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Exploring Stratification and Entrepreneurship: African American Women Entrepreneurs Redefine Success in Growth Ventures

By
JEFFREY ROBINSON,
LAQUITA BLOCKSON,
and
SAMMIE ROBINSON

The relationship between social stratification and entrepreneurship is one that is underexplored in the literature of management and organizations. In the authors' view, social stratification (social structure, institutions, and culture) influences the context, process, experience, and outcomes of entrepreneurship. In this article, the authors discuss these relationships in the context of African American women engaged in high-growth entrepreneurship. The authors support their premise by presenting the limitations of prevailing approaches that exist within the current minority and women entrepreneurship literatures. Using the concept of entrepreneurial success as an example, the authors demonstrate how a social stratification and entrepreneurship framework may be useful for scholars who seek to understand the process of entrepreneurship.

Keywords: African Americans; women; entrepreneurship; social stratification

According to the National Women's Business Council (2004), in 2004, 365,110 majority-owned, privately held firms were owned by African American women in the United States, more than 6 percent of all women-owned firms. These African American women entrepreneurs employ nearly two hundred thousand people and create more than \$14 billion in revenues. In one study of the survival rates of firms owned by women and minorities, African American women-owned firms fared better than those owned by African American men (Robb 2002). In Fairlie's (2004) analysis of the trends of African American entrepreneurs, African American women entrepreneurs appear to be increasing in numbers faster than African American men for the first time in the past one hundred years. Taken in combination, these trends point to the increasing presence of women in African American entrepreneurship, have implications for the U.S. economy, and provide a road map for economic

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development in the African American community through productive entrepreneurship (Baumol 1990).

Surprisingly, very little academic literature has been written about African American women in entrepreneurship. We believe the gap exists because of the lack of an orienting framework in an area we call social stratification and entrepreneurship. We define social stratification as the end result of institutional processes that partition society into advantaged and disadvantaged socially constructed groups. This article focuses on African American women in entrepreneurship as a starting point for exploring the influences of social stratification on entrepreneurship and vice versa.

We begin this article by providing a brief overview of our framework for exploring social stratification and entrepreneurship. We then turn our attention to the topic of African American women entrepreneurship as an area of study that would benefit from our framework. We present an overview of the existing literature in the area of minority and women entrepreneurship. We demonstrate through this review what is missing from the discourse and the limitations of the prevailing approaches. We conclude by demonstrating how the social stratification and entrepreneurship framework is useful for scholars seeking to understand the process of entrepreneurship using the concept of entrepreneurial success as an example of new research directions.

Social Stratification and Entrepreneurship

As early as Max Weber and W.E.B. Dubois (1995), sociologists have long held to the notion of stratification in society. Following a long conversation in sociology

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(Davis and Moore 1945; Hatt 1950; Tumin 1953; Buckley 1958; Spilerman 2000), we define social stratification as the end result of institutional processes that partition society into advantaged and disadvantaged socially constructed groups. In the United States, it is well documented that the basis of social stratification can include groupings by gender, race/ethnicity, wealth, and class (Massey and Denton 1993; Spilerman 2000). The result is some groups are advantaged because of their group membership. These advantages and disadvantages can be reinforced by the accumulation of power and resources by the advantaged group over time.

Social stratification and entrepreneurship interact in at least three ways. Entrepreneurship can be a means of social mobility. Entrepreneurs can create ventures that create wealth and allow the entrepreneurs and their families to move from lower-status to higher-status positions. Second, entrepreneurship can play a role in addressing the challenges of a fractious, stratified society. Typically, this takes on the form of programs supporting entrepreneurship (self-employment) as an alternative to traditional labor markets. A second approach to meeting the challenge is entrepreneurship that uses market processes to directly solve social problems (as in social entrepreneurship). This type of entrepreneurship requires some nuanced understanding of social stratification processes (see Robinson [2006] for a more detailed explanation).

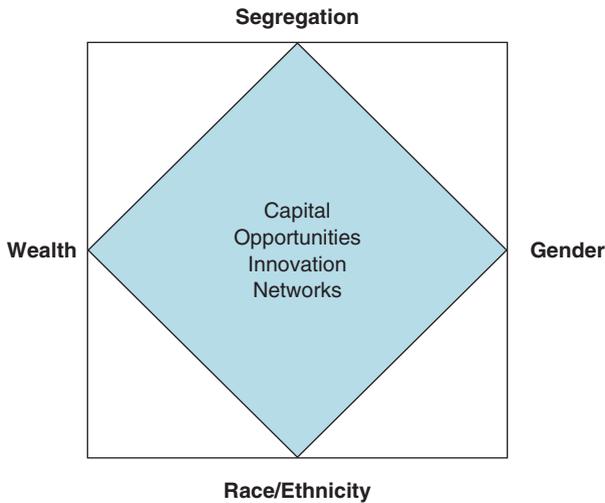
The third type of interactions between social stratification and entrepreneurship is the focus of this article. Social stratification profoundly influences the process of entrepreneurship for those actors who hold lower-status positions in society. We explain this further in the next section.

The process of entrepreneurship

Before we continue with our argument for more research at the intersection of social stratification and entrepreneurship, we should be clear about what we mean by entrepreneurship. Of the many definitions of the term *entrepreneurship*, the opportunities-oriented definition proposed by Shane and Venkatraman (2000) is the most useful for our purposes. Therefore, entrepreneurship is the process of identifying, evaluating, and pursuing opportunities. Variation among entrepreneurs is related to how entrepreneurs go about the process of entrepreneurship. This variation relates to the type and level of capital they can apply toward developing the new venture, the type of opportunity and innovation exploited by the entrepreneur, and the type and substance of the networks employed to achieve their entrepreneurial goals. Researchers have examined the variation of inputs and outcomes related to entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. This is an essential step and easily transferable to the classroom. We consider this a first step toward understanding entrepreneurship.

