



Evaluating Competing Explanations for Street Entrepreneurship: Some Evidence from India

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Abstract

Participation in street entrepreneurship has been variously explained as either a residue from a pre-modern era (modernisation theory), a necessity-driven endeavour and last resort (structuralist theory), a rational economic choice (neo-liberal theory) or conducted for social or lifestyle reasons (post-modern theory). To evaluate critically these competing explanations, face-to-face interviews are reported with women street entrepreneurs in India during 2006 and 2007. Finding that no one explanation suffices to explain all women's participation in street entrepreneurship and that different theoretical explanations apply to varying segments of the population surveyed as women street entrepreneurs, the outcome is a call to combine these previously competing explanations in order to achieve a richer and finer-grained explanation of women's street entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Street Hawking, Street Vendors, Entrepreneurship, Informal Economy.

Introduction

For many decades, an ideal-type depiction of entrepreneurs as objects of desire and super heroes has dominated the entrepreneurship literature; entrepreneurs are viewed as the heroic icons and symbolic figureheads of capitalist culture (Burns, 2001; Cannon, 1991). In recent years, however, a lived practices approach has challenged this depiction by investigating other types of entrepreneurship that do not reinforce this ideal-type. One such example is the burgeoning literature on street entrepreneurship in third world cities (Bhatt, 2006; Bhowmik, 2007; Charmes, 1998; Cross, 2000; Cross & Morales, 2007; Das, 2003; Gurtoo & Williams, 2009; Unni & Rani, 2003). This is an important subject to study because many people pursue street entrepreneurship as their means of livelihood. In India, for example, it has been estimated that there are some 10 million street entrepreneurs (Government of India, 2004). For many decades, street entrepreneurship was viewed as a residue of some pre-modern mode of production and as steadily disappearing with the modernisation of societies (Geertz, 1963; Gilbert, 1998). In recent decades, however, the recognition of the persistence and even growth of street entrepreneurship in particular and the informal economy in general across the

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globe has necessitated a re-theorisation of such endeavour (ILO, 2011; Williams et al., 2013). The result is the advent of competing theoretical explanations for participation in street entrepreneurship. Besides those who continue to perceive such entrepreneurship as a residue from a pre-modern era (modernisation theory), those recognising its persistence and growth have variously theorised street entrepreneurship as a necessity-driven endeavour and last resort (structuralist theory), a rational economic choice (neo-liberal theory), or conducted for social reasons (post-modern theory). Until now, few if any empirical studies, have evaluated critically the validity of these competing explanations. To fill this gap, the aim of this paper is to evaluate critically these rival theories for participation in street entrepreneurship. To do this, we will report an empirical survey of the reasons for street entrepreneurship in India.

In the first section, therefore, we will briefly review the various competing explanations for participation in street entrepreneurship. To evaluate the validity of these rival theoretical perspectives, the second section will then report evidence from a survey of women street entrepreneurs in India. Revealing that no one theoretical perspective explains the motives for women's street entrepreneurship, the outcome in the final section will be a call to combine what were previously perceived as competing theoretical perspectives in order to achieve a finer-grained and richer understanding of the reasons for participating in street entrepreneurship.

Before commencing, however, it is necessary to define street entrepreneurship. The street vendors studied in this paper would not be viewed as entrepreneurs 'proper' by adherents to the ideal-type depiction of entrepreneurs as objects of desire. However, the standard definition of the entrepreneur used in Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) surveys, which defines an entrepreneur as somebody who is actively involved in starting a business or is the owner/manager of a business (Harding *et al.*, 2006; Reynolds *et al.*, 2002), clearly includes street entrepreneurs who after all start up a business venture or own/manage a business. The difference between entrepreneurs 'proper' and street entrepreneurs is that the latter offer their goods for sale to the public on the streets without having any permanent premises from which to sell (Bhowmik, 2007; Cross, 2000). Instead, street entrepreneurs are either stationary vendors who occupy space on the pavement or some other public/private space, or mobile vendors carrying their wares on pushcarts or in baskets on their heads. Moreover, these street entrepreneurs tend to operate in the informal economy, which the standard International Labour Office defines as 'all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements' (ILO, 2002a, 2011; Hussmanns, 2005). Street entrepreneurs usually lack appropriate business permits, violate zoning codes, fail to report tax liability, lack compliance with labour regulations governing work conditions, and/or lack legal guarantees in relation to suppliers and clients.

