the magazine's corporate set-up. First it was a partnership, now it's a joint-stock company. Previously there were eight partners who worked on the magazine. But this created a *public-sector* mentality. *Each of us had his own row to hoe . . . and he was only concerned with that, there wasn't any interest . . . he was only interested in one job and in earning a steady salary.* They split and now there are five employees (plus contributors), of whom three are partners. Mr Air believes that their company bears little resemblance to a 'Company'. *Companies usually have a more hierarchical structure, more centralized, whereas here you've seen . . . there's almost no structure.* He also tells me that he would like an entirely independent administrative board which would conduct audits and monitor the work. *Because, all right, I can*

get away with it . . . but there are others . . . who should be checked up on. 'Can't you do it?' Yes, but it's also me who gets the hassle! 'But you're the chief editor?' Yes, but as such I should be worrying about the next issues (annoyed) . . . instead of being here in the bank making payments.

We go back to the office, but only to ring (for the fourth time) to get permission for a photograph to be used on the cover of the February issue. This is the week when the February issue should go to the printers, but there is still no cover. Nobody, however, seems particularly worried.

The saga of the front cover. Mr Air wants to use a photograph of the catalogue of a well-known fashion designer on the front cover. But he has to get permission. Mr Air knows the designer because he, too, is gay. But he is difficult to get hold of. Although Mr Air has been leaving him messages for days, he has not called back. *It's really tough having to insist . . . to keep on trying . . . you look so weak.* He fails to get through. The girl on the telephone has said that the designer is going to be extremely busy for the next two days and she cannot put him through. But let us proceed in order.

In May, when the first issue of the magazine came out in revamped format (all colour, more pages, glossy paper, a folding cover), the fashion designer (who is gay) telephoned Mr Air to congratulate him on the new graphic design. A month later Mr Air asked him for an interview and in reply received only a catalogue and a handful of press releases. They wrote an article nevertheless. They also managed to sell advertising space to the designer, but at a quarter of the usual price because his marketing advisers said that that magazine was *too politicized*. 'What is politicized about it?' *I don't know. People who work in marketing, they flick through magazines, they don't read them.*

And so we come to this month, when Mr Air asks for permission to print a photograph of an old copy of the catalogue on the magazine cover. *Yes, no, I don't know:* nobody will give him an answer. Mr Air is rerouted to a marketing manager (*some 25-year-old who's been to bed with . . . because it's always the same old story*), who makes himself simply impossible to find. Result: today is Wednesday, it is obvious that the cover is a non-starter and that a new photograph must be found. How is the cover photograph chosen?

We used to choose a photo of a good-looking boy . . . a nice face . . . a beautiful body. Now we try to choose something which . . . well, it should be right for the cover . . . we still don't know whether it sells more or less copies . . . although according to me it's not that Atlantis's readers . . . but, you know, for the sake of image . . . you have to.

To continue the conversation, I say somewhat provocatively '*. . . and anyway, a lot of newsagents still classify Atlantis among the porn magazines . . . I've nothing against pornography!*

The saga of the advertising. I talk to Mr Fire. Before the split he was in charge of the bookshop; then the bookshop was taken over by the group that had left and he moved on to the editorial staff. He handles advertising and relations with advertising agencies, although in reality, he explains, there are very few contacts with the agencies. The magazine relies more than anything else on a network of contacts (with various homosexual organizations) built up over the years. Yet it is precisely the advertising agencies that the magazine needs, because they offer longer and bigger contracts upon which long-term investments can be made. But why are the agencies not interested?

Mr Fire thinks it depends on the fact that you have to know someone in an agency, otherwise it is difficult to convince them. Moreover, Atlantis carries 'porn' advertisements (sex shops, hot-lines, hard core videos) and there are some who are reluctant to have their product appear alongside a sex shop. Others are even more reluctant for their product to appear in an avowedly gay magazine.