As scholars, we are advocating that our colleagues go further by studying entrepreneurship in relation to its impact and influence on society and vice versa. Our

FIGURE 1
STRATIFICATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP



framework proposes that studying entrepreneurs with a social stratification lens will lead to different conclusions about the process and possibilities of entrepreneurship.

Stratification processes and entrepreneurship

We are advocating the study of entrepreneurship with the lens of social stratification because stratification is a multidimensional construct and allows for more nuanced considerations of the intersection of entrepreneurship and society.

Our view of the relationship between social stratification and entrepreneurship is captured in Figure 1. At its core, the idea of entrepreneurship is a process that entrepreneurial actors will go through to create and grow ventures. Through mainly popular accounts, we have agreed upon a set of norms and assumptions about what it takes to be successful as an entrepreneur. The academic literature provides some insight into the process but seldom into the context of the entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship does not take place in a vacuum; it takes place in various social settings, and these settings can make a difference in how the process of entrepreneurship unfolds. Rarely have the assumptions regarding entrepreneurship been challenged.

We find this problematic for a field in its adolescence (Low 2001). In the academic literature, the processes and activities of entrepreneurs were developed with primarily white and generally male subjects, and this has led to a set of

assumptions about how entrepreneurship should proceed for *all* entrepreneurs. We generally agree that the core processes of identifying, evaluating, and pursuing opportunities are a broad enough umbrella for all to fit beneath. However, the arrangement of capital, opportunities, innovation, and networks are influenced by a modern society that has social structures in place that advantage some and disadvantage others. In our view, social stratification based on race, class, wealth, gender, and segregation processes circumscribes entrepreneurship.

For some entrepreneurs, the effects of social stratification are not noticeable because they are advantaged by the institutional structures that govern the norms and processes of entrepreneurship. For those entrepreneurs who hold disadvantaged positions in the social structure, social stratification can have profound effects on how they identify, shape, and pursue entrepreneurship.

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For example, we often evaluate the survival of a new venture based upon the amount of financial capital raised by the entrepreneurial team. For most entrepreneurs, the initial investment for a new venture comes from the founders and their family. Researchers have pointed to this type of statistical evidence to explain the higher failure rates of African American- and woman-owned firms.

If we challenge the underlying assumptions for a moment, we must first ask the question, Where does the initial investment come from for a new venture? If the initial investment comes from the founders and their family, then we are no longer examining the financial means; we are measuring wealth. Personal and family wealth is much more than cash on hand. Wealth is inextricably tied to social stratification (Spilerman 2000) and to that end interrelated to race, gender, and class. To show statistical evidence of the link between start-up capital and venture success leaves out aspects of the story that may be important for policy making or future research.

Those familiar with the literature on ethnic or female entrepreneurship may wonder if our framework is any different than previous research in these areas. Scholars who have researched protected markets (Light 1972; Aldrich et al.

1985) and networks and entrepreneurship (Aldrich 1989; Aldrich and Waldinger 1990; Uzzi 1997, 1999) have come the closest to the approach we are advocating in this article. We believe our approach, however, is an improvement on previous research because it allows for the influence of multiple dimensions on entrepreneurship simultaneously. Using the social stratification lens, we can account for multiple influences from society on the process of entrepreneurship. One dimensional accounts lack explanatory power and can lead to dangerous assumptions and ineffective public policy.

In the next section, we demonstrate the limitations of the previous approaches to researching women in entrepreneurship and ethnic entrepreneurship by considering previous work on African American women.

Limitations of Current Entrepreneurship Research on African American Women

Early research on women in entrepreneurship, such as Hisrich and Brush (1984), incorporated very descriptive studies of women entrepreneurs with surveys. More recently, programs of research (e.g., The Diana Project) have taken a broader look at the patterns of women entrepreneurs in hi-tech industries and venture capital. Brush (1992); Brush et al. (2004); Baker, Aldrich, and Liou (1997); and others have noted that many opportunities exist for research on women's entrepreneurship. We take up this challenge in this article by presenting aspects of women's entrepreneurship that have not been fully researched or understood: African American women in entrepreneurship.

Recently, large-scale research projects by consortia of researchers have moved the dialogue further along in this area. Brush and her colleagues in The Diana Project (Brush et al. 2004) have provided a more nuanced view of high-growth and technology entrepreneurship by women, but minority women were not present in significant numbers in their study. The Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics (PSED; Reynolds 2000; Reynolds et al. 2004) offers an oversample of both women and minority respondents. The PSED sample of nascent entrepreneurs does not have large enough numbers of minority female respondents for an adequate study.

Our intention here is not to completely review the literature of women's entrepreneurship or research on African American entrepreneurship. Several authors (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990; Brush 1992; Bates 1997; Brush and Bird 2002; Brush et al. 2004) have provided notable reviews of the literature. We have explored this literature to understand its relevance to studies about African American women in entrepreneurship. In this section, we examine studies from both streams of literature.

Lack of research

To fully appreciate the dearth of research in this area, we first considered Brush's (1992) review of the women in entrepreneurship literature. She noted

TABLE 1
 CATEGORIZATION OF RECENT DISSERTATIONS BY TOPIC (1981-2004) ON
 AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Topic	Number of Dissertations
Nascent entrepreneurs/self-employment	5
Start-up	1
Characteristics of the business	3
Financing ventures	1
Characteristics of business owners	4
History	2
Social networks	1
Total	17

that only two of the fifty-seven articles on women and entrepreneurship she analyzed from 1977 to 1991 focused on minority women. When we shift to the literature on African American entrepreneurship, little has specifically been written about African American women. Reviews by Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) and books by Bates (1997), Light and Rosenstein (1995), and Butler (1991) said little about African American women and their experiences as business owners. The most that is said in this research is in the form of comparisons with African American men or with women in other ethnic groups.