Literature Review

Competing Explanations for Street Entrepreneurship

For many years, entrepreneurs have been revered in popular culture and the literature on entrepreneurship as super heroes (Burns, 2001; Cannon, 1991). As Jones and Spicer (2009) assert, they are portrayed as an 'object of desire' for others to emulate, rather than as lived subjects. This ideal-type representation of the entrepreneur as a super hero & object of desire prevails, moreover, across all theoretical approaches to entrepreneurship (Cunningham & Lischeron, 1991). Although explicit in the 'great person' school that portrays them as born (rather than made), it is also present in the more socially constructed approaches of the classical, management, leadership or intrapreneurship schools which all portray entrepreneurs as positive and wholesome heroic figureheads of capitalism

who possess virtuous attributes that ‘lesser mortals’ do not. Forms of entrepreneurship not reinforcing this ideal-type, in consequence, have tended to be either ignored, depicted as weak, temporary or disappearing, or simply classified as being not ‘proper’ entrepreneurship (Williams, 2006).

In recent years, nevertheless, this ideal-type depiction of the entrepreneur has begun to be indirectly and perhaps unintentionally challenged by a sub-stream of the entrepreneurship literature that has begun to examine entrepreneurs as lived subjects & to analyse various other (‘othered’) types of entrepreneurship. Firstly, studies have been conducted of criminal entrepreneurship that reveal how many entrepreneurs participate in illegitimate activities (Armstrong, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Gottschalk, 2010; Gottschalk & Smith, 2011; Rehn & Taalas, 2004; Sköld & Rehn, 2007), and how many participating in illegitimate activities display entrepreneurial attributes, such as those selling illegal drugs (Bouchard & Dion, 2009; Frith & McElwee, 2008). Secondly, there has been a rapidly growing literature on informal sector entrepreneurship (De Soto, 2001; Minard, 2009; Venkatesh, 2006; Volkov, 2002; Webb et al., 2009; Williams, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2011; Williams & Round, 2009; Williams & Nadin, 2010, 2011a,b, 2012a; Williams et al., 2011, 2012). This reveals that entrepreneurs do not always play by the rulebook regarding tax and social security payments and adherence to labour laws are concerned. Third and finally, there is a burgeoning sub-stream of literature on street entrepreneurship (Bhatt, 2006; Bhowmik, 2007; Charmes, 1998; Cross, 2000; Cross & Morales, 2007; Das, 2003; Gurtoo & Williams, 2009; Unni & Rani, 2003).

When examining the lived practice of such other (and othered) forms of entrepreneurship, the tendency, until now, has been to explain it in one of four ways: as a pre-modern traditional activity; a necessity-driven endeavour conducted as a last resort; a rational economic choice, or an endeavour voluntarily pursued for social reasons. Below, each explanation is reviewed in turn in relation to explaining street entrepreneurship.

Modernisation Perspective: A Pre-Modern Traditional Economic Activity

For most of the last century, it was widely assumed that street hawkers and peddlers were a residue or leftover from an earlier pre-modern era and their persistence taken as a signal of ‘under-development’, ‘traditionalism’ and ‘backwardness’. The emergent modern formal economy, meanwhile, was seen to represent ‘progress’, ‘development’ and ‘advancement’ (Geertz, 1963, Gilbert, 1998; Lewis, 1959; Packard, 2007). As Lyon (2007, 165) asserts, street vendors in this view are depicted as ‘a residual labour category’ which as Bromley (2007, xv) summarises, is from this perspective viewed ‘as unimportant and destined to disappear’. Street entrepreneurs are therefore deemed part of a pre-modern traditional economic order that survives only at the fringes of modern society. A growing number of studies, however, refute this depiction of street entrepreneurship by revealing how street vending in the contemporary era remains an extensive phenomenon (Bhowmik, 2007; Cross & Morales, 2007).

