

Framing a feminist phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs

A
phenomenology
of women
entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to explore the potential of feminist phenomenology as a conceptual framework for advancing women's entrepreneurship research and the suitability of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to the proposed framework.

Design/methodology/approach – The article critically examines the current state of women's entrepreneurship research regarding the institutional context and highlights the benefits of a shift towards feminist phenomenology.

Findings – The prevailing disembodied and gender-neutral portrayal of entrepreneurship has resulted in an equivocal understanding of women's entrepreneurship and perpetuated a male-biased discourse within research and practice. By adopting a feminist phenomenological approach, this article argues for the importance of considering the ontological dimensions of lived experiences of situatedness, intersubjectivity, intentionality and temporality in analysing women entrepreneurs' agency within gendered institutional contexts. It also demonstrates that feminist phenomenology could broaden the current scope of IPA regarding the embodied dimension of language.

Research limitations/implications – The adoption of feminist phenomenology and IPA presents new avenues for research that go beyond the traditional cognitive approach in entrepreneurship, contributing to theory and practice. The proposed conceptual framework also has some limitations that provide opportunities for future research, such as a phenomenological intersectional approach and arts-based methods.

Originality/value – The article contributes to a new research agenda in women's entrepreneurship research by offering a feminist phenomenological framework that focuses on the embodied dimension of entrepreneurship through the integration of IPA and conceptual metaphor theory (CMT).

Keywords Women's entrepreneurship, Institutional context, Feminist phenomenology, Lived experiences, Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT)

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship research has broadly adopted established ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches inherited from mainstream scholarship (Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2016). However, these approaches have produced a rational and agentic (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Ogbor, 2003; Steyaert, 2007) but disembodied entrepreneur (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014; McAdam *et al.*, 2019). As explored within feminist approaches to women's entrepreneurship research, this has resulted in a male-biased discourse within research and policies (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2016), which has adversely affected women entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019).

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Whilst there is some agreement that entrepreneurial institutions constrain women's entrepreneurship (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2017; Malmström *et al.*, 2017), more research is needed on how agency is exercised within constraining environments (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Welter, 2020). To address this limitation, this article responds to calls for studies that: (1) explore the gendering of entrepreneurial institutions (Brush *et al.*, 2020); (2) the role of agency within gendering contexts (Welter, 2020) and (3) employing an innovative methodology (Dean *et al.*, 2019; Welter, 2020).

The objective of this article is three-fold. Firstly, it aims to discuss the critical assumptions within women's entrepreneurship, emphasising the contradictory nature of entrepreneurial institutions and their negative impact on women's entrepreneurship. Secondly, it proposes a feminist phenomenological framework to explore the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs. By adopting this framework, research can uncover hidden aspects of entrepreneurship that have been overlooked by mainstream research. Thirdly, it evaluates the suitability of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as an underutilised and promising methodology for feminist phenomenological research on women's entrepreneurship.

For MacInnis (2011), conceptual papers should demonstrate the hidden or unexplained issues within the current literature that can be exposed by applying the proposed conceptualisation. For instance, in "Phenomenology of perception", Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) often discussed exceptional cases to illuminate aspects of lived experience that remained obscured. Accordingly, women's entrepreneurial practices fall into liminal spaces or outside the norm (Dean and Ford, 2017). Therefore, this article seeks to reveal insights that can be generated by applying its framework.

In conclusion, this article sets the stage for a comprehensive examination of women entrepreneurs' lived experiences by addressing the limitations of existing research. By embracing a feminist phenomenological framework and considering the potential of IPA as a research methodology, the present work aims to contribute to a new research agenda in the field. It also highlights the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of adopting this framework whilst acknowledging its limitations.