We wanted to also understand the potential for papers in the pipeline generated out of dissertation research. To do so, we conducted a keyword search of the Proquest Dissertation and Theses Database. Between 1981 and 2004, 972 dissertations were written on entrepreneurship, 304 dissertations on self-employment.¹ Upon further analysis, we found 108 total dissertations using keywords *women* and *entrepreneurs* and 104 total dissertations using keywords *women* and *self employment*. Using various combinations of keywords (*women*, *female*, *African American*, *black*, *entrepreneurship*, and *self employment*), we found only 17 dissertations related to African American women entrepreneurs and self-employment. Table 1 categorizes these 17 dissertations by topic.

For this article, we chose to examine the state of the literature since 1991. We found a marked increase in number but not necessarily in the breadth or depth of the research. We have organized the notable ones according to their levels of analysis.

Individual and firm level

The majority of the studies that explore African American women in entrepreneurship consider issues at the individual level. This is consistent with Brush's (1992) presentation of the distribution of research papers.

Two studies have explored the individual characteristics of African American entrepreneurs and included separate tables for women and men. Fairlie and Meyer (1996) presented data on ethnic and racial differences in entrepreneurship. In one section of this paper, the entrepreneurship (self-employment) rates of each ethnic or racial group are presented. Each group is further divided by gender. Their findings indicate that African American women have a 2 percent rate of entrepreneurship, while African American men have a 4.4 percent rate based upon the 1990 census. Fairlie and Meyer made contribution to the areas of ethnic entrepreneurship by testing three competing explanations (sojourners theory, cultural theory, and disadvantage theory) concerning African American entrepreneurship using their data. Unfortunately, these explanations do not explain the significant differences within group and between genders.

The second study picks up where Fairlie and Meyer (1996) left off. Robb (2002) went directly to the research question at the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and entrepreneurship. This study provides some insight into the predictors of firm survival across women and minority groups. Robb concluded that the survival rate of African American women-owned businesses is slightly higher than those owned by African American men and that a number of other factors also correlated with survival (i.e., location, form of organization, number of employees).

Our first critique of these studies is that they lack nuance. While these data enable us to understand broad patterns in the characteristics of African American women in entrepreneurship (i.e., education level, wealth, age, family composition, etc.), they do not provide the more nuanced data that explain more than grand comparisons. We recognize the significance of highlighting the disparities in the human capital and personal wealth data between men and women and African Americans and other groups. Nevertheless, we are concerned that further studies in this stream will only incrementally enrich our understanding of the challenges faced by African American women in founding and sustaining viable firms.

Two other studies were able to address this issue. Inman's (1999) study of black and white women entrepreneurs found a link between motivations and resources at the individual level. Inman's qualitative and survey approach to this study of start-up ventures uncovered nuances that large quantitative studies often overlook. Black women and white women entrepreneurs often have different lived experiences that lead to completely different approaches and motivations when starting up new ventures. These findings were similar in content and breadth to the findings of Bell and Nkomo (2001) in corporate settings.

Smith-Hunter and Boyd (2004) made a contribution by testing competing theoretical explanations for differences between white and minority (mostly African American) women. In a sample of sixty (thirty white and thirty minority) women entrepreneurs in the personal services industry, they found some of the differences in individual characteristics that previous studies have highlighted. But they also found that the motivations of the minority women in their study do not differ greatly from their white counterparts. This is contrary to the prevailing disadvantage theories and culture-based explanations of these differences. Smith-Hunter's (2004) dissertation work in the same area created a space for research

to be conducted that challenges the prevailing theories about African American women entrepreneurs.

Black women and white women entrepreneurs often have different lived experiences that lead to completely different approaches and motivations when starting up new ventures.

This leads us to our second critique. We agree with sociologists Basu and Werbner (2001; Werbner 1999) that simple comparisons without theory may do more harm than good because they can lead unsophisticated readers to believing that each racial/ethnic group's history, values, motivations, and goals are the same. This approach assumes that the "objective" measures of human capital explain the differences between groups and can lead to positive ascriptions of "entrepreneurial tendencies" to certain groups. While this approach is easily accepted here in the United States, it is not only approach to take. Two international studies of women entrepreneurs, Mitra (2002) and Lerner, Brush, and Hisrich (1997) reflect alternate approaches to theory building research. These studies explore the nature of women's entrepreneurship in India and Israel (respectively) without comparing them to other groups. This approach assumes that these women entrepreneurs have practical value and theoretical significance without the need for comparison.

It should be noted that both Smith-Hunter and Boyd (2004) and Inman (1999) were able to avoid this critique in their qualitative work by writing their findings not as simple comparisons but as indications that the differences between these women could be traced back to significant differences in the cultural and personal history of the subjects. Neither study devalued one group or the other. One of their many conclusions is that traditional economic rational choice theoretical approaches did little to explain these differences. Furthermore, functionalist paradigms will not uncover the richness at the individual level in accord with calls for alternative perspectives in entrepreneurship research (Jennings, Perren, and Carter 2005).

Market/environment/population level

The macro-level of analysis of African American women entrepreneurs is by far the least studied area of all. This is consistent with Brush's (1992) assessment

of women's entrepreneurship research and the discourse analysis of Baker, Aldrich, and Liou (1997).

