An exploration of androgyny in Indian women entrepreneurs

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Abstract

The sign of a thriving economy of any country is the entrepreneurial performance of that country. Biological gender is seen as one of the critical factors impacting entrepreneurship behavior. A need for inclusive development has been extensively focused on in order to promote entrepreneurship in women. However, rather than biological gender, it is the ‘gender role behavior’ which is more relevant for finally expressed behavior. Androgyny is a balanced psychological identity that combines the social behaviors of both genders. Androgynous behavior increases the flexibility and adaptability of individuals as they have access to both behavior patterns based on situational necessity rather than being confined to socially dictated gender stereotypical behavior. This flexibility is imperative for entrepreneurs who have to constantly keep adjusting to environmental challenges. This study attempts to understand the ‘gender - role orientation’ of N=51 Indian women entrepreneurs who have fulfilled stringent performance criteria to qualify for participation in an entrepreneurial development program. Bem’s sex role inventory (BSRI) was used for measuring the gender role orientation of these participants. 45% (n=23) of the participants had an androgynous gender-role orientation in this study. The number of years of entrepreneurial experience, type of business, external cultural influences and the stage of entrepreneurial venture, all had a role in the evolution of androgyny. The implications of these findings on entrepreneurship behavior are discussed from an Indian context.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of ICTMS-2013.

Keywords: androgyny; entrepreneurship; feminine; masculine; gender

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1. Introduction

Women and men have historically assumed different roles in society. Certain jobs have traditionally been considered more appropriate for men and others more appropriate for women (Williams and Best, 1982). It has been argued that men are more likely than women to undertake an entrepreneurial venture. The fundamental reason given for this gap between men and women is that girls are socialized differently than boys, leading to differences in career aspirations including the desire to be an entrepreneur (Mueller, 2004). Traditionally, women have been characterized by qualities such as dependence, passivity, fragility, non-aggression, non-competitiveness, inability to risk, and emotionality. By contrast, men have been thought to possess such characteristics as independence, aggression, competitiveness, leadership, assertiveness, courage, rationality, confidence, and emotional control (Daewoo, 1997). However, it is wrong to assume a bio-psychological equivalence, i.e. equating the gender-role with biological gender. Since a large proportion of our population is socialized to display gender-role behavior appropriate to biological gender, these two concepts are often confused (Bem, 1974). Underlying widely-held beliefs in the appropriateness of these conventional sex roles are male and female gender stereotypes (Williams and Best, 1982). But, are these stereotypes valid in the entrepreneurial arena?

1.1. Challenging stereotypes

Stereotypes assume patterned differences in the psychological characteristics of males and females. These gender stereotypes, when accepted as true, influence the assignment of men and women to different occupational roles (Williams and Best, 1982). Females are expected to be more cooperative, more empathetic and emphasize interpersonal relationships much more than males (Kelly, 1991). Women generally are also seen as more focused on balancing work and family, while men as more motivated to gain wealth through business ownership (Buttner & Moore, 1997; De Martino & Barbato, 2003).

In order to explain these differences, sociological theories consider gender as a social construction rather than a biological given. The sources of gender differentiation lie more in social and institutional practices than in fixed properties of the individual. Many gender differences in social behaviour are viewed as products of division of labour between the sexes that get replicated through socio-structural practices governed by disparate gender status and power. Viewed from this sociological perspective, the pattern of opportunity structures and formal and informal constraints shape gendered styles of behaviour. This then channels men and women into different life paths (Eagly & Blair, 1990). Dramatic social changes over the last half-century have given rise to modern, economically advanced societies for which traditional sex roles and social barriers to historically ‘male’ vocations, including entrepreneurship, are less rigid (Mueller & Dato-on, 2008).

1.2. Gender, gender role behaviour and androgyny

Constantinople (1973) conceptualized male and female sex-roles as independent constructs rather than opposite ends of a uni-dimensional continuum. (Bem, 1974) proposed the construct of psychological androgyny, which refers to the combined presence of socially desirable agentic (e.g., assertive, independent) and communal (e.g., gentle, nurturing) characteristics. Her perspective on psychological androgyny provided an alternative perspective to the traditional bipolar view on gender-related personality.

Bem (1974) developed a instrument known as BSRI (Bem’s Sex Role Inventory) by building on Constantinople’s (1973) concept. Under the BSRI method, individuals are classified into one of four categories based on answers to a 60-item Likert-type scale. Individuals who score high on masculinity and low on femininity are classified as masculine. Similarly, individuals are classified as feminine if they score high on femininity and low on masculinity. Individuals who score high on both masculinity and femininity are classified as androgynous and those scoring low on both are classified as undifferentiated.