Women's entrepreneurship research

It is well recognised that when women's entrepreneurship research emerged, there was an already established discursive practice in entrepreneurship literature that privileged male hegemony (Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019), even if unintentionally (Brush *et al.*, 2009). Foundational texts framed entrepreneurship as an economic phenomenon (Dean *et al.*, 2019), portraying the entrepreneur as a rational and agentic (male) hero (McClelland, 1987; Ogbor, 2003; Schumpeter, 1934/1949) endowed with exceptional cognitive capabilities (Kirzner, 1973; McClelland, 1987). As such, earlier entrepreneurship research was considered to adopt a gender-neutral approach (Marlow *et al.*, 2019) that overlooked the gendered aspects of entrepreneurial behaviour, rendering women and masculinities invisible (Ahl, 2006; Hamilton, 2013). Accordingly, the entrepreneur as a mythical hero (Ogbor, 2003) is "portrayed as disembodied, sex-less and gender-less in a literature that is as hetero-normative and gender blind as any other body of entrepreneurial discourse" (McAdam *et al.*, 2019, p. 470). Furthermore, accepting the male entrepreneur as the "universal entrepreneur" also resulted in the universalisation of entrepreneurial models (Brush *et al.*, 2020).

Women's entrepreneurship research mostly inherited mainstream paradigmatic, theoretical and methodological assumptions, often treating gender as a variable in statistical analyses (Ahl, 2006; Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2016; Serrano-Pascual and Carretero-García, 2022). These studies indicated that women are perceived as less likely to engage in entrepreneurship (Adachi and Hisada, 2016; Cuberes *et al.*, 2019; Vamvaka *et al.*,

2020; Wu *et al.*, 2019) and more inclined toward necessity-based business generally in low-profit industries (Warnecke, 2013; Wieland *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, they are underrepresented in opportunity-driven and high-growth entrepreneurship (Amoroso and Link, 2018; Guzman and Kacperczyk, 2019). Furthermore, research also suggested that women are generally more risk-averse, less competitive and lack self-confidence (Bönte and Piegeler, 2013; Comeig and Lurbe, 2018), employing inferior networking with a lower level of social capital (Dilli and Westerhuis, 2018; Neumeier *et al.*, 2019). Their businesses are more commonly undercapitalised (Coleman and Robb, 2009) due to a lack of entrepreneurial acumen (Kwapisz and Hechavarría, 2018), low-growth prospects and high presence in low-profit industries (Guzman and Kacperczyk, 2019; Mijid, 2014) and lower financial demand (Cowling *et al.*, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2019).

The gender as a variable approach perpetuates the assumption that women and entrepreneurship are incompatible (Ahl, 2006; Laguía *et al.*, 2019) and that they underperform compared to men (Du Rietz and Henrekson, 2000; Henry *et al.*, 2016). Despite being repeatedly debunked, Marlow and McAdam (2013) argued that the latter is a persistent myth. As an illustration, when variables such as firm size, industry and growth prospects were factored in, findings revealed that gender alone was not a significant determinant of firm performance (Du Rietz and Henrekson, 2000; Robb and Watson, 2012; Watson, 2020; Zolin *et al.*, 2013).

This research stream often fails to acknowledge the contextual differences shaping women's entrepreneurship outcomes (Greene *et al.*, 2007; Serrano-Pascual and Carretero-García, 2022; Welter, 2020). Conversely, some studies exploring the regulatory institutional environment highlighted how business and labour regulations (Angulo-Guerrero *et al.*, 2024; Chowdhury and Audretsch, 2014), entrepreneurship policies (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Arshed *et al.*, 2019; Sundin, 2016) and childcare and welfare rules (Elam and Terjesen, 2010; Estrin and Mickiewicz, 2011; Neergaard and Thrane, 2011; Thébaud, 2015) might negatively shape women's entrepreneurial activity and performance. Moreover, the concept of human agency in entrepreneurship research also proved elusive (Berglund, 2015), as it neglected to consider how individuals' autonomy and choice may be influenced by contextual constraints (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Some examples are the work-family interface (Foley *et al.*, 2018; Gherardi, 2015; Oladipo *et al.*, 2023; Patterson and Mavin, 2009) and the nexus between entrepreneurial identity and spatial contexts (Arshed *et al.*, 2022; Ekinsmyth *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, contexts strongly affect women's motivations, growth propensity and entrepreneurship journey. Overall, a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic elements impact women's entrepreneurship, positively and negatively, in which gender is itself a contextual factor that should be approached as a theoretical lens.

Feminist theories as applied to research on women's entrepreneurship

Feminist theories generally offer a critical perspective of the status quo, but their views and research outcomes vary according to the lens adopted. Three main approaches have been prominent in women's entrepreneurship research: liberal feminist theory, social feminist theories and feminist poststructuralist theories (Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2016). Table 1 summarises their key paradigmatic and theoretical constructs.