A follow-up to the previously mentioned Fairlie and Meyer (1996) paper reveals that the entrepreneurship rate for African Americans has been flat for most of the past one hundred years. Only within the past twenty years has there been a marked increase in the number of African American-owned firms (Fairlie 2004). Some reports indicate that the increase has been generated by African American women (National Women's Business Council 2004).

Most notably, two scholars, Bates (1997) and Butler (1991) have written extensively about African American entrepreneurship. In *Race, Self-Employment and Upward Mobility*, Bates took a look at the statistical evidence related to self-employment and black entrepreneurship. He made several comparisons across ethnic groups to make the point that sociological approaches to explaining the differences do not hold up under statistical scrutiny. He concluded that successful entrepreneurship is independent of race or ethnicity. In *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help among Black Americans*, Butler took a more historical comparative approach to understanding African American entrepreneurship. His central thesis is an arrested development of entrepreneurship in the African American community because of establishment of Jim Crow and other discriminatory laws. These laws prevented blacks from selling their goods and services to whites and others, and therefore, the economic development of the African American community was greatly minimized. Neither Butler or Bates fully addressed African American women in entrepreneurship in their books or subsequent articles. Both provided statistical evidence of the trends, types, and history of African American entrepreneurship, but neither considered the additional challenges of African American women in entrepreneurship. To their credit, each of these books provided enormous depth in the area of African American entrepreneurship and subsequent work (including our own) builds upon their insights.

Recent studies have followed the work of Butler and Bates and tackled specific entrepreneurship issues in the African American community. A paper by Rhodes and Butler (2004) presented a conceptual model of "black American small business performance" based largely on the family background of and the community resources of the black community around the entrepreneur. Whereas we see the merits of this approach to study firm performance, we cannot ignore the notion that African American men and African American women may experience entrepreneurship differently and that these variations may also have an impact on performance.

Rasheed (2004) demonstrated in his study the moderating effects of ethnicity and gender on the relationship between capital access barriers and market penetration. Both ethnicity and gender (along with education) were found to influence the market penetration of the firms in the study. These results are certainly interesting from a policy perspective because of the interaction between ethnicity and capital, gender and capital, and education and capital. But how is the relationship between capital access barriers and market penetration (sales) influenced when the entrepreneur is both a member of a minority group and a

woman? Are the effects combined or are they independent? Rasheed did not answer this question.

Other studies have been challenged to address these difficult questions. And herein lies another conundrum of functionalist work: for academic precision, we would like the variables to be independent of one another. We argue here that as scholars truly interested in the subject of African American women entrepreneurs, we will have to rigorously investigate the nature of being both African American and female as it relates to entrepreneurship. The multidimensional nature of social identity has implications for how entrepreneurs pursue entrepreneurship.

We found only one study that attempted to tackle this issue. Levent, Masurel, and Nijkamp (2003) described the entrepreneurship experiences of ethnic (Turkish) females in the Netherlands. Their study wrestles with the idea that ethnic women entrepreneurs' experiences, attitudes, and choices vary. They were particularly interested in the idea of characterizing the entrepreneurship as primarily female entrepreneurship or ethnic entrepreneurship. Based on their field surveys, they concluded from their study of their personal and business characteristics and motivation that the ethnic female entrepreneurs are "special female entrepreneurs" and not "special ethnic entrepreneurs." In other words, these Turkish women used the strategies that have been described as female entrepreneurship strategies (interacting and servicing women of all ethnic groups) more often than they used strategies described as "ethnic" entrepreneurship strategies (interacting and servicing ethnic protected markets).

We find this paper interesting because of the very idea of dual identity of ethnic minority women. Levent, Masurel, and Nijkamp (2003, 1158) admitted that their findings may not be generalizable beyond the Netherlands: "Different ethnic groups and different cultures may show different characteristics in terms of their driving forces, motivation, performance, and success conditions." This idea can help us construct a broader framework for studying the intersection of entrepreneurship and society.

A Framework for Understanding Social Stratification and Entrepreneurship

From the literature review of the previous section, it is clear to us that the field gains much when researchers explore social stratification and entrepreneurship together. When we consider how social stratification influences entrepreneurship, the approach we are advocating has two advantages. First, we are able to account for the multidimensional nature of social identity. Since the basis of social stratification can be multidimensional, we can use additive language (e.g., African American *and* female) instead of one-dimensional language to discuss the process of entrepreneurship. Second, this approach allows us to move beyond the functionalist paradigm to understand how entrepreneurship unfolds differently for these subjects. This second point requires a paradigm shift in the way entrepreneurship research is conducted, reported, and evaluated.

Shifting paradigms for research on African American women in entrepreneurship

Using a social stratification lens requires a paradigm shift for entrepreneurship researchers. Burrell and Morgan (1979) in their seminal work proposed that organizational research was trapped in a functionalist paradigm and that this limited the explanatory power and the potential impact of the research. We embrace the perspective of similar recent critiques of the entrepreneurship literature:

Assumptions that researchers make, both about philosophy of science and the theory of society, represent two independent dimensions which, taken together, delineate four distinct paradigms: "Functionalist," "Interpretive," "Radical Humanist," and "Radical Structuralist" (Burrell and Morgan, 2003). These paradigms reflect basic metatheoretical assumptions that underpin the shared philosophy, perspective, mode of theorizing, and approach of researchers who operate within them. . . . (Jennings, Perren, and Carter 2005, 145-46)

Using the two-by-two table of the types of research described by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and reviewed in Jennings, Perren, and Carter (2005), we present in Figure 2 how the four approaches lead to different questions.

