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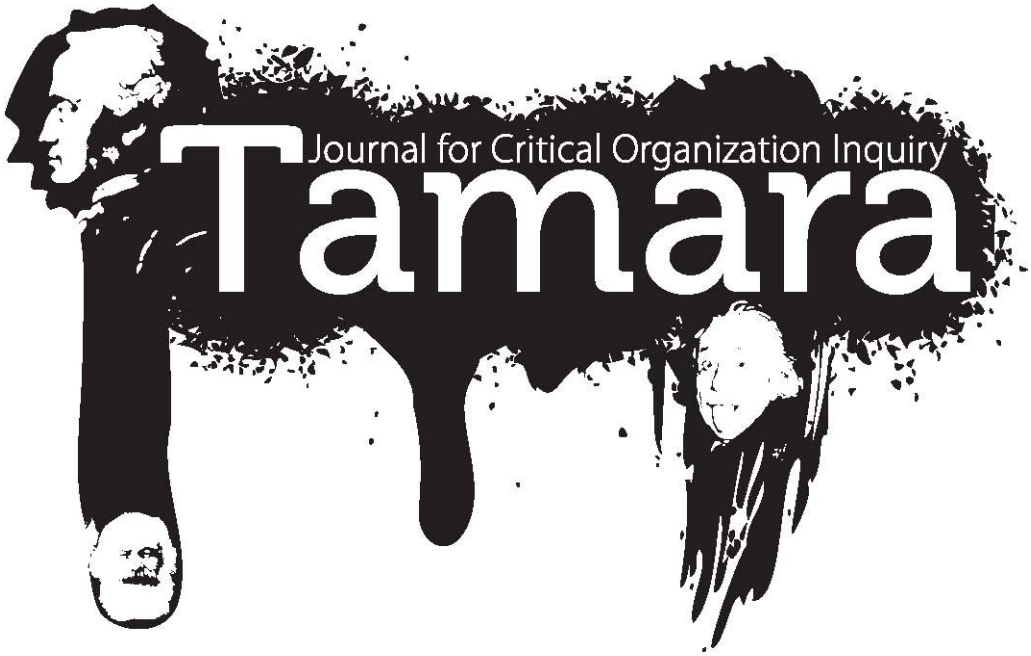

An Autoethnographic Account of Prosaic Entrepreneurship

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Abstract
In recent years, entrepreneurship scholars have begun studying entrepreneurship from social, prosaic, narrative, and discursive dimensions. These "new movement" approaches privilege both business and non-business perspectives. Research in this domain of inquiry seeks to account for the everyday and mundane practices of social actors that can be characterized as entrepreneurial; therefore, prosaic approaches can de-center the narrative of entrepreneurship as comprised solely of a group of elite entrepreneurs. While researchers are encouraged to describe entrepreneurship from a life-story perspective, few scholars have used a self-narrative approach to writing about entrepreneurship. In this article, I use autoethnography to provide a personal account of entrepreneurship. I reflexively interrogate the ways in which I have reproduced, disrupted, benefited from, and been hindered by the dominant enterprise discourses in the United States. A prosaic approach using self-narrative, as demonstrated, is already engaged in a process of re-storying entrepreneurship scholarship because it takes into account, among other things, the details of everyday entrepreneurial activity and is receptive to heterodox accounts (even stories that end in entrepreneurial failure).

My Story Part One: A Synoptic Autoethnographic Narrative

When I was six-years-old, I peddled candy at school. When I was 15-years-old, I started my first legal business entity. It was a sole-proprietorship. I received a $6,000 bank loan. I paid the loan back early. The name of the company was Alternative Frequencies. I provided music (disc jockeying) and club-style lighting at various events (e.g., high school and college dances, business holiday parties, and weddings) throughout Wyoming and Colorado. I usually only worked weekends. I grossed, on average, $2,000 a month. After three years, the business no longer existed (a euphemistic way of saying it failed). I have since started another company, but I have no strategy, no business plan, and have been stuck in the start-up process for five years.

Admittedly, I present this brief overview with the hope that it will entice readers to continue on. The main purpose, however, is to provide a disclaimer of two kinds. First, it forefronts that the plot of my essay is not the typical heroic tale of entrepreneurship that is common in academic and popular culture stories of enterprise (see Katz, 2004; Nicholson &

Anderson, 2005). It is not a story that fits with the more dominant, uplifting narratives of entrepreneurial success. It is a prosaic story of entrepreneurship that ends in failure. It is the kind of story that is often overlooked in prose, but statistically well documented (only 30% of new businesses survive 10 years and one out of every five entrepreneurs are stuck in a perpetual start-up phase; see Shane, 2008).

Second, as a culturally-situated writer, my story inevitably cannot resist incorporating some of the more common elements of the dominant narratives of enterprise. So while I attempt to re-story entrepreneurship though an autoethnographic account that resists the mythological impulse to describe entrepreneurs as "crafty magicians" or "God-like" (see Nicholson & Anderson, 2005), I inevitably, at times, re-story entrepreneurship in the "same old way." Furthermore, readers' "prejudices" [i] will likely uncover tropes that I did not foresee. In this sense, the narrative of "my story" is not mine at all but simply a product and propellant of an expressive discourse that challenges and supports common plotlines.

Through introspective analysis, I seek to challenge popular narrative themes. It is for this reason, that I hope readers—now knowing a part of the climax of the autoethnographic essay—will bracket their presuppositions as they read the story that comes before the analysis. To reflexively take account of some of the assumptions that colleagues, reviewers, and I have uncovered in our multiple readings of the personal essay, I have placed some of the common tropes within [brackets].