Liberal feminist research has been crucial in highlighting the structural conditions (e.g. lack of access to resources) that differentiate women's entrepreneurship experiences from those of men. However, it adopted the male norm as a benchmark (Calás *et al.*, 2009; Foss *et al.*, 2019), limiting its potential. Research applying feminist standpoint theory (i.e. social feminism) has aimed to bridge the agency-structure divide (e.g. McAdam *et al.*, 2019) by recognising gender as a site for creative agency enactment, even in the face of contextual constraints (e.g. Lewis, 2013; Swail and Marlow, 2018). Nevertheless, it has sometimes essentialised women's experiences, failing to fully acknowledge the validity of

	Liberal feminism	Social feminisms	Feminist poststructuralism
Ontology/ Epistemology	Positivism; feminist empiricism	Interpretivism; feminist standpoint (challenges the male ontological subject)	Social constructionism (challenges ontological categories)
Theoretical assumptions	Women and men are essentially the same, both characterised as rational beings; it does not differentiate between sex and gender, the female sex is added as a (binary) variable; women's underperformance is explained due to structural barriers	Women and men are essentially different; it introduces the distinction between sex (i.e. biological) and gender (i.e. social process); women's underperformance is explained due to different socialisation process; women-centred, based on the essential feminine	It challenges the concept of gender as binary, biological determinism and essentialism; gender is performative (masculinities and femininities); it focuses on the gendering of organisations and power hierarchies; subjectivities are constituted through discourses; it challenges meta-narratives
Human agency	Agency as a given	Situated/constrained agency. Women should reclaim their agency through political struggle and by validating women's experiences as an epistemic construct	It does not articulate agency or assumes it as an impossibility due to women's (and other minority groups) structural oppression
Entrepreneurship policies recommendations	Promote equal access to resources (e.g. training, finance). Policies are based on neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies; it objectifies women as untapped economic resources	Promote women-targeted programmes (e.g. network, funding)	Change discriminatory social normative practices (e.g. mandatory gender awareness training)
Source(s):	Ahl (2006), Calás <i>et al.</i> (2009), Foss <i>et al.</i> (2019) and Neergaard <i>et al.</i> (2011)		

Table 1.
A comparison of main feminist approaches in Women's entrepreneurship research

intersectional experiences and silencing dissident voices (i.e. Black women) (Ahl, 2006). Feminist poststructuralist scholarship has made significant contributions by exposing the gender-biased metanarratives within entrepreneurship research (Dean *et al.*, 2019) and bringing hegemonic masculinity to the forefront (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Recent studies have revealed various forms of entrepreneurial masculinities (e.g. Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017), highlighting the implications of male hegemony for entrepreneurs who do not conform to the norm (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Dean and Ford, 2017), regardless of gender.

In recent years, additional perspectives such as critical realism (e.g. Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2018) and intersectionality (e.g. Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017) have also gained traction in women's entrepreneurship literature. Critical realism provides insights into the underlying structures and mechanisms that shape women's entrepreneurial experiences, whilst intersectionality emphasises the importance of considering multiple intersecting social identities and power relations. For instance, studies have indicated that women with intersectional identities (e.g. those who identify with multiple marginalised groups) may encounter additional challenges in areas such as resource access (Carter *et al.*, 2015; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017), ideological prejudices (Verduijn and Essers, 2013) and cultural differences (Forson *et al.*, 2013).

In summary, research on women's entrepreneurship has exposed the male bias within entrepreneurial discourses, shedding light on the gendered dynamics of entrepreneurial behaviour. It has demonstrated that hegemonic masculinity is pervasive within entrepreneurial institutions, which is explored in the next section.

Understanding women entrepreneurs' lived experiences within institutional contexts

Women's entrepreneurship research has made significant strides in uncovering the unique contextual factors that shape women's experiences. For instance, researchers (e.g. [Fernandes and Mota-Ribeiro, 2017](#); [Gherardi, 2015](#)) revealed how societal gender norms and expectations influence women's motivations and identities. Additionally, whilst the historical antagonistic separation between the public and private spheres has extended to entrepreneurship, it might not apply to the realities of women entrepreneurs ([Bourne and Calás, 2013](#); [Hamilton, 2013](#); [Lewis, 2013](#)). Despite these advancements, entrepreneurial institutions led by the metanarrative of economic progress ([Dean et al., 2019](#)) often fail to adequately address the specific needs and challenges women entrepreneurs face ([Henry et al., 2017](#); [Marlow, 2020](#)).