We begin with the highly functionalist research question that compares rates of entrepreneurship between African American women and women in other racial/ethnic groups. This is the status quo. When we consider the same set of comparisons from one of the three other sociological perspectives, the questions and the approach are quite different. Jennings, Perren, and Carter (2005) defined the three other quadrants as follows:

Interpretivists, like Functionalists, are interested in how society maintains order and regulates the status quo, but view reality as subjective and are interested in the world through the eyes of individuals. Radical Humanists share Interpretivists' subjective view of the world, but see the purpose of research as understanding how radical change can occur within society. As the name suggests, Radical Structuralists are interested in understanding radical change of what they view as objective and hard structures within society. (pp. 146-147)

The point here is that completely different theoretical approaches to the topic will yield different types of explanations of a phenomenon. We believe that a purely functionalist research agenda will yield more the same types of research and will explain little about the phenomenon of African American women in entrepreneurship.

Robb (2002, 395) admits that "additional factors may play a role in the differences according to race and gender in business survival. Whether these differences are due to discrimination or other obstacles remains a topic for further research." A functionalist paradigm will not be able to address the nuances found in the lived experiences of those being discriminated against. Statistical evidence may not fully characterize what remains an entrenched problem in society.

An example of using the interpretivist approach in entrepreneurship research is Feagin and Imani (1994). They used this approach to explore the various

FIGURE 2
 EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS FROM FOUR RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Subjective	<p>Radical Humanist How did the increases in number of African American women entrepreneurs take place in U.S. society over the last 20 years?</p>	<p>Radical Structuralist What kinds of changes would have to take place in U.S. society to change the status quo of African American women entrepreneurs?</p>	Objective
	<p>Introspective How do African American women view entrepreneurship in U.S. society (in their own words)?</p>	<p>Functionalist Comparisons of rates of entrepreneurship between African American women and women in other racial/ethnic groups</p>	

aspects of discrimination against African American construction contractors. Their scholarship yielded a multidimensional construct for discrimination useful in future studies of entrepreneurship where discrimination is a barrier to entry and growth.

Using the social stratification lens in entrepreneurship research leads to research conducted from a nonfunctionalist paradigm. We believe this is a healthy progression for the field of entrepreneurship.

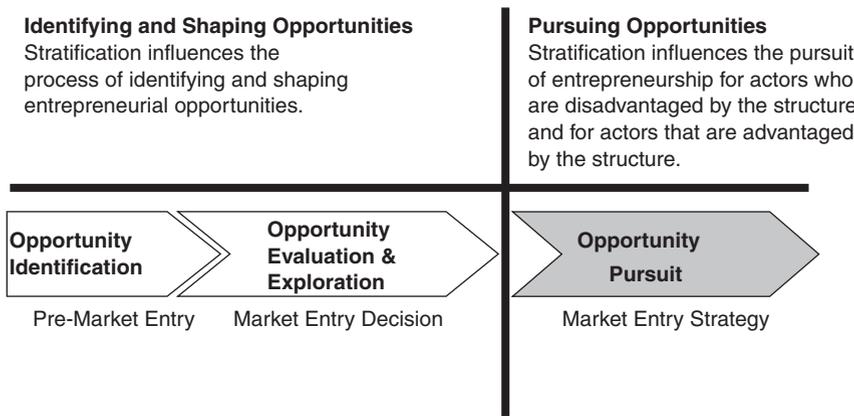
Social stratification influences on entrepreneurship

Throughout this article, we have argued that the study of entrepreneurship will be enhanced if scholars research the effects of stratification on the entrepreneurial process. It is a useful lens that can help researchers consider alternative paradigms for research and close significant gaps in the literature.

Of course, the issue here is not whether stratification exists in American society but how gender and race present barriers and opportunities for these women. The challenge we have for our colleagues is to move beyond one-dimensional accounts of entrepreneurship. We propose an increased emphasis on the influence of stratification on the entrepreneurship process because it affects every step of the process. Stratification may influence who pursues entrepreneurship and who does not. It influences the types of opportunities that are seen and evaluated. It also shapes how a venture opportunity will be pursued.

Specifically, this means acknowledging the inequality in the United States and other nations and considering how that inequality interacts with the identification and the shaping of entrepreneurial opportunities (see Figure 3) by constraining some activities and providing opportunities for others. It also means recognizing how the variation of entrepreneurial success and failure is based upon a more

FIGURE 3
HOW SOCIAL STRATIFICATION INFLUENCES ENTREPRENEURSHIP



nanced set of social and institutional factors than we have previously understood. Therefore, the pursuit of entrepreneurship is tied directly to the historical, social, and institutional processes of social stratification. Since this cannot be easily achieved using a functionalist paradigm, we advocate the study of African American women entrepreneurs and other complex identities with distinctly interpretivist approaches.

A Study of African American Women in Growth Firms

Between February 2005 and May 2006, we conducted qualitative, in-depth interviews with sixty-two African American women entrepreneurs (AAWEs) in seven U.S. metropolitan areas, where the women tell “their entrepreneurial story.” We interviewed women who were founders/leaders of growth/growing firms, with a minimum of three years’ ownership and management. In this light, we focused our study on AAWEs who lead ventures that provide services and/or products that fulfill wants and needs in an innovative and/or unique manner. Some of these ventures include engineering consulting firms, corporate/professional event planning, specialty product manufacturing, specialty construction companies, information technology firms, and large-scale hospitality services, among others.

Our criterion of a minimum three years’ ownership and management implies some assumptions about business viability; however, the criterion itself does not necessarily assume business success. This is different from some scholars’ assumptions about entrepreneurial success, where an entrepreneur was viewed

as successful if she or he met specific criteria. In other words, our criterion does not—in and of itself—*define* success.