Mr Fire would be willing to remove the hot-line advertisements if he could be sure of filling the space with other advertising. But he cannot do this a priori; if he does, the magazine will fold. But what irritates him most is that no one ever says outright 'No! Because you're a gay magazine!' and everyone ducks the real issue. And yet (he says), there does exist a gay lobby in Italy, in both fashion and advertising. *Dolce and Gabbana, for example . . . they're gay, they put themselves forward as gay, they have products which draw on homosexual imagery . . . but it is people like them that give us the greatest problems . . . so I'm pessimistic and I say that there's no sense of community . . . and then just imagine how much it would cost D&G to buy space in Atlantis: with the money they spend on organizing a party we could live for a year!*

Mr Fire believes that everything is made more difficult by the fact that a gay market does not exist in Italy, apart from saunas and nightclubs. There are no restaurants, no beauty products, no bookshops, no theatres and no cinemas. But what should a gay restaurant have? *Nothing specific . . . it should be opened by two gays . . . create a particular ambience . . . a place which caters to the gay community.*

Atlantis: does heterosexuality matter?

The case of Atlantis is important not only because it exemplifies an aspect of entrepreneurship but also because it highlights an assumption that in the other case remained invisible because it was taken for granted: the presumed heterosexuality of organizations and of entrepreneurial activity.

From the fieldnotes, it seems that homosexuality structures the organizational identity and experience of people involved in the company: life and work choices are apparently determined by occupying a dimension fashioned by one's sexual orientation. The latter, however, is never treated

together with the gender issue, with the consequence that homosexuality apparently transcends the male/female.

Although homosexuality does not seem to interweave with gender dimensions, the ethnographic fieldwork does not reveal a setting shorn of the socially shared meanings of male/female, either at the organizational or, even less, the personal level. Emotional aspects are invariably treated (and dismissed) as 'weaknesses'. In the same way, an abstract and 'rational' model of organizational planning is often extolled (for example, when Mr Air talks about 'running' the editorial staff). The reference models (the 'true' Company, the 'true' journalist) appear to be the classic ones, unless they are discredited by other clichés (the 'true' journalists who write 'garbage', or the 'true' marketing managers who merely flick through magazines before deciding whether or not to advertise in them). The figure of Mr Air himself, as a businessman, is not at odds with the canons of male entrepreneurship (it is clear that he finds it difficult to delegate); even if the climate of the editorial office is collaborative, Mr Air tends to present himself as the pivotal figure (for example when he says that if he went away for a week the magazine would fold).

The point, then, is to understand the relationship between homo/heterosexuality and the male/female dichotomy in the case of Atlantis. From what has been observed, the relationship seems to be a 'parallel' one, in two senses:

- The homo/heterosexuality dichotomy seemingly operates in parallel with the male/female one. A homosexual order is just as much taken for granted as a male one and homosexuality is intrinsically 'better' than heterosexuality (in the same way as the male discredits the female). In the organization studied, people's roles are legitimated by their homosexuality and their opinions on homosexuality (just as happens in those organizations where masculinity is the sub-text of people's careers). Thus the processes that sustain the two dichotomies seem to move along the same track.
- Seen from another standpoint, homo/heterosexuality and male/female are two parallel lines which never meet. The former is based on sexual practices, the latter on a set of socially shared meanings. Hence it follows that the former has mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion which are much more 'objective' than those of the latter and, consequently, while male/female may be (and in effect are) constantly subject to negotiation in interpersonal relationships, homo/heterosexuality still remains an essentially static dichotomy. When Mr Air says that they will be forced to hire lesbians by 'equal opportunities' legislation, what he is not questioning is female homosexuality. In other words, Mr Air is using the female counterpart of his homosexual practice, not of his gender position.

The choice of a homosexual enterprise enabled us to account both for the heterosexual assumption of the market, but also of the researcher, evidencing

that the dominant model of sexual desire is constantly present in the negotiation of organizational practices. But the inclusion of an homosexual enterprise also brought with it the (covert) hope that this would represent an occasion for destabilizing the symbolic space of (heterosexual) masculinity. However, perhaps because Atlantis did not pursue a political agenda and perhaps because (like any other enterprise) it was obliged to build a reputation in the market, we cannot say that this was the case. Gender seemed to perform the role of a commodity: an item like any other, to be selected, capitalized upon and marketed. What we found, therefore, was a process of 'gender commodification', in the sense that the symbolic space of gender was exploited as terrain on which to (re)construct market relations.