Introduction

In recent years, a momentum has developed in entrepreneurship studies toward a narrative and discursive turn that focuses on everyday, prosaic practices of entrepreneurship (see, for example, Berglund, 2007; Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004; Rae & Carswell, 2000). This momentum also privileges the cultural dimensions of entrepreneurship as much as the economic (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2005). The interest in "new movement" approaches to entrepreneurship and everyday practices of entrepreneurs (see, especially, the special issue in Entrepreneurship & Regional Development, 16.3; as well as Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2003), brings to the foreground the need to find methodological techniques for describing and understanding "the everyday and the ordinary, the familiar and the frequent, the customary and the accustomed, the mediocre and the inferior, in short, the prosaic" (Steyaert, 2004, p. 9). Chris Steyaert (2004) proposes, among other authors (e.g., Rehn & Taalas, 2004a), narrative, ethnomethodological, genealogical, and deconstructionist approaches. Regardless of interpretive method, scholars interested in prosaic entrepreneurship adhere to the epistemological and ontological assumptions that are emblematic of the "narrative turn" in social studies research, namely that enacted narratives are a basic form of social life, narratives are a mode of knowing, and narration is a mode of communication (see Czarniawska, 2004).

This paper is a contribution to this momentum. Through an autoethnographic account and introspective analysis of my story of entrepreneurial becoming, I reflexively interrogate the ways in which I have reproduced, disrupted, benefited from, and been hindered by the dominant enterprise and capitalist discourses in the United States, which largely, and potentially at great financial and social expense, privilege masculine ways of being (Catano, 2001). As a "confessional tale" (van Maanen, 1988, p. 73), the personal essay (boxed text) and analytical writing (non-boxed text) presented herein function together as an example of how researchers, educators, and students can use autoethnographic writing projects to disrupt heroic entrepreneurial stories, bring to the fore new stories that tell about the mundaneity of entrepreneurial activities—which may work (a)synchronously with dominant entrepreneurial myths[ii], and rethink some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in popular and academic narratives of entrepreneurship. In other words, there is great pedagogical value in this style of research.

As methods of inquiry, essayistic writing and autoethnography have emerged as legitimated approaches to academic research (Jones, 2005; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In this project, I am using autoethnography as "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others [and texts] in social contexts" (Spry, 2001, p. 710) and as a way to account for the performative and aesthetic features of everyday (i.e., prosaic) entrepreneurial life. The power of crafting autoethnographic essays, which I see as synonymous with creative analytical processes (CAP) ethnographies, is that they display "the writing process and writing product as deeply [and politically] intertwined" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). This means that a critical and reflexive attitude must be honed in writing and reading these entrepreneurial stories.

Autoethnography breaks from the more scientific style of academic writing, privileges description and explanation, and encourages stylistic experimentation[iii]. Autoethnography is "research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection" (Ellis 2004, xix). Given its subjectivist approach to research, performative writing style, and focus on the self, autoethnography is not without its critics. Its legitimacy has been challenged by positivist and

interpretive researchers alike for being too narcissistic and not rigorous (see Coffey, 1999; Holt, 2003; Sparks, 2000). Nevertheless, the method now has a strong following among human studies scholars in various disciplines and it has been vigorously defended by its proponents as a useful analytical and evocative device for understanding social phenomena[iv].

Autoethnography is an appropriate methodological approach for the prosaic-oriented "life story" approaches in entrepreneurship studies and education, which recognize,

> that entrepreneurship is to a great extent a form of art, a practice-oriented endeavor that requires a sensitive and committed engagement with a range of phenomena in the surrounding world. Still, much of the research and theory development favours large studies and positivist epistemologies…, where the liveliness of entrepreneurship tends to be suspended in favor of 'scientific rigour.' (Berglund, 2007, p. 75; see also Rae & Carswell, 2000)

Since autoethnography encourages entrepreneurs to creatively write their stories and be critically reflexive about them, it ought to be more amenable with their lifestyle. Entrepreneurs may not possess the skills (or desire) to write in a purely analytical style and, if Steyaert (2004) is correct, entrepreneurs' writing would likely need to function as an expression of their entrepreneurial creativity. As I will highlight in the analysis, when one rhetorically breaks from the common storylines of entrepreneurship, new cultural and political understandings of business practices emerge.

Autoethnography can deepen our understanding of the various political, cultural, and artistic dimensions of entrepreneurship; however, it is not commonly used in prosaic entrepreneurship research[v]. While there are various ways in which autoethnographic research can be conducted and written (see, for example, Anderson, 2006; Crawford, 1996; Pelias, 2000), I have used a process that, while peculiar to traditional scientific research, has been accepted as a practical approach to autoethnographic scholarship (see Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones, 2005):

> I start[ed] with my personal life. I [paid] attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use[d]… systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I [wrote] my experience as a story. By exploring [my] particular life, I hope[d] to understand a way of life. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737; see also Reed-Danahay, 1997)

I now turn to providing a personal essay that, through its cultural-situatedness, serves both as an example of and an insight into prosaics of entrepreneurship. Following this story, I demonstrate, through introspective analysis, its potential uses and value to both students and researchers of entrepreneurship. In order to narrate my story, I have added a plot. This means that, despite my best attempts, it will necessarily draw upon pre-established storylines of entrepreneurship. The text will also entice readers to interpret it through their own hermeneutical lenses. I encourage readers to bracket their judgments, as much as possible, in their first reading. As noted at the beginning of this article, I have accounted for some of the storylines in [brackets].

My Story Part Two: A Prosaic Autoethnographic Example of Entrepreneurial Becoming

I can't recall exactly how it all began or where I got the idea. It just made sense to me. Perhaps I was born with an enterprising personality, but I suspect that my entrepreneurial spirit was nurtured, often in mundane and unexpected ways, by the larger United States culture and economy. When I was six-years-old I started my first enterprise. The concept was relatively simple. Whenever my mom would buy my sisters and me candy, I would save mine and sell it at school. Because my parents often just financially scraped by from month to month, I was never given an allowance. Therefore, I enjoyed the income that this venture provided me. [The "childhood prodigy storyline" and "rags to riches" storyline seeped in already!]