Another criterion the AAWEs must meet for our study is that the ventures are owned completely (100 percent) by either one African American woman or two African American women. Persons of another race and/or gender could not be a financial and/or managing partner. This enabled us to focus clearly on African American women's experiences, without the need to explore explicitly the differences between male- and female-led entrepreneurial ventures or the differences between majority- and minority-led entrepreneurial ventures. For the purpose of this particular study, we explore the experiences of African American women, in their own right, from their own perspective.

Preliminary observations

In this article, we present preliminary observation based upon our “first cut” of our interview data. We believe these observations are an example of using different approaches to shed light on the question of what defines success for entrepreneurs. We have organized our observations into four categories: the double minority challenge, the trade-off between passion and growth, the importance of family history and family support, and personal calling and community orientations. Two of these categories represent perspectives on success at the individual level; the remaining two represent the group/family and societal levels.

Individual level: The double minority challenge

The current entrepreneurship literature provides conflicting evidence regarding whether gender plays a significant role in determining economic entrepreneurial success. Fasci and Valdez (1998), Reynolds (1993), Loscocco et al. (1991), and Loscocco and Robinson (1989) all indicated that female-owned businesses are less profitable than male-owned businesses. On the other hand, Watson (2002), Chaganti and Parasuraman (1996), and Kallenberg and Leicht (1991) noted that few financial performance differences exist when comparing female- and male-owned businesses.

Previous studies have shown that race/ethnicity plays a role in entrepreneurial identity, which may contribute to entrepreneurial success. Levent, Masurel, and Nijkamp (2003), in their study of Turkish women entrepreneurs in Amsterdam, investigated whether the women (given their location in the Netherlands and within a strong extended family) saw themselves as ethnic entrepreneurs or as female entrepreneurs. In our preliminary observations, many of the AAWEs expressed some tension in being both a woman and an African American. Most of the AAWEs also noted that their social identity as a “woman first” or an “African American” first varied depending on context. Among other African Americans, the AAWEs often viewed themselves primarily as women, while they viewed themselves as African Americans when among other racial/ethnic groups (regardless of gender present). The AAWEs mentioned that their identity was not

an issue when they participated in activities with other African American women. Therefore, success became a function of overcoming racism and sexism in the marketplace.

*The current entrepreneurship
literature provides conflicting evidence
regarding whether gender plays a
significant role in determining economic
entrepreneurial success.*

Eleanor Evans,² who founded and operates a construction company in Chicago, notes,

People always thought that because we were black and female we had a double advantage. When in fact it was a double disadvantage. You know, we were never allowed to participate for the twenty-five percent [government contracting set-asides for minority/women-owned businesses]. That was for the white women who were prized contractors. And we had to fight for that little five percent [of the set-asides]. One of the blurbs that Winnie [another African American woman entrepreneur] sent me was called, "How do you know you're gonna make it?" Once I could bond . . . once I began to see that they stopped looking at me as a female contractor and started looking at me as a minority contractor . . . now that I am in the twenty-five percent arena. You know, but now I've got to fight the brothers. And I didn't want to fight them. I wanted to line myself with them, but they weren't having that. You know, it's gotta be a fight. You know, why I gotta fight you? I have a son! You know, I wanna show him [that] black man [and] black woman [can] work together.

As the previous quote indicates, most of the AAWEs also raised questions about being taken seriously or taken for granted. This was particularly the case for AAWEs who chose to compete for government contracts. Those who chose to compete for government contracts and set-asides discussed the challenges they faced to ensure they were not being used by majority firms solely for their minority/women status. Nevertheless, these same women proclaimed that they did not want to forsake any opportunities (i.e., government contracts and set-asides) that they believed were fairly available to them. Interestingly, those who chose not to compete for government contracts did so because they did not want their venture to be perceived as inferior, needy, or labeled as a minority- or woman-owned enterprise.

Based on our observations, the AAWEs believed they were successful in their ventures. Our understanding is that this is because they learned how to be

tenacious and to persevere when race and/or gender became an operational issue/challenge.

Individual level: The trade-off between passion and growth

Many subjects expressed a desire to pursue a passion *and* growth. Several AAWEs mentioned that the ability to stabilize and grow their ventures was an important criterion for success; however, some provided a caveat when saying so. Some women mentioned that the ability to sustain and grow their ventures was an important external indicator (i.e., a measure used by outsiders for legitimacy and/or validation purposes); nevertheless, financial stability and financial growth was not these women's predominant definition for success.

The overwhelming majority of AAWEs defined success holistically rather than in pure economic or financial terms. They mentioned two or more of the following reasons that they believed they (and their businesses) are successful: (1) they are able to provide wealth for their family, (2) they are able to spend more time with their family, (3) they are able to give back to their community, (4) they are able to meet a specific customer need, and (5) they are able to fulfill a personal or spiritual calling.

When the AAWEs were asked, "What does the future hold for you and your venture?" approximately half of the women mentioned they intend to grow the business into a larger concern. The other half of the AAWEs mentioned that, now that their venture has attained and surpassed the survival, stability, and initial growth stages, they are not as concerned about growing their venture any further. In this light, some women defined success as an ability to maintain her venture's current level of performance (i.e., "going concern"), while other women defined success as an ability to enhance the venture's level of performance (i.e., "growing concern"). Interestingly, these women did express that their definition of success does not imply that they did not/do not face challenges in any/all of the above areas. In fact, most attribute their *personal* success to their ability to overcome some/all of these challenges.

