WHO'S THE BOSS? EXPLAINING GENDER INEQUALITY IN ENTREPRENEURIAL TEAMS (SUMMARY)

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Principal Topic

The cultural appeal of small business ownership in modern society supports a positive view of individual heroes as the source of new ventures’ success. This heroic view neglects the individuals who have been involved in business creation but whose contributions have not been acknowledged (Aldrich, 2010). In fact, the creation of new firms is largely dependent on the collective activities of entrepreneurs and those who assist them, rather than the independent efforts of isolated individuals (Ruef, 2010). The contrast between the celebration of individual success and the collective nature of new venture creation suggests an intriguing question regarding status distinctions in entrepreneurial teams: by what mechanisms do some entrepreneurs obtain more rewards than others? If individuals are inspired by the cultural appeal of “being one’s own boss”, do they have equal chances to manage their new ventures or lead their teams? Drawing on theories of entrepreneurship and social inequality, we argue that two principles guide entrepreneurs’ attitudes and actions regarding status distinctions: the first principle is a meritocratic logic, which legitimizes individual competence, as indicated by education, managerial experience, entrepreneurial experience, social networking, and so on; The other principle affirms the application of a gender logic in evaluating entrepreneurs’ competence and defining their tasks and roles. As the two principles imply conflicting requirements regarding what kind of criteria should be used to assign tasks and define leadership, advancing research on gender inequality in social groups requires an in-depth understanding of the conditions under which cultural beliefs about gender have a more powerful impact than a merit-based organizing logic in defining leadership in entrepreneurial teams.

Data and Methods

We analyze a nationally representative sample of entrepreneurial teams in the U.S. from the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics II (PSED II). A fixed-effects model is used to examine to what extent status distinction in entrepreneurial teams is shaped by cultural beliefs about gender differences, and to what extent such gender inequality is attenuated by the application of the meritocratic logic. To take account of team-level heterogeneity, we run a hybrid model to investigate the extent to which within-team heterogeneity is dependent on the characteristics of the team, such as social relationships and the average work experience in the industry where a new venture is located.

Results and Implication

The question regarding status distinctions in entrepreneurial teams has received little systematic study by sociologists. In this paper, we fill the gap in the literature by shedding light on the conditions under which cultural beliefs about gender allow individuals to discount women’ competence in the setting of entrepreneurship. We found that cultural beliefs about gender have a stronger effect on the assignment of task roles while the meritocratic logic substantially attenuates gender inequality in leadership. We provide implications for future theoretical development and empirical studies.

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