I saved the money I earned peddling my treats at school to expand my venture. ["Thrift" storyline!] When I was seven, a potential for greater profitability emerged. So long as they knew where I was going, my parents gave me permission to ride my bicycle to wherever my heart desired. My heart followed the profit opportunities. I began riding my bicycle to the closest store—about one mile from our home—in order to diversify my inventory and increase its turnover. At school, there was both a high demand for the goods and a need for greater inventory diversification. I also realized that kids in my neighborhood had stricter parents/guardians and that they were in need of a mule, especially during summer months. In short, their parental restrictions became my profit opportunity. ["Perceptive to opportunity" storyline is pretty thick in the previous sentences!] This is how it came to pass that for the next five years of my childhood, I rode my bicycle two to three times a week to Bi-Rite Drugs to buy succulent

sweet snacks, such as Little Debbie oatmeal cream cookies, peanut butter bars, and Jolly Rancher candy sticks. My usual mark-up was 100%, so a 10-cent Jolly Rancher stick would sell for 20 cents on the street or playground. Little Debbie snacks were 89 cents per box at the time, and I sold each individually wrapped, "not-for-individual-resale" snack for 50 cents, yielding $5.11 in profit from each 12-cookie box—a 574% markup! [The "savvy and rule-breaking ruthless profiteer"!—This should not be a plotline we applaud, but many do.] At the height of my neighborhood enterprise, kids would come to get candy for their sweet-toothed parents. What I was doing was thusly reified as a legitimate practice. [As Rob Smith (personal communication) has noted, and makes me smile every time I read it: "The hard work storyline combined with business acumen is what we like to read!"]

I didn't yet understand the language of business, but I understood one thing very clearly—my labor and time are value-able. I also understood that it is important to be frugal and to save. So I started a checking and savings account when I was eight. The night before I opened up my first savings account, I didn't sleep a wink. And while setting up the account, I couldn't stop giggling—I was too excited. My mother taught me how to maintain a budget and "account" for my income and sales. Before I was ten years old and without a religious affiliation, I had happily (though in disgust now) adopted the "Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism" (Weber, 1930/1992). I already had many tools and a practical understanding of what is necessary to be(come) successful in an enterprising, capital-based culture.

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I expanded my candy business (for a day) and set up the typical lemonade stand. Again, having parents who did not force me to set up shop on the front lawn, so they could keep an eye on me, gave me an advantage. I traveled with a friend about a half-mile away from our homes. We set up near the Wyoming Frontier Prison, a historical museum and tourist attraction. We both invested equal money in order to diversify our product line. Not only did we sell lemonade, but we offered iced tea, water for a nickel per cup (this was before bottled water was common), and canned Pepsi and Coke products. In one day of business, we each earned, over $120 in profit. ["Taking the childhood prodigy storyline to new heights" (Smith, personal communication).]

My sisters, three and five years older than my friend and I, decided to emulate our enterprise the following week. They made much less money. When I spoke with them about how they were doing, they were rather disappointed. Hiding my conflicting feelings of happiness and guilt, I stroked my ego by gloating how I was just better at business. With red faces, watery eyes, and likely with humiliation, they sold to me four dollars worth of beverages. My neighborhood friends and I sipped our lukewarm sodas (they hadn't purchased ice!) in the arid summer sun while proclaiming with laughter that "boys are just better at business." [Competitive, stoic personality storyline!] We were learning very well "how to be men" in the larger US-American culture. I was learning how to think like an enterprising individual in the United States—"It's not personal, it's just business!" But my sisters' faces projected feelings that have long haunted me. At times, I see this familiar expression on their faces as they reappear in moments where our sibling rivalries resurface during holiday gatherings. It is one of their long-held assumptions that I have had a much easier life. [My analysis will challenge the assumption that hard work alone is rewarded. Success is partly determined by identity politics. I had and have access to particular spaces and other certain privileges that come with being male sexed.] My early candy ventures schooled me in the way of doing business, and the experience set the stage for my first legal enterprise.

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I will never forget the look of dismay and admiration on the Bank of Commerce president's face while I was standing in his office when I was 15-years-old. I was trying to convince him that my business plan for a mobile entertainment company was worth a $6,000 loan. It was a locally owned bank, so he was much nicer than someone at a regional or national bank would likely have been. His look was not one of absolute disregard for my idea. I cannot say if he would have been more prejudiced if I had been female or a person of color. He was prejudiced, I can say, about my age. But there I was, with a shoddy business plan in hand, which was written in my high school small business class, seriously trying to bring my idea into fruition. "Sounds like a good idea kid, perhaps in a few years when you have more collateral [he meant when I am older] it will be something we can support," the president noted. I thought the plan made sense. I had a part-time job at McDonald's, I was successfully operating a lawn mowing service, and I had money in savings, which I was using to supply over half of the needed capital. [Pluriactivity, multi-tasking, and hard-working storylines!] The owner of the bank sent me away, but I was not deterred (probably because he did not reject my idea, just my age). The banker said I needed more collateral. I did not know what that meant, so I looked it up in the dictionary and then I set out to get some. Eventually, I was able to suggest the following collateral to the bank president: a truck title, the business assets, and half the initial

investment. He accepted the offer and I received the loan.

My fortune changed when I convinced my father to help. He signed over the title of his "just-recently-paid-off truck" and I signed it over to the bank. (I understand that this is not a safety net that many potential business owners have.) To convince my father, my rhetorical strategy was to take him to a store that specialized in selling music entertainment equipment. Just as I had thought, he was easily convinced by the sound and lighting equipment, which he said was "awesome stuff." While in the store, he called the bank owner, said he'd give them the title to his truck, and we secured the loan. So when I was 15-years-old, I was doing business as Alternative Frequencies Mobile Entertainment Services. I provided professional sound and lighting at weddings, parties, and school dances throughout Wyoming and Colorado. Business was difficult. Securing contracts was not as easy as I thought it would be, and despite selling $2,000 in contracts a month (not bad for a high school student), I was just breaking even. What's more, I had lost the safety of my family because my parents moved to Texas from Wyoming when I was 16-years-old, just months after I started the company. I was living on my own, so I had new expenses. [Lone-wolf storyline!] This motivated me to work harder to obtain contracts for service, but it also required that I continue my job at McDonald's (while still attending high school). [Bucking-the-odds storyline!] The inability to focus solely on my business made things difficult. Fortunately, I had help from friends and teachers who were keen to support my business by suggesting my company to their friends and family.