Valerie Young, founder and owner of an information technology firm in Washington, D.C., notes,

My goal each year is whatever the dollar value that was done or the biggest contract, dollar-wise, that we had, my goal would always be to try to double it. Okay, but also, the ultimate goal is, because the big companies aren't going to let you get to their status, they will buy you out first before you get there. Now, let's be honest here. So, I don't have a problem: buy me out, signing off; and, I'm fine with that. So, if I get to a status where you gonna buy me off at what I know I'm worth, you're not buying me cheap. So, I have two options: either I position ourselves where one of the big prime companies wants to buy us out . . . that's no problem; I'd be willing to sell. Or, I turn the running of the company to an individual that I feel could take it further."

AAWEs mentioned that they choose to resolve the tension between passion and growth in different ways. For instance, some women purposely are maintaining

specific geographical market boundaries. Some women are placing their energies on fulfilling niche markets and customer bases. Furthermore, the majority of the AAWEs mentioned that a primary objective is to ensure that their venture does not compromise its founding values.

Group/family level: The significance of family history and family support

Family history and support factored significantly in the lives of AAWEs. A large number of AAWEs had entrepreneurial influences—both traditional and nontraditional—from family members (e.g., Shelton 2006). Some AAWEs were raised in families where the parent(s) or extended family members own/owned a business. Some others were inspired or encouraged by family members who might not have owned a business but have/had an entrepreneurial spirit or a sense of economic self-determination (e.g., bootstrapping; creating own sources of income). Some AAWEs defined success as being able to continue a family tradition of entrepreneurship and/or to continue a tradition of economic self-determination. Eleanor Evans, speaking of her parents' work ethic, notes that "my mother . . . started [a business] in the house for extra money. My dad was doing little extra side jobs for extra money. You know, he taught us how to value every single penny. Like I said, we were hustling. I hustled my way through high school; hustled my way through college."

The average age of the AAWEs interviewed was forty-nine; more than half of the AAWEs (across all ages) were mothers. A number of the AAWEs aged forty or older worked in corporate environments before launching their ventures and shared the challenges they faced when attempting to fulfill simultaneously their familial and professional obligations. In response to the oft-times conflicting obligations, a large number of the AAWEs parlayed their professional experiences and resources in a manner that enabled them to conduct business on their terms while continuing to meet their family's needs. Many of those AAWEs who did not yet have children expressed that one of the reasons they created their venture was so that they could structure their business in a manner that would be family-friendly (for themselves and their employees). Thus, many AAWEs defined success as being able to create a venture that does not force them to compromise their familial commitments. Marcia Quarles, founder and owner of a consumer products company in New York City, notes,

Yes, juggling family and stuff has been difficult. It's weird, it's difficult and then it's easier because I make my own schedule. So, if I want to go to something and it's going on in their school, I don't have to ask anyone for their permission. But it's hard when they [her children] feel that I work all the time 'cause I work at home. Or I can't talk to them 'cause I'm on the phone, and they want to tell me something exciting. But in the beginning, when they were babies . . . I had a woman who helped me . . . it was great to be able to have them [her children] here. And not have to send them off someplace, you know, because I nursed both of them. So, I couldn't have done that with a nine-to-five job. So as hectic as it was, it wasn't as difficult but it was, it was definitely the way to go . . . but it was always a juggling act. You work at home; so, your work is here. So, it

becomes very hard to turn it off because it's right here, you know [laughs]. You walk past your desk and it's like, "Oh, let me check my e-mails." Then an hour later [laughs], you know you're still sitting there. But I don't think I would like it any other way.

Societal level: Calling and community orientations

Besser (1999) noted that greater social responsibility on the part of business operators will be positively related to business success as measured by the operator's evaluation of success. Besser asserted that business success precedes increased social responsibility. We asked, Is it also possible that a high level of social or civic responsibility precedes business success? In fact, some—particularly many of our interviewees—would argue that a high level of social and civic responsibility is a success criterion in and of itself.

Boston and Ross (1997) noted that the most successful African American businesses locate themselves in low-income inner-city areas, employ African American workers, and recruit a significant portion of their workforce from the inner city. In our study, most of the AAWEs expressed a responsibility toward their local and racial community; many AAWEs defined success for themselves as being able to provide employment and economic support for their chosen communities. A few AAWEs mentioned that they purposely hire and train a significant number of high school dropouts, former felons, and public assistance recipients, with the charge that, as one firm owner in Atlanta mentioned, "If I don't hire them, who will? I want to provide those most at-risk with an opportunity to improve their lives and the lives of their families."

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Theresa Thomas speaks of her ownership of an event marketing/public relations company in Chicago:

It's really important to find a way to stay grounded. . . . Our [fellow African-American] business people need to somehow understand that and be willing to share and give back . . . when you go down [with setbacks], there's nobody down there with you. But then, it inspires you to continue because I know that God . . . hasn't put me here to be down. . . . I know my mission is true; and I believe it is an appointed one by Him. I believe that He recognizes that our people are in need of so much; and, there are a lot of people giving on lots of levels. But, I don't see people really giving on this level that I'm talking about. There are people that are out here that are doing a lot of good in the nonprofit sector, you know, lots of social services organizations out there that help the people. Nobody's talking business; so, I stay on the business tip. I don't get off of that because, when I do whatever, someone says, "Well, who are you giving a contribution to?" I'm giving a contribution to a business . . . because we've got to stay as a business. Basically, my role is to help other businesses; that's what my business is . . . a lot of what I did with [my company] came out of a spirit of hope than purely looking at bottom line numbers and making the decision that this should go forward because, even though it's not making the "right" numbers and the margins weren't there, all the things that you're supposed to look at in business, you know. I put all those aside because I saw people, there were a lot of faces out there.