The institutional context significantly shapes women entrepreneurs' experiences, resulting in positive and negative outcomes. Regrettably, the challenges tend to outweigh the positive aspects due to the misalignment between entrepreneurial institutions and women's entrepreneurial practices. For instance, [Hechavarría and Ingram \(2019\)](#) indicated that government supports and perceived ease of access to financing are negatively associated with women's entrepreneurship in innovation-driven economies. The gendering of institutions leads to feelings of inferiority and illegitimacy ([Hampton et al., 2009](#); [Harrison et al., 2020](#); [Marlow and McAdam, 2015](#); [Nelson et al., 2009](#)). Unsurprisingly, women frequently experience 'othering' ([Harrison et al., 2020](#); [Marlow and McAdam, 2015](#); [Motoyama et al., 2021](#)) within the same institutions and organisations meant to support them. Negative perceptions and limited awareness of available support services further hinder their engagement with agencies and advisory services ([Hampton et al., 2009](#); [Motoyama et al., 2021](#)). The embodiment of femininities becomes a barrier, reinforcing the normative nature of the hegemonic male behaviour ([Abraham, 2019](#); [Balachandra et al., 2019](#); [Edelman et al., 2018](#)). However, evidence suggests that women entrepreneurs in social enterprises or traditionally female-dominated industries may face less gender bias ([Anglin et al., 2022](#); [Gupta et al., 2019](#); [Lee and Huang, 2018](#)). These findings emphasise the perceived congruity between care and relationship-orientation with women's stereotypical gender roles. Conversely, there is a perceived incongruity between (mainstream) entrepreneurship, associated with masculine hegemony and women's gender roles ([Laguía et al., 2019](#)).

Despite these challenges, women entrepreneurs who reach higher status within the ecosystem are accepted through tokenism and some become role models ([Marlow and McAdam, 2015](#)). They generally recognise the benefits of engaging with institutions, such as information sharing ([Hampton et al., 2009](#)). Women-only networks may serve as vital entry points into the entrepreneurial ecosystem ([Motoyama et al., 2021](#)), offering emotional support and collaboration opportunities ([Lindberg and Johansson, 2017](#); [Roos, 2019](#)).

Government regulations and policies often focus on fixing perceived shortcomings in women's entrepreneurial capabilities rather than addressing systemic gender inequalities ([Henry et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, it results in suboptimal outcomes ([Arshed et al., 2019](#); [Marlow et al., 2019](#)). [Marlow \(2020\)](#) argued that scholars and policymakers "are still looking to fit women into entrepreneurship rather than questioning how entrepreneurship might fit women" (p. 42). Entrepreneurial institutions generally encourage women's entrepreneurship but do not go as far as empowering them as entrepreneurial agents ([Harrison et al., 2020](#)). It can be argued that through political ideologies ([Ahl and Marlow, 2021](#)), entrepreneurial

institutions reinforce and reproduce current systems that serve those in power. This calls for a paradigm shift in entrepreneurship research and practice that challenges traditional assumptions and embraces the diversity of women's entrepreneurial experiences (Ekinsmyth, 2011). However, this can only happen through the recognition of the constraints imposed on women's agency (Marlow and McAdam, 2015).

Understanding women entrepreneurs' lived experiences within institutional contexts is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive ecosystem. This section emphasised the need for alternative theoretical perspectives to capture the complexities of the intersection of gender and entrepreneurship (Welter, 2020). Feminist phenomenology offers a paradigmatic approach to understanding gendering processes and agency in women's entrepreneurship research, offering new insights into the co-constitution of agency-structure (Berglund, 2015; Young, 2002).