Structuralist Perspective: A Necessity-Driven Activity

To explain the widespread persistence and even growth of street entrepreneurship, a structuralist perspective has depicted this endeavour as a survival practice conducted out of economic necessity and as a last resort in the absence of alternative means of livelihood. From street-sellers in the Dominican Republic (e.g. Itzigsohn, 2000), through Ghana (Lyon, 2007) to street entrepreneurs in Somalia (Little, 2003), the consensus is that this sphere is entered out of necessity as a survival strategy (e.g., Itzigsohn, 2000; Sassen, 1997). These entrepreneurs are therefore depicted as unwilling and unfortunate pawns in an exploitative global economic system. As Bhowmik (2007, 96) states, for such marginalised populations, street vending ‘is the only means for survival’. Indeed, jobs like cart vending, hawking, small store vendors, road side cobbling and pedal rickshaw driving are all commonly depicted by this structuralist

perspective as necessity-driven endeavour which is highly insecure and unstable, composed of long hours, poor conditions, no legal or social protection, limited access to credit and very limited bargaining power (ILO, 2002a,b; Kapoor, 2007).

Neo-Liberal Perspective: A Rational Economic Choice

For a group of neo-liberal commentators, however, street entrepreneurship is more a matter of choice rather than due to a lack of choice. From this perspective, street entrepreneurship is a rational economic strategy pursued by entrepreneurs whose spirit is stifled by state-imposed institutional constraints and who voluntarily operate in the informal economy to avoid the costs, time and effort of formal registration (Becker, 2004; De Soto, 1989, 2001; London & Hart, 2004; Nwabuzor, 2005). As Nwabuzor (2005) asserts, 'Informality is a response to burdensome controls, and an attempt to circumvent them', or as Becker (2004) puts it, 'informal work arrangements are a rational response by micro-entrepreneurs to over-regulation by government bureaucracies'. For De Soto (1989: 255) in consequence, 'the real problem is not so much informality as formality'.

Post-Modern Perspective: Entrepreneurs As Cultural/Social Actors

A final perspective again portrays street entrepreneurship as voluntarily chosen but rather than view it as a rational economic decision, it is more a cultural endeavour. This is inspired by a small tributary of critical, post-colonial, post-structuralist, post-development and post-capitalist thought that moves beyond the conventional 'thin' portrayal of economic endeavour as always purely market-like and profit-motivated. It instead adopts 'thicker' portrayals of the participation in economic endeavour which recognises the complex mix of logic, including social, community and cultural logic, often involved (Bourdieu, 2001; Chakrabarty, 2000; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Leyshon *et al.*, 2003). The outcome is to draw attention to how the social relations between street entrepreneurs differ from normal market relations in that business and friendship relations blur and there is greater community solidarity and reciprocity (Cross & Morales, 2007), how such entrepreneurship is pursued due to the greater personal freedom and flexibility it affords (e.g., Cross, 2000; Hart, 1973) and how this endeavour is often in the eyes of participants an expression of community support which allows customers to source goods they otherwise could not afford (Cross, 2000).

Evaluating The Validity Of The Rival Perspectives

Until now, these four theorisations have been largely viewed as mutually exclusive rival explanations. Most commentators depict such entrepreneurship as taking place according to a single unique 'logic' or at best, pay lip-service to other logic but contend that one particular explanation predominates (e.g., De Soto, 2001; Snyder, 2004). To evaluate these competing perspectives, therefore, this paper will test the validity of four hypotheses in relation to women street entrepreneurs in India:

- That Indian women street entrepreneurs are a residue leftover from a previous era (modernisation theory)
- Women street entrepreneurs in India are engaged in a necessity-driven endeavour as a last resort in the absence of alternative means of livelihood (structuralist theory);
- That engagement in street entrepreneurship by these Indian women is a rational economic choice (neo-liberal theory); and
- That Indian women engage in street entrepreneurship for cultural reasons (post-modern theory)