Androgyny is a balanced psychological identity that combines the social behaviours of both genders. Released from the desire to show gender appropriate behaviour, androgynous individuals are able to build up a repertoire of masculine and feminine behaviours, and can call on them as situations or problems arise. Hence, androgynous people are expected to be more adaptive, better adjusted and psychologically healthier (Bem, 1974).
1.3. *Entrepreneurship and Androgyny*

Adaptability and flexibility are essential for success at performing many entrepreneurial tasks. During the process of new venture creation, an entrepreneur faces an uncertain and constantly changing environment. Hence, entrepreneurs must be adaptive, flexible and resilient. Some situations call for masculine qualities such as assertiveness, for e.g., when an outside investor is demanding too large a share of the company. On the other hand, some situations require feminine qualities such as caring and patience, for e.g., when a business partner needs time away from the venture to deal with family problems (Mueller & Dato-on 2008).

Hence this study proposes that women entrepreneurs would most likely be androgynous in their ‘gender role’ orientation.

2. *Method and Measures*

Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) questionnaire was given to N =51 women entrepreneurs participating in an entrepreneurship development program with stringent selection criteria for participation. All these women entrepreneurs who were selected for this program owned or co-owned a business which was operational for past 1 year, with a revenue turnover between 5,00,000 – 75,00,000 Indian rupees.

2.1. *Measures*

Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI): The BSRI is the most widely used and validated ‘Gender Role’ measure reporting scale reliability coefficients from 0.75 to 0.9. It consists of a list of sixty attributes and behaviours; twenty of which were verified to be more socially desirable when demonstrated by men, twenty deemed more appropriate for women and twenty with no specific gender affiliation. Participants were asked to rate these characteristics on a Likert type of scale ranging from 1-7 as to how applicable these were with respect to themselves.

The sample median cut off method was used to score the responses and assign them to Masculine/Feminine/Androgynous or Undifferentiated category. Participants, scoring greater than the sample median on feminine characteristics but less than sample median on masculine characteristics are rated as feminine. Similarly, participants scoring greater than the sample median on masculine characteristics but less than median on feminine characteristics are rated as masculine. Participants scoring less than sample median on both characteristics are rated as undifferentiated. Finally, those scoring greater than sample median on both the masculine and feminine characteristics are rated as androgynous.

2.2. *Descriptive statistics*

There were a total of N=51 women in the sample. The average age was 39 years (SD =9.21 years). The average entrepreneurial experience of the sample was 6.82 years (SD=5.79 years). Many of the participants had other work experience before becoming entrepreneurs. The average total work experience including the entrepreneurial venture was 10.88 years (SD=7.42 years). They were handling a variety of businesses, running the entire gamut from agriculture, manufacturing, retail, designing, financial services, software development, media, food industry, hospitality industry etc.

3. *Results and Discussion*

The median score on Bem’s masculine scale in this sample was 5 (average = 4.9, S.D. =0.82). The median score on Bem’s feminine scale was 4.7 (average = 4.65, SD = 0.63). The median and mean scores on both the feminine and masculine scales are also almost identical. About 45% of the sample was androgynous in their gender role orientation. However, 55% of the sample was not androgynous. Hence the study hypothesis can only be partially accepted.
3.1. Classification of participants on BSRI and its relation to years of total work experience

The total sample included participants with work experience ranging from 2 years to 25 years. The average total work experience in the androgynous group of n=23 was 12 years (average entrepreneurial experience 9 years). The average experience in the masculine n=7 group was 8 years (average entrepreneurial experience 5 years). The average experience in the feminine n=9 group was 7 years (average entrepreneurial experience 5 years). Could development of androgyny depend on the number of years of experience? The androgynous group’s average years experience was 12 years, which is higher than that of participants in the other groups (masculine group total experience = 8 years; feminine group total experience = 7 years).

A negative correlation was found between years of total experience and scores on masculine scale in the androgynous participants r (21) = -0.3, p<0.05. However a positive correlation r (21) = 0.2, p<0.05 was found between total experience and scores on femininity scale in the androgynous participants. Hence, it is possible that masculine scale scores are highest at the beginning of entrepreneurship and with increasing experience, scores on feminine scale increase to approach androgyny.

However, the findings of this study are contradictory to the findings of Mueller and Dato-on (2008). They had found that the need for androgynous behaviour was high at inception. Of business. With increasing experience, as businesses grew, the masculinity behaviour predominated in order to handle growing pressures and competition. However, in this study, androgynous behaviour is increasing with experience. These contradictory findings could possibly be because; their study included both male and female participants from a progressive, egalitarian, Anglo-American society where the cultural components could be very different from the Indian collectivist social context.

3.2. Correlation between average age of participants, entrepreneurial experience and their distribution in masculine category of BSRI

Around 14% (n = 7) of the sample was of masculine gender-role orientation on BSRI. The average age of these n = 7 participants was 35 years. A negative correlation r (5) = -0.20, p<0.05 was observed between the scores on the masculine scale and age of these participants. In addition, a negative correlation r (5) = -0.13, p<0.05 was also seen between the masculinity scores and years of entrepreneurial experience. Therefore, the masculinity scores would be highest at the time of starting the entrepreneurial venture. These results are in agreement with the findings of Baron, Markman, and Hirsa, (2001) who described the perception of the job of being an entrepreneur as ‘masculine’ in nature. The need for predominantly masculine traits is therefore high when starting a business, because of a predominantly ‘masculine perception of entrepreneurship’ (Baron, Markman & Hirsa, 2001).