Feminist phenomenology

Feminist phenomenology is an approach that applies phenomenological principles to feminist theory, focussing on women's embodied experiences (Fielding, 2017; Stawarska, 2018). At the core of phenomenology is Husserl's (1913/1982) plea to go "back to the things themselves" (p. 35). In other words, phenomenology studies "how something is experienced as something" (Schües, 2018, p. 113). Building upon the foundations developed by Husserl, phenomenology distinguishes between the physical body (*Körper*) and the lived body (*Leib*) (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011). The former is the biological body studied by science, whilst the latter is the body from which one perceives, senses and interacts with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). The lived body is simultaneously perceived as "an experienced object and as an experiencing subject" (Heinämaa, 2017, p. 185). Developing Husserl's thought further, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) argued that "[embodied] consciousness is in the first place not a matter of "I think that" but of "I can" (p. 159). Accordingly, the body is not merely a biological entity. The lived body is the subject of perception and action; therefore, the foundation of one's lived experiences (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011).

According to Fisher (2000), some feminists (e.g. Butler, 1989; Grosz, 1994) rejected phenomenology because it was seen as reinforcing the universalisation of the (transcendental) male subject due to its absence of gender and analyses of sexual difference. However, others (e.g. Ahmed, 2006; Dolezal, 2015; Young, 2005) recognised the value of phenomenology's focus on embodied lived experiences. Therefore, one of the tasks of feminist phenomenology is to revise the classical philosophical canon, integrating the insights of earlier phenomenologists as they relate to the embodied experiences of women and other marginalised groups (Stawarska, 2018). Moreover, several authors (e.g. Alcoff, 2000; Oksala, 2016; Stawarska, 2018) advocate for a critical feminist phenomenology that combines the theoretical project of poststructuralism with a phenomenological focus on lived experiences highlighting the interplay between the personal, social and biological. This approach is exemplified in the dynamic relationship between language, embodiment and social structures (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962).

Core concepts in feminist phenomenological theory

Gendering, as a critical concept within feminist phenomenology, examines how individuals are collectively positioned within social structures that may grant more opportunities to some in ways that can disadvantage others (Young, 2002) [1]. For Young (2002), whilst gender is lived through bodies, it is, in fact, "an attribute of social structures more than of persons" (p. 442). A feminist phenomenological analysis of gendering aims to understand how women make sense of their lived experiences within gendered contexts, emphasising the co-constitution of structure and agency (Berglund, 2015; Young, 2002).

Within feminist phenomenology, lived experiences are rooted in ontological dimensions, such as intersubjectivity, situatedness, intentionality and temporality (Fielding, 2017; Stoller, 2017). Situatedness is the embodiment of one's cultural and historical contexts (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009) [2] that defines one's perception of and positionality within the lifeworld (Stoller, 2017). Intersubjectivity focuses on how individuals perceive and relate to others and how these connections influence their sense of self (Dolezal, 2015). Intentionality concerns the body's capacity to engage with the lifeworld in a meaningful way (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) and temporality is about the body's orientation in time/space (Ahmed, 2006; Husserl, 1952/1989) and its ability to envision and plan for the future (Fielding, 2017).

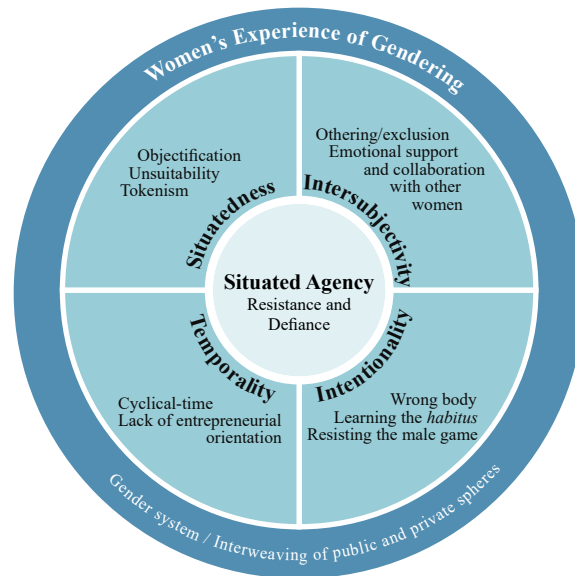
Situated agency is also a relevant construct in feminist phenomenology, recognising that agency is always situated within a specific historical and social context (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009; Moi, 1999). It presupposes that individuals can be compelled to act even when they have no control over a situation. However, human action is situated within the boundaries of a subject's inner and outer realities (Fielding, 2017). Therefore, agency is not innate to individuals or structurally determined but somewhat ambiguous (de Beauvoir, 2015). For Krus (2001), the intentional nature of lived bodies "actively organizes [one's] knowledge of the world in accordance with its own orientation, capacities, and projects" (p. 33). That means that whilst external forces shape the lived body, it does not do it passively. Individuals actively navigate complex social environments towards their practical engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Agency is then conceptualised not as a dichotomy but as an ambiguity, a fluid and multifaceted experience (de Beauvoir, 2015).

