



Qualitative Sociology Review – Book Reviews

Volume IV, Issue 1 – April 2008

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Book Review: *The Scientific Reproduction of Gender Inequality. A Discourse Analysis of Research Texts on Women's Entrepreneurship*
by Helene Ahl. Liber, 2007, pp. 235

As the title suggests, the book focuses on the phenomenon of reproduction of gender inequality. Moreover, the field of the study is research articles, an area usually considered objective and free from ideologies or superstitions. Research results are one of the pillars of sociological reliability, and empirical research seems to be a reliable basis and test for theoretical reflection. Research concerning gender issues is especially expected to be bias - free. The study of Helene Ahl reveals deeply rooted bias in such writings. The author also calls her book 'a critical study', as she proves, research articles need such critical approach.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part presents a necessary theoretical foundation. The second part presents the analysis. The following part is not only a summary of the findings - it ties together theory and results and draws some guidelines for both further research and future writing and publishing of research articles - at least those concerning gender issues.

After reminding to the reader the basics of feminist theories and different grounds for feminist research, the writer comes to the subject of entrepreneurship as gendered. She also calls out the idea of feminist deconstruction. She uses this approach to analyze the construction of discourse concerning female entrepreneurship - which means the study and comparison of the discourse of entrepreneurship and the discourse of 'woman'. It is not surprising, that these two discourses are opposite ones, the discourse of entrepreneurship is closer to men and a construct of masculinity, and woman and femininity are defined in categories that are very distant from the definition of entrepreneurship. As the subject of entrepreneurship is usually described as: a market activity, done for profit, in private sector, being innovative and giving a chance of change and some risks, while its opposites are not-trading activity, non - profit, public sector, traditional and offering stability and safety; femininity is being described as opposite to entrepreneurship and masculinity is being defined as a mirror reflection of entrepreneurship. According to famous Bem's scale of masculinity and femininity, an entrepreneur is viewed as self - centred, mentally free and able, strong willed, able to withstand opposition and firm in temper (the features very similar to characteristics of a male); whereas the features associated with femininity are rather connected to those opposite to 'entrepreneur words', such as: loyal, sensitive to the needs of others, gentle, shy, yielding or gullible.

To conduct such an analysis Helene Ahl applies Foucault's concept for discourse analysis. The description of research process is begun by presentation of the objectives for selection research texts. Few leading research journals in the field of management and organization have been chosen; mainly four entrepreneurship research journals, as: "Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice", "Journal of Business Venturing", "The Journal of Small Business Management", and "Entrepreneurship and Regional Development". All the journals belong to discourse community defined by the author as: based on blind reviews process and using some disciplinary rules of describing entrepreneurship, resulting in regulative effect onto the discourse. The analysis material was expanded by additional thirteen articles published in other journals that were taken into account. They were included into analysis because of frequent citations, proving their influence onto the discourse. Finally, 81 articles from 1982 and 2000 were analyzed. They covered topics such as: personal background and firm characteristics, attitudes to entrepreneurship or intentions to start, psychology, start - up processes, management practice and strategy, networking, family, access to capital and performance. The most common research question in those texts was related to differences between male and female entrepreneurs. The analysis results show how female entrepreneur is being constructed in such writing. It reveals that writers' interest in female enterprises was caused by their impact onto the markets, not from positions of interest in equality issues. Entrepreneurship is being defined as male feature - the words with a masculine connotation are equated with entrepreneurship, whereas the words with feminine connotations are associated with weakness. The world of entrepreneurship is being described through opposition of strong and weak sides, correlating with male and female bodies. Three strategies were used in this discourse of diversity and inequality: firstly, it was focused on small difference and ignoring the similarities. Another strategy was to declare women entrepreneurs as exceptions compared to regular women. The third strategy was to mould an alternative: a motherly entrepreneur. Such strategies resulted in polarisation in portrayal of entrepreneurs, with male figure as a norm, and female as an exception.

The research also focused on constructing the work and family. The results show that division into public and private sphere exists also in research articles on entrepreneurship, and strong gendering of the two spheres is not avoided. Men's place in the public sphere is not unquestioned, and it is the woman who is thought to adapt to her husband's fixed schedule, and the task of caring for small children is regarded as the woman's responsibility. Women's entrepreneurship means rather challenge in combining private and public, family and career, or as a chance to combine those two opposite spheres. Men are excluded from such an alternative, and women seem to be devoted to both spheres, as public childcare is excluded from the discourse, although the question of flexibility arises. Entrepreneurship is generally viewed as positive value and experience, and women are advised to adapt to double burden by adapting themselves, and not to question the general rules.

Such scientific reproduction of gender inequality in the sphere of entrepreneurship is based on some discourse practise, revealed through the analysis. Entrepreneurship is male gendered, even though thought as neutral. Although entrepreneurship and the sphere of business are defined as good ones, one should remember that men and women are essentially different, as public and private sphere of life. The ideology of individualism, one of the basic roots of ideology of entrepreneurship, supports differentiation, as analyses quoted and conducted usually concentrate on individual aspects, individual biographies and tend to omit

social context and aspects. That is why the power perspective is lost, as well as the processes of social change excluded from analysis.

As a result, women entrepreneurs are being described in research articles as 'something else', i.e. something compared to male entrepreneurs. Such vision is based on stereotypes, not clear data findings, and fail to observe changes in gender roles and their definitions in contemporary culture. Increasing number of women entrepreneurs cannot be described and explained by old category of "exception". Women, who gain and advance in real world of entrepreneurship, do fail in scientific discourse on entrepreneurship. It does not mean that men automatically gain in this discourse. Instead, the traditional social order is being supported discursively, with the idea of male entrepreneurship supported by the idea of women entrepreneurs as 'unusual' women.

From the feminist point of view (defined by the author as recognizing women's subordination to men and wanting to do something about it) such study results should be used not only to criticize, but also to modify the practice. The writer suggests two ways to achieve such an objective: the expansion of the research object and some shift in epistemological position. As a current research object is usually defined by individual focus and essentialist assumptions, the new perspective should cover more factors, use contingency studies and also comparative methods. Current epistemology based on looking for female construction of business and lives of businesswomen should be replaced by new approach, including studies on how social orders are gendered and of the mechanisms by which this gendering is reconstructed. Such new approach should result in improvement, feminist theories and feminist - based research can enrich current research perspectives, and should be included not only into theoretical reflection, but also into current research. Feminist perspective adds equality perspective - invisible in material researched by Ahl, and encourages including the issue of power relations. Women's entrepreneurship should be described - concludes Ahl - differently, and suggests expanding both the research object and epistemological perspective. Such conclusion corresponds with new policies of gender mainstreaming aiming to obtain equality or - at least - avoid inequality. Ahl's analysis shows that even research articles need more equality approach and should abandon inequality discourse. It shows that from gender perspective blind - review system is neither bias - free, nor fair, and suggests its revision.

Citation

Desperak, Iza (2008) "Book Review: The Scientific Reproduction of Gender Inequality. A Discourse Analysis of Research Texts on Women's Entrepreneurship" *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. IV Issue 1. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)