An explanation for this finding could also lie in the strongly ‘masculine’ classification of Indian society by Hofstede (1998). Based on data collected from over 70 countries, Hofstedee, (1998) described the culture of a country on the basis of five dimensions namely power distance, individualism, long term orientation, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity.

The dimension of masculinity is relevant to the current study. Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity refers to the distribution of roles between the genders. The assertive pole has been called ‘masculine’ and the modest, caring pole ‘feminine’. The women in feminine countries have the same caring values as the men. However, in masculine countries women are somewhat assertive and competitive, but, not as much as the men. So, these countries show a gap between men’s’ values and women’s’ values.

India has Masculinity as the third highest-ranking Hofstede (1998) dimension at 56, with the world average slightly lower at 51. The higher the country ranks in this dimension, the greater the gap between values of men and women. It may also generate a more competitive and assertive female population, although still less than the male population (Hofstede, 1998).

This level of assertiveness could be propellant for initial push towards entrepreneurship. However, as per the findings of this study discussed in detail in the previous paragraphs, there is a shift towards androgyny with advancing experience.

3.3. Correlation between average age of participants, entrepreneurial experience and their distribution in feminine category of BSRI

In direct contrast to the masculine group, a correlation of r (7) = 0.63, p<0.05 was found between scores on
femininity scale and age of n = 9 participants in the feminine category of BSRI. So, here as age increases, the
tendency towards femininity will also increase. Five of these nine participants were running businesses, which could
be considered predominantly ‘feminine’ (chocolate making, dry flower arrangements, boutique owners etc.).

A correlation r (7) = 0.50, p < 0.05 was also found between number of years of entrepreneurial experience years
and scores on the feminine scale in these same participants who scored in the feminine range of BSRI. This could
mean that the type of business could also have an impact on the development of gender role orientation with the
possibility of tendency towards feminine behaviour increasing with age as well as entrepreneurial experience.

Stereotyping pattern is such that occupations associated with higher levels of rationality and assertiveness is
viewed as masculine occupations. On the other hand, occupations associated with dependency, passivity, nurturing
and interpersonal warmth are perceived as feminine occupations (Sinar, 1975). Since many of the businesses of
these feminine group participants could be classified under ‘feminine occupation stereotype’ their feminine
behaviour could be a direct outcome of occupation stereotyping.

3.4. Undifferentiated category on BSRI

Around 24% of this sample (n=12) was undifferentiated in their gender orientation. The average experience in
the undifferentiated group n =12 was 9 years (average entrepreneurial experience 5 years).

The number of people in this category can be explained by the cultural orientation of the external environment of
India with competing and opposite demands being made on these entrepreneurs by their business and family/society.
As explained by Buttnier and Moore, (1997) and De Martino and Barbato, (2003), the priorities of men and women
entrepreneurs tend to differ significantly. Women generally are more focused on balancing work and family, while
men are more motivated to gain wealth through business ownership. Hence, this undifferentiated behaviour could be
a reflection of the stress of fulfilling competing and contradictory personal and professional demands.

3.5. Conclusions

This study has found that ‘gender – role’ orientation has an important influence on entrepreneurial behaviour. However, the influence is multi dimensional and complex. Number of years of entrepreneurial experience has an impact on the androgynous gender – role orientation of the women entrepreneurs. Although it was hypothesized that there would be a predominantly androgynous orientation in the sample, only 45% of the sample was androgynous on BSRI. As discussed, this can be explained by other factors like years of experience, type of business, external cultural influences and the stage of entrepreneurial venture. All these factors could possibly have a role in the evolution of androgyny.

This study agrees with the findings of Mueller and Dato-on (2008) that biological gender per se may not affect entrepreneur behaviour but ‘gender-role’ behaviour clearly does. While the entrepreneur generally operates in a demanding ‘enterprising’ task environment, (Holland, 1985), not all tasks are ‘masculine’ in nature. Some require ‘feminine’ qualities. Moreover, demands on the entrepreneur change over time.

3.6. Limitations of the study:

This study was conducted on a limited number of women entrepreneurs participating in an entrepreneurship
development program. Moreover, since all participants were women, a comparison of androgynous and other
orientations with male entrepreneurs was not possible. In addition, there was no control group of people who were
not entrepreneurs to see if any traits were peculiar to entrepreneurs. Future studies can address some of these
limitations so that the results can be applicable to wider and varied groups. This study could also be replicated using
comparable samples of women entrepreneurs across the globe from various countries and cultures.

3.7. Contributions of this study:

This study has attempted to look at Indian women entrepreneurs from a ‘gender – role orientation’ perspective
rather than the purely biological gender based viewpoint. It has also explored the fact that entrepreneurship by itself
make different demands on the entrepreneur at various stages of its evolution. The demands vary with different
types of entrepreneurial ventures as well because some entrepreneurial ventures may themselves be classified as
masculine and feminine.

References