As advanced in this article, a feminist phenomenological framework should account for how women make sense of entrepreneurial institutions as a gendered context by exploring the ontological dimensions of lived experiences (i.e. situatedness, intersubjectivity, intentionality and temporality). Just then, it is possible to appreciate how women's agency is enacted. Hence, adopting a feminist phenomenological approach can pave the way for more comprehensive research in women's entrepreneurship.

A feminist phenomenological framework to explore the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs

The present article proposes a feminist phenomenological framework to explore the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, as seen in Figure 1. This framework draws inspiration from feminist phenomenologists such as Ahmed (2006), de Beauvoir (1949/2009), Dolezal (2015) and Young (2002). By juxtaposing the findings of the previous discussion with relevant conceptual categories, this framework provides a valuable lens for examining the complexities and challenges women entrepreneurs face. Whilst this research focuses on the regulatory institutional dimension within Western developed economies (e.g. innovation-driven), it also acknowledges that the relative effect of social/institutional norms on men and women's entrepreneurship varies according to a country's stage of economic development (Hechavarría and Ingram, 2019). For instance, whilst government programmes significantly decrease the rate of female entrepreneurship in innovation-driven economies, the opposite is true for male-owned businesses in general. The authors conjectured that this may be due to the varied scope of entrepreneurship policies across countries at different economic stages.

As proposed herein, a feminist phenomenological analysis of gendering processes aims to understand how women make sense of their lived experiences within gendered contexts. As previously introduced, Young (2002) proposed a shift from gender as an identity marker to gender as an analytical tool. Whilst not advocating for the erasure of gender, she argued that the emphasis on identity has diverted attention from the roots of social injustice. Young's (2002) ultimate goal was to make it possible to hold institutions accountable for the reinforcement of gendered social structures, such as the division of social life into public and



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1.
A phenomenological
framework to explore
the lived experiences of
women entrepreneurs

private spheres (and the subsequent unequal separation of paid and unpaid labour), heteronormativity and gendered power hierarchies. Her approach is also an alternative to the concept of distributive justice (Rawls, 1971), as advocated in much of women's entrepreneurship research.

Extensive research has addressed how gendering is embedded in entrepreneurship discourses and policies (e.g. Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Malmström *et al.*, 2017) and organisational and institutional practices (e.g. Bourne and Calás, 2013; Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Some examples of gendering processes at the institutional level are the masculine hegemony in entrepreneurship research and practice (Marlow, 2020; Ogbor, 2003), the economic orientation and neoliberal ideologies guiding entrepreneurship policies (Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Marlow *et al.*, 2019); the separation of the social world into private and public spheres (Bourne and Calás, 2013; Hamilton, 2013); and identity and aesthetic work (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; McAdam *et al.*, 2019; Richards and Mattioli, 2021).

Feminist phenomenology identifies four ontological dimensions of lived experiences relevant to the study of women entrepreneurs: situatedness, intersubjectivity, intentionality and temporality. Regarding situatedness, Heidegger (1927/1962) argued that human beings are thrown into a world of people, objects, culture, history, language and meaning, which he called "Being-in-the-world". However, as interpreted by feminist phenomenology, one's situatedness cannot be reduced to one's embeddedness in contexts (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009; Moi, 1999). Particularly concerning women's oppression, a woman's situatedness should be characterised as "how she makes something of what the world makes of her" (Moi, 1999, p. 72). Accordingly, the situatedness of women entrepreneurs is often characterised by objectification, unsuitability and tokenism (Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Marlow and McAdam, 2015). These may result in women's apathy to engage with entrepreneurial institutions (Motoyama *et al.*, 2021), issues of self-confidence (Hampton *et al.*, 2009) and a lack of identification with the image of an entrepreneur (Harrison *et al.*, 2020). However, women also enact agency by, for instance, authoring their own entrepreneurial identities (Gherardi, 2015) and opening new

entrepreneurial spaces within the social context in which they are embedded (Ekinsmyth, 2011).