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Every story must end somehow. My entrepreneurial story in general has not yet come to an end (see post script). For the purpose of this article, however, it seems appropriate to end this part of the story at the time in my life when I was at the crossroads between business management and studying business. Within two years of starting my company, I was able to repay the loan. I was at a juncture where I could have continued to operate the company or go to college. For various reasons, but primarily because I didn't feel like musical entertainment was my calling, I chose to go to college. My decision to go to college was very late—just weeks before graduating from high school. Fortunately, I had received a tip from a McDonald's colleague about a small college in Grand Junction, Colorado. I went to the college for a tour in May, long after scholarships had been awarded. During this trip I met with an administrator who informed me that while I could still be admitted, there were no scholarships available. I knew that I could not afford the tuition, fees, and boarding without some financial assistance. I made a case that I really wanted to attend the particular college because I had been impressed by its programs and location. I explained to him my financial and family circumstances, highlighting in particular my business experience. I asked if there was any way that he could help me to attend. He explained that I was "just the type of student that the college wanted" and asked me to wait while he went to talk to financial aid officers. When he returned, he offered me an out-of-state tuition waiver, which made the tuition more affordable. [Suave personality storyline!] My confidence and my (hi)story were all shaped by my previous experiences. My entrepreneurial endeavors in particular were clearly creating new opportunities. Thus, certain privileges and some hard work begot more privilege with less work (and this is the way the economy functions).

When I arrived at the college campus the following August, I still didn't have enough money to pay my bill beyond the first semester. ["Tough-luck" and overcoming-the-odds storylines!] If I did not find a source of income, I knew I would have to drop out. I heard about a leadership position that paid for room and board and so, against second-and third-year students, I ran for the position. I won. This position meant that I would not have the time to continue operating my business. So I placed all of my sound and lighting equipment in a "secure" storage facility and, because I could no longer afford the insurance, cancelled my policy. A month later, all of the sound equipment was stolen.

I suppose I should have been upset, but I actually felt liberated. It had been a wonderful yet exhausting experience. To this day, I would still forgo my business in order to re-live the experiences and education I received during my undergraduate studies. College transformed me from an aggressive business-minded entrepreneur into a socially-conscious entrepreneur with an interest in culture and non-traditional economics. The route was not through business textbooks, however, but through non-traditional literature and liberal arts classes. In fact, I had declared business as my major very early in my academic career so it would not have been financially a good decision to change majors. If it would have been, I would have graduated with a literature or history degree. In the analysis and conclusion of this paper, I return back to some of the themes presented in this story, pushing the narrative into, I hope, interesting directions.

Analysis: Rethinking the Storylines

I consider my story a prosaic one. Many entrepreneurs start their first enterprises at a young age and the majority of businesses fail (Shane, 2008). In telling my story of success and failure, I frame certain details and events in ways that not only play into pre-established narrative storylines about entrepreneurship, but in ways that create a positive and favorable story about my endeavors. While I did overcome some challenges in my adolescence and I am proud of my accomplishments, the story, in its focus on me, has slighted many other important details. For example, it is very a-social. When others appear in the story they serve as examples or justifications of my success. Even in my criticism of the Protestant work ethic (PWE) storyline, the story seems to only reinforce and maintain it. As one reviewer noted, "No self-respecting entrepreneur story would rhyme true without it." The PWE storyline crept into the text in order to legitimize my story.

In this section, I provide an introspective analysis of my story of entrepreneurial becoming. Drawing on literature in entrepreneurship studies, I try to account for some of the ways in which my story benefits from but also disrupts some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about entrepreneurship. I have organized the section around four conceptual themes: risk/safety; masculinity; identity; and social networks. These themes emerged from analysis of the story presented in the boxed text. I recognize the four themes are areas with significant research in literature on entrepreneurship studies. While I point to this body of literature for the purpose of supporting my claims, I am not trying to engage in theory building regarding these areas of research. I recognize this is a potential limitation of this paper; however, my goal is to show how autoethnographic writing has helped me re-story my accounts of my entrepreneurial life while questioning cultural assumptions about entrepreneurship.

Risk or Safety?

It is often suggested that entrepreneurs have a propensity for calculated risk, which implies they make rational decisions (see Xu & Ruef, 2004). Research that focuses on the individual also eschews other important factors to entrepreneurs' behaviors, such as the environmental conditions that make risk taking possible (Ray, 1993). While "risk tolerance" adds to the myth of the heroic (male) entrepreneur (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Shane, 2008), in that hegemonic masculinity tends to be association with the symbolic domain of the male (Connell, 1995), my lived narrative of entrepreneurship tells a story of safety. When I used to narrate this story, I highlighted the risks I took at a child; it seems to me now that I did not face many threats and, therefore, there was little at risk.

When I started my candy and music enterprises, my financial needs were already provided by my parents. The environmental conditions, in other words, were such that I could take financial risks. My projects could have been rejected. Consequently, my ego might have been strained for a week or so, but there was little financial risk involved in building my candy inventory or promoting my music enterprise. I could meet my music entertainment company's financial obligations with the money I earned while working at McDonald's. I did not have to use the money to pay other bills. If either venture failed or succeeded, my economic survival was not in danger. What is more, all of the money that I earned could be reinvested back into the business, increasing the chances of success. That my music company still failed to stay in operation shows how challenging it is to remain profitable. Thus, there is an increased risk of business failure if one is dependent on profits for personal wellbeing (Shane, 2008) and, if my own experience is reflective of other entrepreneurs' experiences, many of my later business ideas were abandoned or failed due to my insecurity and lack of a safety net[vi]. For example, I started an after-school tutoring program. Because of my general lack of funds, due to rent and a low graduate student income, I was unable to advertise as much as I needed to. As a result, just two years after I started the company, I reduced it to a part-time endeavor.

While more research into the roles that welfare and social safety nets play as potential stimulants of entrepreneurship and economic growth is needed, some researchers have challenged the popular myth in the United States that adversity increases innovation and government programs reduce entrepreneurialism. Alf Rehn & Saara Taalas (2004b), for example, provide a convincing narrative that the practice of blat ("economy of favors") in the Soviet Union (a socialized economy) was highly entrepreneurial. Furthermore, Florida (2004) shows that open and tolerant communities are correlated with successful small business start-ups, even when such communities have a higher tax base (often because they offer more locally-based social programs).