Methodology

The Government of India (2004) has estimated that there are some 10 million street vendors in the country. Until now, three major studies have been conducted of street hawkers in India (Bhowmick, 2007; Sharma, 1998). These reveal how earnings range between Rs50 to Rs80 per day (Rs50= US\$1), or US\$1.00-1.59 per day (Bhowmik, 2000, 2007; Sharma, 1998). Given that some 20% of their earnings are taken as bribes or rents by municipal authorities or intermediaries (Bhowmik, 2000), average earnings are between US\$0.80-1.27 per day after bribes and/or rents. Until now, and given these figures, it has been widely assumed that street entrepreneurship is necessity-driven (Bhatt, 2006; Chen *et al.*, 1999, 2004; Carr and Chen, 2004; Chant, 2007; Charmes, 1998; ILO, 2006). This, however, is an *a priori* assumption rather than an evidence-based finding. Here, therefore, the intention is to evaluate critically whether this is indeed the case by evaluating the validity of these four competing explanations in relation to women street entrepreneurs in India.

To do this, we here analyse a survey conducted over a period of seven months during 2006 and 2007 of women engaged in the informal sector in India. Face-to-face interviews were undertaken with 323 women engaged in four occupations, namely street vending and informal waged work either as a house help, office help or shop assistant. The questionnaire explored workplace structures, economic status, characteristics of their operations, the socio-business environment, their motives, fears and the nature of their concerns. In relation to the street entrepreneurs surveyed, the questionnaire investigated: whether they were mobile or stationary street entrepreneurs; their work histories; their socio-demographic characteristics such as their age; how long they had been street vending; the nature of the goods and services that they sold; their earnings and hours of work; their reasons for engaging in street entrepreneurship, and their concerns such as whether they had to pay bribes in order to operate.

To gather this sample of street entrepreneurs, firstly, maximum variation sampling was used in order to select a range of first, second and third tier cities in different parts of India. The sample cities were the first tier cities of Mumbai, Bangalore and Delhi, the second tier cities of Nagpur and Jhansi, and the third tier cities of Jodhpur and Gulbarga. In each city, stratified spatial sampling was then employed in that industrial, commercial and residential districts were selected to survey street entrepreneurs. Within each district, the roads on which street entrepreneurs were selected, the researcher then selected for interview street entrepreneurs at intervals of 10 metres. If the interview was refused, then the next closest street entrepreneur was selected for interview. This provided a spatially stratified sample of each district. Although this sampling method may not be representative of women street entrepreneurs at the national scale, it has provided a cross-section of the diverse array of street entrepreneurs operating in different cities and districts and has avoided using a sampling frame that results in a survey of only one type of woman street entrepreneur in one type of spatial area.

This, therefore, is one of the first surveys to explore the reasons for women's street entrepreneurship in India. Although not representative of Indian women street entrepreneurs at the national scale, it nevertheless provides a useful insight into how street entrepreneurship might be explained. In this paper, in consequence, we focus upon the results regarding the 76 women street vendors surveyed in order to understand their reasons for engaging in street entrepreneurship.

Results

Characteristics Of Women Street Entrepreneurs

As Table 1 illustrates, 24 percent of the women surveyed were street entrepreneurs. Of these 76 women street entrepreneurs surveyed, two-thirds (66 percent) were migrants who had moved to their current city of residence from elsewhere. Other than the common reasons of social discrimination and degradation of farmlands, the main reasons for their migration were better employment opportunities and marriage. These women had either come on their own or with relatives to find work. Over half (54 percent) had no formal education. Comparing the women informal entrepreneurs with the women informal waged workers, the finding is that better employment opportunities were more important reasons for migration of women entrepreneurs than those engaged in waged work as office helps, shop assistants and domestic helps. Moreover, the education level of the women working as informal entrepreneurs, although lower than those working as office helps and shop assistants, was slightly better than women working as domestic helps.