Some women explicitly defined success as being able to serve as a positive role model within their chosen communities. While serving as a role model may not have been a priority for most AAWEs, these women realize that their success enables them to influence and mentor others to perform well in their educational and professional endeavors.

As the previous quote notes, one interesting observation we made during our interviews is the strong influence of faith and spirituality in the lives of AAWEs. The overwhelmingly majority of the AAWEs interviewed perceived a spiritual calling when establishing their business. Many AAWEs defined success as being able to fulfill a spiritual calling or to serve God through their venture. As one of our AAWEs put it, meeting "God's criteria, above all others," was her barometer for measuring success.

Discussion

Based on these preliminary observations, it appears that AAWEs define success more broadly than do management and entrepreneurship scholars. We believe these women's stories provide some evidence that supports creating an augmented definition for success—one that reflects populations that are currently absent, underrepresented, or misrepresented in current entrepreneurship statistics. It is known among entrepreneurship scholars that no single agreed-upon definition exists for business success or failure. Rogoff, Lee, and Suh (2004) noted that the empirical work in entrepreneurial success and failure is limited because conducting studies on entrepreneurial success is difficult and requires significant time to conduct meaningful longitudinal studies. Given this development, exploring definitions of success beyond the management and entrepreneurship literatures provides additional insight.

While the history of American/Western business values has conditioned us to believe that economic indicators of success are predominant, entrepreneurial success is defined much more broadly in other cultures and environments. Pnina Werbner (1999), in her study of ethnic entrepreneurship, provided great insight on what determines entrepreneurial success. Werbner described it best when she noted that success may be defined as “the competitive achievement of prestige or honor, and of the symbolic goods signaling these, within a specific regime of value” (p. 556). Her main point is that we must expand our definition of success. Using purely economic measures for success does not provide a complete assessment. Things that are valuable (or deemed significant) to entrepreneurs when defining success for their ventures (and/or themselves) often cannot be translated cleanly into economic terms. Noneconomic measures of success may be viewed as being as valuable as—if not more valuable than—economic measures of success. Depending on the context (which may include personal history, cultural environment, work environment, social networks, and personal values), success may be defined in a myriad of ways.

Our preliminary observations would validate Werbner’s (1999) argument. For our subjects, entrepreneurial success is contextual. Using solely economic indicators to determine entrepreneurial success may mask whether entrepreneurs are, indeed, successful. It appears evident from our initial observations that the context of African American women is important for this discussion and has implications for the field of entrepreneurship.

Implications

Why should we study AAWEs? What do we learn from studying these entrepreneurs, and what are the implications of this research? In this article, we have established that scarce research has explored the intersection of race, gender, and entrepreneurship. For some the very idea that we know little about entrepreneurship is enough to pursue these new directions. But the case for studying African American women (or other unique intersections) in entrepreneurship is not complete without exploring the possible implications of conducting such research.

It is our position that *context* matters in entrepreneurship. The process of entrepreneurship may have many similarities across contexts, but the process is influenced by society’s norms, values, rules, regulations, and public policies. A social stratification lens speaks to each of these aspects. In the United States, African American women have been marginalized as a result of racism and sexism. We should not perpetuate this marginalization in our research.

Second, studying African American women in entrepreneurship with an eye on social stratification perspectives provides an opportunity to use different research *approaches* in entrepreneurship research. As a field, we must stop privileging the traditional functionalist approach in our journals and classrooms. By using a different method, one that values the voice of the entrepreneur, we can

answer different questions than before and see nuance in the old questions we have asked. We demonstrated the usefulness of this approach in this article by exploring the dimensions of success that emerge from rich group dialogue with high-growth AAWEs.

Third, the recognition of the importance of context and relevance of research approach will lead to more informed *policy making*. For example, if a policy maker were to ask what could be done to triple the number of African American women entrepreneurs with million-dollar firms, the current literature would do little to inform him or her. A review of the few papers that address the topic might only yield the answer, "provide more seed capital." Through our preliminary study, we know that this is just scratching the surface of the challenge. Solid entrepreneurship policy cannot be developed in a vacuum; the framework we have outlined here begins to put these issues into perspective. (Gilbert, Audretsch, and McDougall 2004).

We have highlighted the limitations of prevailing approaches to the study of entrepreneurship. Doing so raises the question, Does this research destabilize the entrepreneurship narrative? Our response is, Perhaps, though justifiably so. We have argued that research that privileges one group, by normalizing their experience such that another group's appears lacking in comparison, lacks nuance, results in competing theoretical explanations, and generates ascriptions that have been challenged by our work and by other researchers whose work is noted herein.

Our goal in writing this article was to present the usefulness of analysis that explicitly addresses the complexities of race, gender, class, wealth, and entrepreneurship. As a result, the implication is that further research in this area should be conducted from an interpretivist perspective, adopting a lens that considers several important factors. First, entrepreneurship is defined and characterized as a process. Our interest is in how such a process unfolds for a particular group that is underrepresented and, we would argue, mischaracterized in the current literature. Second, current research fails to see the nuances that are present when entrepreneurship is viewed as a social construction, which is grounded in the lived experiences of the women involved, and reflected in, among other features, their differing definitions of success. Third, research should take into account both the complexity in the field and the multidimensional nature of the phenomena.

Taken together, these factors produce investigations whose outcomes have practical value and enhance the theoretical significance of their results. Our hope is that we have encouraged other researchers to follow our lead and develop research questions that go beyond the traditional functionalist paradigm. By taking these radical departures from the prevailing narrative, we move the field forward.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, we use *self-employment* and *entrepreneurship* interchangeably.
2. This article uses pseudonyms to protect the identity of the subjects.

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