My parents provided me with safety and I was still motivated by my enterprising desires. Perhaps, and even more so, this is because I had less to lose than if I lived consistently in the margins. My initial capital (candy) was even provided as a subsidy by my mother. Human actors, so my story wants to point out, find opportunity and engage in entrepreneurial activity even when they are relatively content. This goes against the common orthodox assumptions regarding homo economicus, who is supposedly to be inspired by privation and lazy when comfortable.

A grand narrative of entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurs are risk takers. However, entrepreneurs, so it seems from a prosaic perspective, are much more interested in reducing uncertainty[vii] than in taking risks. Ludwig von Mises (1949/2007) argued that we are motivated not by profit, but by a desire to consistently change our circumstances to obtain adopted goals. The low-income family may economize, but they may also seek out strategies (i.e., act entrepreneurial) to get more with their limited income (see Steyaert & Katz, 2004). This may equate to "trading favors" with others (see Rehn & Talaas, 2004b) or laboring to develop and operate non-profit organizations, such as a community soup kitchen to increase personal wellbeing and safety.

To suggest or to actively promote a narrative of entrepreneurial risk taking may not only be erroneous, but may be dangerous for an economy. Promoting risk taking can result in great financial and social losses, which is often not explained in current entrepreneurship literature. The common assumption is that the benefits of taking risks outweigh the costs (Baumol, 1990). However, even a simple example suggests that this may not be true. For example, the entrepreneur who invests her or his pension into a venture that ultimately fails has not only misappropriated economic resources for a period of time, but will now have to rely more heavily on public funds for retirement (e.g., social security). If the majority of new start-ups are bound to fail (Shane, 2008) then we should seriously consider whether the benefits of some entrepreneurial enterprises outweigh the social and financial costs.

This section highlights that there is a basis for arguments in favor of social programs (such as universal healthcare) as a means of inspiring business venturing. A community that is safe, according to Richard Florida (2004), is much more likely to find itself with innovators. If an actor has a great business idea, but cannot quit his or her job in order to implement the idea out of fear of losing his or her healthcare or pension benefits, an economy dependent on entrepreneurialism suffers. If, however, there is a safety net, then the entrepreneur just may find it easy to start her or his (business) enterprise, such as I did as a child. The key, of course, is to balance safety and to promote a narrative that does not reward uncalculated risk taking.

Doing Masculinity and Enterprise

Attila Bruni, Silvia Gherardi, and Barbara Poggio (2005), who are at the fore-front of describing the relationship between gender and entrepreneurship, argue that,

> The symbolic meaning of enterprise is encapsulated by the mythological figure of Mercury and by the mercurial personality: shrewd, pragmatic, creative, open-minded and adventurous. The features of entrepreneurship reside in the symbolic domain of initiative-taking, accomplishment and relative risk. They therefore reside in the symbolic domain of the male. (p. 1)

Catano (2001), who draws on Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of "ritual practice" and Judith Butler's "performativity" to describe both the fluidity and fixity of gender in regard to entrepreneurship, argues that these myths are transmitted through stories about enterprising individuals. These stories form a masculine doxa that drives most of our business activities and relationships. To a large extent, my autoethnographic essay is constituted by, but certainly reconstitutes, the myths of the "self-made man."

Before engaging in this exercise, I liked to consider myself particularly resistant to orthodox masculinity and very resistant to my father's approach to business (which I considered hyper-masculine). However, through reading my autoethnographic account through extant literature on masculinity in entrepreneurship (e.g., Bruni, Gherardi, Poggio, 2005; Catano, 2001), I better appreciate how my successes in life are partly attributable to my being male. I have also come to realize that when I narrate my story I am reproducing a masculine logic. My resistance to my father, for example, is part of the Oedipal tales of entrepreneurship (see Catano, 2001) and my business drive was framed particularly around vengeance (a masculine construct; see Connell, 1995).

The household in which I grew up was managed primarily by my father, who lavishes in the pleasures of being the patriarch[viii]. In many ways he is a good man, but his general tendency to want to control people makes him, at times, manipulative. The reason I didn't immediately think of his influence on my entrepreneurial life is because I was always closer to my mother. Due to this relationship, I found it easier to be friends with women. As I grew older, I was increasingly uncomfortable by the talk that was required to fit in with other men. Derogatory talk about homosexuality and females, a desire to party, and a general aggressiveness in their everyday practices, made me nervous to be around other boys and men. To deal with my lack of male intimacy, I often retreated into the comfort of my own thoughts about business and work, increasing my motivation to labor harder and start my own business. On wrestling trips and at school,

for example, I would fantasize about starting a music entertainment company as my teammates and classmates engaged in physical and verbal violence against me and other freshman, often calling me a "fag" and teasing me about my less-than-masculine behaviors. I spent several years of my youth, because of these activities, fantasizing about how I would prove myself. I often planned my future businesses. I envisioned myself starting a successful company. I relished in the thought that I would one day be a successful (read: rich) businessperson and would, through my success, show everyone who "a thing or two."

It is not surprising that while my masculinity was in question, I clung particularly to a character that is often read as both heroic and male—the entrepreneur. And, I did so in a way that is masculine—"getting even" through shrewdness. According to Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2004), "in the classic literature, the features defining entrepreneurial figures are intrinsically connected with masculinity (the entrepreneur as conqueror of unexplored territories, the lonely hero, the patriarch)… (p. 407). As a practice of "doing masculinity," I was motivated by a projection that once successful I would serve my revenge in the form of others' feverish jealousy of my economic success. The exact business that I was going to operate was never clear; it oscillated between youth summer camps and educational seminars, event planning and organizational consulting, and an entertainment venue. I genuinely wanted to put my skills to work through business venturing, but as time passed the desire became to upstage others; I clung heavily to the mythological version of the million-dollar businessman that society admires (e.g., Henry Ford). Ironically, I was thinking in the same aggressive logic as so many of the young men I loathed. Through a twisted rationalizing process, I was able to convince myself that my way of thinking was right and that my childhood nemeses were wrong.