Table 1. Characteristics Of Street Entrepreneurs And Informal Waged Workers Surveyed

	Domestic Help	Office Helpers	Shop Assistant	Entrepreneurs
Number of participants	161	54	32	76
% without formal education	60	39	20	54
Average age (years)	34	36	30	34
Age (%)				
16-25 years	10	24	53	5
26-40 years	52	21	32	65
41-65 years	38	29	16	18
66+ years	>=1	16	0	12
% migrants	83	20	36	66
Main reason for migration				
Parents moved	24	33	25	13
Marriage	32	33	47	26
Better job prospects (includes called by relatives to find work)	10	>=1	6	28
Religious or social discrimination	17	14	13	20
Natural degradation and loss of farmland	16	18	9	13
Average monthly income (INR)	1824	1810	1926	2554
% earning (INR)				
100-1200	52	9	6	24
1201-2500	22	64	72	37
2501+	26	27	22	49
Source of credit				
Credit from friends/family (%)	85	81	85	43
Credit from bank/institution (%)	5	8	0	0
Credit from money lenders/ contractors (%)	10	11	15	57

Other significant differences between women informal entrepreneurs and women informal waged workers are, firstly, that the income of women informal entrepreneurs is significantly higher than those engaged in informal waged employment. The average monthly income of these self-employed vendors was nearly 40 per cent more than other groups. Nearly 49 per cent of the women entrepreneurs fall into the higher income bracket of INR2500 and above, compared with about 26 per cent of women in the waged occupations. Comparing these figures to the national floor level minimum wage of INR100/day (for 25 days work per month),

defined by the government in November 2009 as the minimum amount needed for daily sustenance, earnings of the women entrepreneurs are the closest to this figure. Women street entrepreneurs, therefore, cannot necessarily be depicted as low-paid, although this is valid in relation to women informal waged workers.

None of these women street entrepreneurs had accessed funds from a bank or government lending institution. Instead, they depended on either friends or informal money lenders. This significantly limits their growth as ventures need capital to expand (ILO 2006; Government of India, 2004). This informal lending setup, however, does not follow standardized interest rates and opens up these women to severe economic vulnerability (Kapoor, 2007). Since the 1990s, Central and State governments in India have promoted several social and economic support schemes for the informal sector and formalized this support through the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006. Evidently, however, no benefits have reached the women working as street entrepreneurs surveyed here. This could be either due to lack of access, lack of awareness or cultural constraints which discourage women to go for any social or economic self-support (Bhatt, 2006).

Reasons For Participation In Street Entrepreneurship

Until now, the common assumption has been that these women are driven out of economic necessity into this endeavour in the absence of other means of livelihood (Bhatt, 2006; Bhowmik, 2000, 2007; ILO, 2006; Morris, 2011; Polese & Rodgers, 2011). To evaluate the validity of this structuralist perspective, the main reasons they gave for participating in street entrepreneurship are classified according to whether they conform largely to the explanations proposed in the modernisation, structuralist, neo-liberal or post-structuralist accounts. Table 2 reports the results.

Table 2 Main Reason for Working as a Street Entrepreneur

Examples of Reasons	Type of Reason	Theoretical Explanation	% of all Street Entrepreneurs Surveyed
Family tradition Handed-down from ancestors	Traditionalism	Modernization	8
No other choice Last resort Economic necessity No formal job opportunities Forced off land	Economic necessity/ survival	Structuralism	25
Best way of making money Income greater than other jobs Lack of competition from larger businesses Limited expertise required Low set-up costs Over-regulation of formal economy Bribes in formal economy	Rational economic decision	Neo-liberalism	50
Flexibility of work Community feeling Community support	Lifestyle/social reasons	Post-structuralism	17

Only one-quarter (25 per cent) of these women viewed themselves as being driven out of economic necessity into street entrepreneurship in the absence of other means of livelihood. For example, they stated 'there was no other alternative', 'it was the only way of making money' and 'I had no other option'. If economic necessity is not their main reason, then why do they engage in such entrepreneurial endeavour? Although in recent decades the modernisation thesis that depicts street entrepreneurship as a traditional pre-modern activity has been widely refuted, this survey shows that for 8 per cent of participants, this was a traditional and/or ancestral way of working handed down to them across generations, which they are continuing to pursue despite the encroachment of the modern formal economy.