5. Five processes and one metaphor of the construction of gender and entrepreneurship as intertwined practices

In the two cases we singled out five main processes of how gender and entrepreneurship are performed on a daily basis.

One process common to the various businesses studied relates to the fact that gender and entrepreneurship are performed by constantly shuttling between different and dichotomous symbolic spaces. Gender and entrepreneurship are constructed through the dual presence that characterizes and situates the action of the male and female entrepreneurs studied. We wanted to associate Asie Welders explicitly with the idea of dual presence because the process was particularly apparent in that business. But it is possible to put this construction on all the situations characterized by a continuous and fluid movement between different spaces of signification (home/work, reproduction/production, secretaries/entrepreneurs, housewives/working women) which facilitates the breaching of the boundaries that mark out the symbolic order of gender and entrepreneurship according to the occasion. In Atlantis, where the magazine merged public and private experience together, gender and entrepreneurship are a theoretical dichotomy whose dividing line is constantly blurred, traversed and denied, but then jointly reconstructed *a posteriori* by diverse actors.

The second process of gender and entrepreneurship construction also moves in this direction. It concerns negating the crossing of symbolic boundaries, thus sanctioning separation. When actors behave in breach of the 'ceremonial' aspects of doing business, or when critical situations arise and order must be re-established, activating a correct gender score may constitute an efficacious remedial practice — to the point, for instance, that the two (female) owners of Asie Welders were persuaded that their Engineer (a man) should perform the role of the entrepreneur while they pretended to be secretaries. Note that the process also operates in reverse, as in the case of Atlantis, where the demonstration of a strong orientation to the market

served to restore the balance between symbolic universes thrown out of kilter by the transgression of heterosexual practices. This is the notion of the dialectical enactment of 'ceremonial' and 'remedial' work, which forms the backdrop to all the 'ceremonies' of entrepreneurial action and doing gender that sanction the division between the male and female spheres.

'Doing gender' and 'doing business' are therefore tied together by a tacit knowledge which imposes further boundaries and further constraints on action. Unlike 'remedial' and 'ceremonial' work, in fact, 'boundary-keeping' concerns not only the assertion of different symbolic fields but also their defence. Representative of this process are those episodes in which action is intended to preserve an acquired space: for instance, at Atlantis, where business practices were designed to define a market sector on the basis of shared sexual practices. 'Boundary-keeping' processes are evident in all the situations observed at Asie Welders, where the two female entrepreneurs established the boundaries of their entrepreneurial action on the basis of their 'womanhood'.

The fourth process is what Goffman (1974, 1980) calls 'footing'.² Footing has two functions: it enables people to adjust their stance within a particular frame and it provides an occasion for them to disrupt its referents. At Asie Welders, footing was an ironic process by which the two female entrepreneurs aligned themselves in gender terms (as women-secretaries) and thus resolved the doubts of external actors as to their presence in the company. Footing work also seems to characterize the situations observed in the Atlantis editorial office, where management sought to keep in step with the market, regardless of the consequences for organizational and gender practices.

The final process is 'gender commodification', a process which acted reflexively on everyday organizational practices. We found examples of gender commodification in the entrepreneurial stories where the symbolic spaces of male and female were a production factor to be allocated in the most efficient manner possible. By 'gender commodification' we mean the exploitation of the symbolic space of gender as terrain on which to (re)construct market relations, as exemplified by Atlantis. In the case of Asie Welders, for instance, it was a process of gender commodification that persuaded the two female entrepreneurs that women were less 'reliable' than men, given the alleged 'impartiality' of the production cycle.

Gender and entrepreneurship as symbolic spaces of intertwined practices

Having discussed five processes of gender construction, we wish to propose a final metaphor which conveys a summary image of them all. If we conceive 'doing gender' and 'doing business' as symbolic spaces marked

out (and occupied) by the action of those who engage in these practices, the joint production of gender and entrepreneurship seems to proceed as follows.