My early business successes as a candy peddler and entertainer were not motivated by vengeance. However, some of the success is attributable to my gender. Only 27% of small business owners are women (Shane, 2008), and my story provide some insight as to why. Despite my close relationship with my mom and spending my adolescent years among young women rather then men, I was still largely given access to the cultural world of the male; and when I engaged in any enterprising ventures, it was always already entwined with my performances of masculinity (see also Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). I hunted with my father and attended many social events with him (he was an elected official). My sisters, it was assumed, would not be interested and were often never invited. What is more, on some occasions they had explicitly asked to come along but were denied. In short, I spent more time with my father than my sisters did; consequently, I had more access to the settings and privileges that come with being both male and the son of a politician. Over time, all of my mundane and interpersonal interactions with others in various settings (that my sisters were denied access to) added to my tacit understanding of how the (male) world operates and how to engage politically with people. I was also able to gain more practice at socializing than my sisters; thus, I have a different sense of how the world of business and politics operates, all skills which have informed—both implicitly and explicitly—my business and personal decisions[ix].

Entrepreneurship and Identity

By adopting a prosaic approach to entrepreneurship, it is possible to account for the ordinary ways in which privilege operate in everyday business, economic, and social interactions. It is also possible to see how individual entrepreneurial identities—defined here as a socially constituted (discursive) accounts of the self (see Down, 2004; Foss, 2004)—are reproduced along with other social (e.g., gendered) practices (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004). Such an approach does not deny that structural issues are important. The disadvantages that marginalized actors (say females, working class, and non-whites) face due to historical oppression and discrimination are not forgotten. The need to have collateral, for example, in order to obtain financing to put an idea into practice is structurally more difficult for underserved and less privileged individuals (Fairlie, 2004). This is a result of having been denied the historical opportunities for creating and transferring wealth. Despite programs by nonprofit organizations, federal and state laws, and the Small Business Administration, which seek to close the racial and gender gap, there is still indication that people of color and women are largely underrepresented in business venturing and entrepreneurship (Shane, 2008; see also Fairlie, 2004). Researchers adopting a prosaic approach to entrepreneurship could describe the common practices of business pitches for obtaining needed capital. Focusing on the rhetorical interactions between entrepreneurs and bankers, for example, could provide insight into how power is asserted and likely shape business strategies.

Scholars interested in the prosaics of entrepreneurship may seek to show how everyday interactions like looks of discontent, for example, are attributable to entrepreneurs abandoning their business visions. It is the unconscious looks, the mundane ways of speaking, and the subtle reactions of others to business proposals (in either excitement or disappointment) that entrepreneurs as interlocutors get a sense of how well their business ideas will be accepted.

Consequently, it may be these subtle reactions that shape whether entrepreneurs (as business owners) follow through with the implementation and enactment of their proposals and ideas.

Studying identity performances in everyday interaction may require methods more amenable to microanalysis, such as shadowing research, conversation analysis, or video analysis. it is possible to excavate some of the performances of identity with self-narrative. Through introspective analysis, it is possible to reinterpret the scenes that have become central to one's story of entrepreneurial successes or failures. Take, for example, the lemonade stand that I mentioned in the personal essay. While it indicates that my friend and I made a lot more money than my sisters, it doesn't offer any plausible explanations for why this may be. What has been left out is a description of the transactions that my friend and I had with customers. In thinking about it now, I recognize that, with their subtle comments of praise, our lemonade stand clientele encouraged my friend and me to continue working. Our customers were motivated by more than just our business location, idea, products, services, and so on. They were moved by our identities that we projected in the moment. They identified us not only as entrepreneurs, but, in their own words, young, cute, and adorable entrepreneurs. If, however, the adjectives were replaced by black, female, teenager, immigrant, or ugly, then the business results could likely have been different.

This may explain my sisters' failure to yield similar profits. When people would stop by they would say things like "What enterprising young boys"; "Look at these two little entrepreneurs"; and "How cute are these two?" It is plausible that the lemonade stand customers may have reacted much differently to my older sisters. I've always looked relatively young for my age, and it was clear that our customers thought that we were "really young businessmen." Since my sisters say that they vaguely remember the specifics of the day they sold lemonade, I am unable to say with much certainty that my hunch is accurate. I can say, however, that our customers seemed to be motivated more by their desire to help and motivate us than a desire to quench their thirst. Some customers, for example, told us to "keep the change" or said, "I'm not thirsty, but I'll help you out" while handing over a one-dollar note. Our clientele, it seems, were much more motivated by our age, and very likely our gender, than obtaining a product. For various reasons, two young, nine-year-old boys are much more persuasive in the lemonade stand business than two teenage girls. A point that can be made, therefore, is that business success is not always contingent on an idea or hard work, but in whose idea and the body producing the work.

The lesson I learned from my sisters' pithy results as beverage cart operators, while not apparent to me then, has given me the lens to understand how my privilege as a white, male, able-bodied individual (with safety due to my parents' income), has benefited me as an entrepreneur and business owner throughout my life. I can even say that over time, there was a cumulative, positive feedback loop. Not only has it encouraged me to continue to seek out business opportunities but it did, as mentioned in the personal essay, create some of the necessary conditions for receiving a scholarship to my undergraduate university. In this sense, my story adds weight to claims that previous discovered opportunities and previous entrepreneurial activities are the source of new entrepreneurial discovery (Holcombe, 2003; Plummer, Haynie, & Godesiabois, 2007). As Steyaert (1998) notes, "…new possibilities come into existence out of 'that which has become,' and the created event becomes involved with what is in turn being created anew, creating yet another new event." Autoethnographic stories of entrepreneurship allow authors to capture the process of a chain of events leading to successes or failures: my connection to the male world and my previous business ventures, even though they were not successful, provide interesting stories that can be persuasive (e.g., they suggest to university administrators that I was the type of student they would like to have).

(Prosaic) Entrepreneurship and Social Networks.

I did not mention this in personal essay, but I was never very popular. Nevertheless, I did have some friends who were willing to help me with many of the business operations that come with owning a music entertainment service. If they had not helped, my business would have likely gone bankrupt or I would have lost interest in it. My classmates and friends helped promote my company's services to students in other schools. Another friend, who was older than me, was on an activities council at Western Wyoming Community College and consistently advocated that the council retain my services for dances at the college. (Ah, the power of having a lobbyist as a friend!) Other classmates and friends, often without pay, would travel with me up to four or five hours to emcee dances in other towns. Without their help, these trips would have been boring and I could not have set up all the equipment. In one instance, having a friend helped insure that I wasn't robbed following a dance. Everyone was willing to help me solely out of friendship, a construct that is not easily quantifiable and, therefore, often goes unaccounted for in economic and entrepreneurship research (Stuart & Sorenson, 2005). While having a social network to draw upon was helpful, it was also frustrating at times. Many classmates, for example, did not understand why I would not provide free services (though I offered a hefty discount) to my own high

school. Their poor understanding of business operations meant that the concept of "opportunity cost" escaped them. The result was that I was often identified as a "cheap" or "greedy" person, which led me to have feelings of depression.