For most street entrepreneurs, however, engagement was a matter of choice, rather than due to a lack of choice. Some 50 per cent explain their participation as a rational economic decision, viewing such entrepreneurial endeavour as the best option open to them for making money because it pays more than alternative livelihoods, it is easy to establish themselves, it requires low investment and expertise and there is a lack of competition from larger businesses. However, despite viewing themselves as voluntarily engaged in such entrepreneurship, most have a limited vision of the alternatives open to them. For the majority when considering whether they would prefer waged work, they envisage working as a maid or pion rather than in an office job in the formal sector. These street vendors, therefore, are comparing street vending with working as a maid or pion, which they view as highly exploitative work. Very few viewing street entrepreneurship as their choice, however, have ever held a salaried job (1 per cent). As such, they view engaging in street entrepreneurship as a matter of choice but their perception of the alternatives available to them is very narrow. This finding that around half of street entrepreneurs view their participation as a chosen endeavour and rational economic decision is akin to similar studies conducted in other nations (Cross & Morales, 2007).

A further 17 per cent again view street entrepreneurship as a choice but do so due to the flexibility they can achieve in their working lives, the community solidarity and support they witness and the self-identity that results from their participation in such activity. In western terms, these street hawkers might be viewed as 'lifestyle entrepreneurs' doing so due to the meaning and identity they find in such endeavour and community solidarity that results from their participation. Indeed, street entrepreneurship for this group is not so much about engaging in market-like transactions for profit-motivated purposes and more about community solidarity, identity and flexibility. These street entrepreneurs are more likely to have previously held a salaried job (26 per cent of them) but voluntarily choose street selling as their means of livelihood. Just 16 per cent would stop street selling if a salaried 'office' job was offered.

Conclusion

This paper has evaluated critically the competing explanations for street entrepreneurship that variously represent this activity as a traditional ancestral endeavour (modernisation theory), a survival strategy for those marginalised from the circuits of the modern economy (structuralism), an endeavour voluntarily pursued as a rational economic decision (neo-liberalism) or an endeavour chosen by social actors for lifestyle reasons (post-modernism). To evaluate these competing theories, a 2006/7 survey involving face-to-face interviews with women street entrepreneurs in India has been analysed.

The finding is that no single theorisation is universally applicable to all the street entrepreneurs surveyed. Instead, each theorisation is valid for different segments of the street entrepreneur workforce. As such, it is only by combining the different explanations that a more

accurate and finer-grained understanding of this form of entrepreneurial endeavour can be achieved. Rather than depict these as competing theorisations of street entrepreneurship, therefore, the argument is that they should be combined in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the heterogeneous nature of such entrepreneurial endeavour and multifarious varieties of street entrepreneur.

This, of course, has significant policy implications. In the modernisation thesis, where street vendors were conceptualised as the antithesis of modernity, the policy objective was quite simply to erase them from the economic landscape. The recognition of the persistence and growth of street entrepreneurship, however, suggests that governments seeking to eradicate them will result in repressing with one hand precisely the entrepreneurial endeavour that with another hand they are seeking to nurture. Therefore, if one accepts that the desire of governments is not so much to eradicate such endeavour but to transform such work into formal entrepreneurial endeavour wherever possible and/or to provide protection for street vendors, then appropriate policy responses will be required. This requires a move beyond a 'one size fits all' policy approach. Instead, tailored policy responses are needed that deal with the reasons for participation given by each segment of the street hawking population discussed above (for further discussion of how this might be achieved, see Chen, 2012; Williams and Nadin, 2012b).

What is also required is further research to evaluate whether this more integrative explanatory framework is valid when studying other populations of street entrepreneurs, and to begin to highlight how the proportions that belong to each segment vary socio-spatially. More broadly, it would also be useful to evaluate whether the other types of entrepreneurship, such as criminal and informal entrepreneurship, can be explained in a similar manner rather than relying on one mono-causal universal explanation. If this paper consequently helps engender such an integrative understanding of the heterogeneous reasons for participating in street (and other forms of) entrepreneurship in different contexts, then it will have achieved one of its major objectives. If this then helps the wider entrepreneurship literature to begin transcending the ideal-type depiction of entrepreneurs as an object of desire and enables a better understanding to emerge of the lived practices of entrepreneurship in the contemporary world, then it will also have fulfilled its wider intentions.

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