

Walk the talk: Who's targeted in governmental innovation systems?

Abstract

Governmental innovation support for venturing (e.g. incubators) is significant worldwide for supporting competitiveness and growth in particular in technology and knowledge based ventures, but little is known about how such innovation support systems target and attracts entrepreneurs in such ventures. Even less is known about who's channelled into these systems due to what images are communicated through websites, i.e. included/excluded and what social constructions underpin the images communicated.

Equality in distribution of governmental resources is of particular concern because it represents a distribution from the tax system and public transfers from the government to specific individual ventures. Society as a whole receives benefits when such resource distribution is efficient, i.e. gender neutral, by allowing the development of successful ventures without reference to the gender of the entrepreneur. In parallel to this, studies show that women entrepreneurs face more difficulties in accessing innovation support systems compared to men entrepreneurs. We still lack a deeper understanding of why such barriers prevail.

The present study aims to advance our knowledge of governmental innovation support actors' construction of gender and how they communicate with target entrepreneurs via websites. First, we explore governmental actor's perceptions of women and men entrepreneurs. Second, we explore governmental actors' communication through websites with targeted entrepreneurs in the innovation support system from a gender perspective.

To understand who is channeled into innovation support systems we use social constructionism and entrepreneurship literature on incubators and innovation. Social constructionism suggests that structures are a product of socialized patterns, behavior and perceptions where structures come to be taken for granted as the norm for how structures ought to be formed. The basic tenet of this study is that gender is a social construction. This tenet builds on a social constructionist view of gender, according to which reality is constructed in social interactions between people where knowledge is made real or objective to them. In line with this theory, knowledge arises when people perceive the world and act as a result of established habits.

We use interview data collected from 26 governmental support actors to analyze and capture their images of women and men entrepreneurs in technology and knowledge based ventures. We also analyze gender structures within the organizations of governmental innovation support systems. We further analyze these actors communication with entrepreneurs through websites and analyze the images communicated by 44 governmental support actors from a gender perspective. We use content analyses as well as discourse analyses to retrieve our findings. We code our data in several steps using a grounded approach for conceptualization. As a result, we identify how social constructions of gender characterize governmental innovation support systems.

Our analysis reveals structures attached to socially constructed images of women and men entrepreneurs. This study reveals that governmental innovation support systems build their communication strategies with targeted entrepreneurs by targeting men entrepreneurs specifically, implying that women entrepreneurs may have difficulties in identifying themselves as a targeted entrepreneur in the system. One key finding is the striking difference between the socially constructed and conscious myths of gender structures in governmental support systems and why structures are skewed towards favoring men entrepreneurs. Our findings also show how socially constructed sub-conscious images communicated through websites to entrepreneurs actually sustain gender structures. Consequently, the governmental support actors gendered construction of the targeted entrepreneur appears to be central in who's getting access to governmental innovation support systems and thus for allocation of innovation support in technology and knowledge based entrepreneurship.

This research show that gender skewed representation of entrepreneurs in governmental innovation support systems may stem from who's channelled and invited into the governmental innovation support system. Although, the study show that governmental support actors rationalize the biased distribution of few women in their governmental innovation support system based on prevailing images about women and men entrepreneurs rather than how they communicate with entrepreneurs.

Our findings imply that women entrepreneurs may have difficulties in identifying themselves as a targeted entrepreneur in the innovation support systems. A consequence of barriers to these systems is subsequent underperformance of the business. Without governmental innovation support certain technology and knowledge based ventures may not reach their full potential, may suffer from undercapitalization, or even go out of business. In parallel, a potential risk of biased representation in governmental innovation support system is inefficient allocation of governmental resources and risk of adverse selection. The most promising ventures may not gain access to significant support for exploiting business potential. This poses potentially costly consequences for the public.

We extend previous entrepreneurship literature on incubators and innovation in several ways. First, we contribute to advance the understanding why women entrepreneurs are so few in the governmental innovation support system. Second, the use of discourse analysis and content analysis on governmental actors' communication regarding targeted entrepreneurs for the innovation support system permits the exploration of socially constructed gender. We thus show the need for new communication formats to build an entrepreneurial society that supports both women and men entrepreneurs. Such change is required for solving persistent problems with efficiency in distribution of governmental resources. Today, the communication format images may jeopardize a society's sustainability, because the governmental innovation support system may drive out entrepreneurs that may be more suitable for governmental support. We thus highlight a potential downside of governmental innovation support systems current formats that no previous study has examined.