At first, the two spaces closely interweave: home and business merge and it is difficult to draw a clear demarcation line between public space and private space. At this 'mobilization' stage, distinctions among the various symbolic fields (public, private, male, female, gender and entrepreneurship) are blurred and boundaries are easy to cross. But when numerous actors interact and set about establishing some kind of order (especially when a critical or ambiguous event occurs), the process of crosswise presence described earlier is obstructed. The actors involved activate a dialectic between ceremonial and remedial work which prevents any breach of boundaries, thereby sanctioning the separation between the two spaces. This phase is followed by defence of one's own symbolic space. Confined to a specific territory (whether male, female, or entrepreneurship), the actors seek to forge alliances with the other occupants of their space and engage in a process of 'boundary-keeping' which protects the benefits that they have acquired and preserves their space against trespassing by 'outsiders'. It is now that footing work renders the symbolic spaces more or less open and receptive to new practices or new participants, and constructs the parameters of territorial belonging. One consequence of this process is 'gender commodification': if 'doing gender' and 'doing business' acquire a concrete form through the progressive separation of spaces (both symbolic and of action), then the commodification and exploitation of one's own symbolic territory appear to be the practical consequence. However, the complexity of the processes observed, which appear to be the neutral consequences of two spaces purportedly pertaining to different symbolic dimensions, is thus obscured and removed from scrutiny.

Conclusions

In this article we presented an ethnographic description of the processes that position people as 'men' and 'women' within entrepreneurial practices and as 'entrepreneurs' within gender practices. Having identified in the field-notes five processes of gender construction, we proposed in the last section a metaphor which conveys a summary image of them, conceiving 'doing gender' and 'doing business' as the symbolic spaces of intertwined practices. In these conclusions, we want to offer some final remarks regarding the original purpose of our investigation; that is, the relations between entrepreneurship, masculinity and gender practices.

From a certain point of view, our fieldwork confirms the existing equation between entrepreneurship and masculinity: in both of the cases we

presented, the ways actors performed their roles as entrepreneurs were related to the parallel performance of masculine practices. Moreover, some of these activities were explicitly performed in order to align the image and/or the identity of the entrepreneur and its organization with the broader symbols of entrepreneurial action.

At the same time, our ethnographic descriptions highlight a contrasting process, namely the fact that both our organizations were practicing entrepreneurship and gender in forms that can be considered alternative (if not opposite) to the one prescribed by a model of hegemonic masculinity. In Asie Welders the way the two sister entrepreneurs refused to frame their activity as 'entrepreneurial' (claiming that they were 'dis-entrepreneurs') echoes the Atlantis' effort to find a model of masculinity different from the heterosexual one. Last but not least, in both of these cases entrepreneurial experience is valued by the actors, above all, for its significance in their private, more than business, lives.

Thus, it is not that these two organizations fail to represent forms of entrepreneurship. Rather they deliberately reject certain assumptions about entrepreneurship as a male corporate performance, principally as the aggressive, competitive, solitary hero who aspires to the conquest of new markets. In our opinion, this process sanctions the indivisibility of gender and entrepreneurship as intertwined practices. Performing entrepreneurship involves a gender positioning and, as we have shown through the five processes of the social construction of gender and entrepreneurship, subjects act in ways that constantly blur, cross and deny the theoretical dichotomy between different spaces of signification. Exploring entrepreneurship and gender as practical accomplishments, we found alternative forms of entrepreneurship to those that are allegedly hegemonic, just as we found different forms of gender.

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Notes

1. The data we present here are part of a broader research project which consisted in the ethnographic observation of five companies (Bruni, 2004, Bruni *et al.* 2000). In this article, we rely on just two of them.
2. To be precise, Goffman (1974, 1980) applies the notion of footing mainly to discourse dynamics. However, in our view he does not provide a thorough definition of the notion, which authorizes us to use it for the analysis of practical activity, not just of discourse.

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