Feminist and prosaic entrepreneurship scholars argue that social networks are primary means through which entrepreneurs in general, but women in particular, do business (see Minniti & Nardone, 2007; Nelson, 1989; Rehn & Talaas, 2004b). Entrepreneurial networks can be defined as "…those relationships that an individual develops and utilises, consciously or subconsciously, to progress a particular enterprise…. They can be highly personal, reflecting relationships that are deeply embedded in the life of the individual" (McGowan & Hampton, 2007, p. 111). Such relationships are maintained by high levels of mutual trust and develop over time through shared experiences. Had my friends and classmates not trusted my ability to provide high quality services, they would not have promoted my business. Also, had my friends not believed that my business was largely unprofitable when they helped me, they would have come to resent their in-kind services.

The notion that an entrepreneur's success is largely his or her own, or is the result of a tenacious and enterprising "lone-wolf" spirit (see Nicholson & Anderson, 2005), is more easily called into question through a prosaic framework. Even my own accounts of my entrepreneurial endeavors immediately begin to draw in additional characters. While my sisters' accounts of our lemonade enterprises may be different, they are important characters to my story. In telling my story and reflecting on it through academic literature on gender, identity, and social networking, it become clearer to me that my accounts of success and failure are social. Entrepreneurs' ideas, successes, and failures are largely contingent on others' previous work and discoveries, their communal and economic environment, and their social networks. Consequently, entrepreneurs who focus their daily practices toward maintaining genuine and caring friendships, relationships, and connections with their community will likely be potentially shaping future entrepreneurial opportunities. In other words, out of friendship new possibilities for obtaining future moral or financial support becomes possible. A study focusing on how entrepreneurs maintain friendship without appearing self-serving would be interesting.

Small business owners, especially, understand the value of in-kind services that help sustain their businesses. Whether it is word-of-mouth marketing, family or friends helping at the store or factory for little or no pay, or friends and family providing a short-term financial injection during start-up or difficult times, the need for developing strong relationships based on trust rather than exploitation is more evident in prosaic accounts of entrepreneurship. In many accounts of entrepreneurship, the story of friendship and social networking is lost in favor of privileging the strategies of particular (heroic and shrewd) individuals (see Cantano, 2001). My story, as I've noted, eschews the more social dimensions. Honestly, the importance of social networks is not something I had considered prior to writing my autoethnographic account. I am just now, therefore, becoming familiar with the large body of research in entrepreneurship and social networks (see Stuart & Sorenson, 2005). While this explains some of the limitations of this section of the paper, it highlights how an autoethnographic exercise can become a power learning exercise—for academics and entrepreneurs alike.

While it may be difficult, especially in individualistic cultures, to craft one's story of entrepreneurship in terms of social accounts, seeing how one's own story maintains a more individualist tone can help to avoid future accounts being written in the same way. This excercise has given me a better appreciation of all the things my friends did for me in the past. I now make conscious efforts to be more available to friends. Writing ones life story approach can give one appreciation of important processes and skills required to be more successful in business (Rae & Carlswell, 2000), and personal matters.

Conclusion

Prosaic approaches to entrepreneurship, as the last section of the analysis highlights, foregrounds the need to engage in social and ethical interpersonal communicative praxis. As Hjorth and Steyart (2004) note,

> Entrepreneurship as a dialogical creativity is located in between the possible and impossible. Understanding the discursive reproduction of knowledge and practices often means a heightened sensitivity in the face of how 'normalities' are reproduced…. Convincing others – directing desires, organizing resources, dealing with obstacles – and sharing images of 'what could become' is done in small narratives to which people can relate. (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004, p. 4)

If we take seriously the possibility that entrepreneurship is foremost a social activity, then we can better understand what stories of entrepreneurship are important for creating better social and business relations.

Prosaic entrepreneurship, as demonstrated in this autoethnographic account, has the potential to de-center the narrative of entrepreneurship as comprised solely of a group of elite entrepreneurs (see Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004) and takes into consideration how everyday acts add up, over time, as part of the process of becoming a successful or failed entrepreneur. In fact, it seeks deeper consideration of what is meant by success and failure. That I now longer own the material assets my music enterprise, the symbolic assets continue to pay off as I narrate my story in ways that sometimes resist and sometimes reproduces tales of entrepreneurial heroism. For these reasons, a prosaic approach is already engaged in a process of re-storying entrepreneurship scholarship because it takes into account everyday entrepreneurial stories, even the ones that end in failure. While these accounts may both positively and negatively re-appropriate some of the more problematic narrative themes in conventional stories of entrepreneurship, the movement to reflexive analysis can illuminate new understandings. By engaging in such a critique of personal essay, I have, in effect, re-storied "my story."

As educators, we should use prosaic and narrative approaches to teaching about entrepreneurship. Not only does a prosaic approach create the possibility to unleash the creative and reflexive capacities that are important to everyday entrepreneuring, but it can produce more conscientious entrepreneurs. As an entrepreneur, I learned through the autoethnographic writing exercise the importance of social networking. I also learned, however, to be more careful with how I attribute my everyday successes and others' failures. Not forgetting that autoethnography seeks to "democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power" (Denzin, 2006, p. 419), such writing exercises, as a pedagogical tool, offer an opportunity for some students of entrepreneurship or business to become more self-aware of their positionality within larger socio-economic domains.

Case in point: As a first generation college student, I did not know much about higher education. My initial thought was that it was a means to an end. Like many students, I thought that a degree would pave the way to a lucrative career. I figured I would eventually start another small business. For pragmatic reasons, I chose to study business administration with an emphasis in human resources management (what a terrible term!). I quickly realized after a few core courses that I should have majored in finance, business law, or accounting because these were really the technical skills that business managers need.

It was in an [US-]American literature class, however, where I first read Beat poetry, Don DeLillo, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Anne Sexton, and other (post)modern writers. This literature inspired me to think differently and, I would argue, more dynamically. I have never lost my interest and belief in private enterprise; however, I have developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for institutionalized regulatory systems and the need to keep collaboration and competition, community and individuality, and profit and philanthropy in dialectic and productive tension. In recent years, we have witnessed the destruction that unregulated and monopolistic markets, which follow the logic of a masculine and neo-liberal worldview, can have on both individuals and society. A liberal arts education may produce better entrepreneurs and consultants (Ray, 1990). I try to keep, for example, my current entrepreneurial activities and business-related projects directed toward social rather than solely economic gain, which is one of the principles of "good capitalism" (Baumol, 1990; Baumol, Litan, & Schramm, 2007).

One route to better management and economic development is narrative approaches to research and pedagogy that use non-traditional literature and non-traditional methods (e.g., autoethnographic writing). The shift to a narrative approach, if we are to take it seriously, must include a clear focus on specific themes that are constitutive of a democratic ethos (themes that are particularly underrepresented in business and organizational curricula). As many successful organizational leaders understand, "Serious [business] leaders who are serious readers build personal libraries dedicated to how to think, not how to compete" (Rubin, 2007). Furthermore, the shift must include a focus on the prosaics of entrepreneurial life and incorporate life-story approaches that allow students to write their own stories of entrepreneurship. Through the process of writing autoethnographic accounts that describe, theorize, and challenge the prosaics of entrepreneurship, we can simultaneously disrupt the problematic myths about entrepreneurship and create a different understanding of what "being in" business means in our enterprising culture, even if this is risky for us as educators (see Rosile & Boje, 1996).

My Story Part Three: A Postscript

I am still an entrepreneur, but mostly out necessity. Perhaps a better term to describe me would be bricoleur. I use various skill sets and knowledge to produce profits so that I can pay bills and avoid going into debt. I offer low-cost, after-school programs for local youth (e.g., public speaking courses and reading groups), I proofread and edit documents for job seekers and other entrepreneurs, and I create websites for anyone willing to pay me $60 an hour to do so. My company name is registered with the state and I have all the things that make me appear legitimate

(e.g., a website and checks with my company name). But I know this is mostly façade. I talk about "my company" in class as if it is something bigger than it is. If my students asked me, I wouldn't lie, but I am happy to never admit that I produce just a few thousand dollars in profit a year. Perhaps I would be more profitable if I actually had a business plan and was not the one in the "one out of every five entrepreneurs [who] is involved in the start-up process forever, never abandoning the effort but never completing it" (Shane, 2008, p. 75). Perhaps I could be more successful if I wasn't fragmented between my desire to be a university educator and a small business owner. For now it's been just supplemental income and a way to keep youth busy and help other entrepreneurs.

However, I am now on the verge of becoming a "forced entrepreneur." I may resort to "plan B" (see Meece, 2009) because I cannot find full employment in my preferred profession. The economic crisis that began in 2008 has left the academic job market in the United States with few tenure-track positions and adjuncting and keeping up with research is becoming exhausting. I've worked as a private investigator and have conducted ethnographic research about the private investigations profession. I know that the US-sector of this industry is expected to grow rapidly in the next ten years and many private investigation companies have doubled revenues since the start of the economic crisis. I qualify for a license and my degree makes me particularly attractive to attorneys. I can team with my father, who is currently a private eye, to pool resources. However, I do not look forward to pooled interdependence. He can, as I noted above, be difficult to work with. Nevertheless, I may have few other options. I know that my chances of business success are statistically greater because I am better prepared and more educated than the typical entrepreneur (see Shane, 2008). However, I am still nervous and uncertain about my future. Being an entrepreneur, while it can be exciting, loses its appeal when one is forced into it. I've read stories of "habitual entrepreneurs" and "accidental entrepreneurs" but very few accounts of "forced entrepreneurs." Only time will tell what type of entrepreneur I'll continue to be(come), but I've through re-storying my story to be cautious about how I account for my entrepreneurial practices.

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[i] I am using prejudice in a positive sense, one that is consistent with Hans Georg Gadamer's definition of prejudice as "pre-judgment": "Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us" (1976, p. 9)

[ii] The myths are varied, but Louise Nicholson and Alistair Anderson (2005) summarize nicely the type of myths that are currently in discursive play: In 2000, the entrepreneur is an aggressive protagonist in battle, 'nuking' and 'culling' rival businesses or governments. … The entrepreneur [is] royal magician, but is also portrayed as wizard, iconic legend, master of universe, giant tree, and bearded shadow. Mythological images surge as the entrepreneur is portrayed as God himself rather than just blessed by God. Analysis unearths explicit references to the entrepreneur as a giant or titan, gobbling up companies, reaching up into the depths of outer space. (pp. 161-162)

[iii] My essay is much more linear and traditional. As a reader, I enjoy reading stylistically creative texts. As a writer, however, I am uncomfortable with textual experimentation.

[iv] The method is now institutionalized in many disciplines (see Holt, 2003; Jones, 2005). Readers interested in reading important debates regarding autoethnography are encouraged to read the symposia in the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (vol. 35, issue 4) and Communication Education (vol. 49, issue 3).
[v] Simon Down's (2006) book provides perhaps one of the best self-identity essays of an entrepreneur. His book, however, is more shadow ethnography than self-ethnography. (In the introduction and appendix, however, he does use self-narrative.)
[vi] I was unable to find any empirical study that looks at opportunity abandonment and it's connection to socio-economic data.
[vii] Uncertainty is not the same as risk; also, uncertainty needn't be a negative feeling.
[viii] It is interesting to note that the original Greek meaning of economy was oikonomia, which meant "household management." In Western society, households were (and to a great extend still are) patriarchal. It is not surprising that most of the rhetoric of economics privileges the masculine.
[ix] I recognize that my sisters' autoethnographic accounts could have alternative interpretations of this shared history. Our conversations, however, have largely given me the impression that we do have similar accounts and they feel they are not good at the politics of everyday interpersonal interactions.