Regarding women's intersubjectivity, de Beauvoir (1949/2009) reframed the subject-object relationship in terms of ambiguity. An individual is simultaneously a subject and an object (Heinämaa, 2017). However, in relationships of subordination, the "other" is described with a capital "O", The Other, meaning an object that is not recognised as a subject (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009). Women entrepreneurs often experience othering and exclusion within institutional contexts (Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Hamilton, 2013), particularly in masculine-dominated spaces, such as incubators (e.g. Marlow and McAdam, 2015) and venture capital (e.g. Nelson *et al.*, 2009). Conversely, some women find emotional support and collaboration opportunities (e.g. Lindberg and Johansson, 2017) primarily by building relationships with other women (e.g. Roos, 2019).

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) defined intentionality as an "I can". In other words, it is the body's capacity to engage meaningfully with one's environment, allowing the conditions for specific experiences (Olkowski, 2017). Similarly, "habit" (i.e. motor intentionality) refers to the tacit embodied knowledge that enables an individual to perform a task without thinking. In her phenomenological study of the female embodiment, Young (2005) contended that the social construction of the female body as inferior and its subsequent subordination to regimes of power and oppression undermine women's confident intentionality. For her, women's intentionality is inhibited: "I can" is self-induced as "I cannot". Conversely, feminist phenomenologists (Bartky, 1990; Dolezal, 2015) argue that women's bodies within public spaces are considered vulnerable and their free expression shameful. Due to body shame, women may intentionally turn their body movements internally instead of projecting them outwards, impeding them from occupying spaces and reaching out to their objectives. Due to women's othering within institutional contexts, some may perceive the female body as the wrong entrepreneurial body (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Consequently, they may feel they must learn the entrepreneurial *habitus* to fit in, meaning learning to think and act like a man (Swail and Marlow, 2018). Other women would reject the male-game performing femininities as an act of resistance (Fernandes and Mota-Ribeiro, 2017). However, whilst women are considered to lack legitimacy, the display of stereotypical femininity is perceived to be incongruent with the role of an entrepreneur (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019), who should perform the stereotypical masculine behaviour (Swail and Marlow, 2018).

Temporality refers to the body's orientation in time/space (Ahmed, 2006; Husserl, 1952/1989) to transcend into the future (Fielding, 2017). When transposed to entrepreneurship research, women are framed as lacking entrepreneurial orientation (Marlow and McAdam, 2013), where orientation (e.g. opportunity-led, high-risk propensity) is mainly defined from the male perspective (Brush *et al.*, 2009). It might be the case that women feel disoriented by being led to take a normative entrepreneurial orientation (Ahmed, 2006). Furthermore, whilst the entrepreneurial process is primarily defined as a linear progression and confined to the public sphere (Dean *et al.*, 2019), women's experiences blur the boundaries between personal and public (Hamilton, 2013), highlighting the need to appreciate their circular life cycles and the intertwining of personal and entrepreneurial trajectories (Ekinsmyth, 2011). Hence, it can be understood that when women's temporality is not appreciated, combined with the objectification of their bodies, they may be held back from achieving their entrepreneurial potential fully (Dolezal, 2015).

As adopted within this article, agency should not be understood as a given or an exclusive outcome of autonomous power structures and discourses. From a feminist phenomenological perspective, cultural meanings impose limits on specific bodies based on beliefs about their social and biological function (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009). However, in the same way that feminist phenomenology posits individuals as a subject and object, transcendence and immanence, the agent is also a situated freedom (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009). Ultimately, non-

normative bodies can learn to navigate potentially hostile environments through creative habituation (Fielding, 2017).

Whilst acknowledging that the current institutional context restricts entrepreneurial activities for individuals who do not adapt to the norm (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019), there is a need to better comprehend agency within gendering contexts (Welter, 2020). It should include an understanding of how agency is simultaneously constrained and enacted. Alternatively, agency is mainly explored in terms of doing gender (Baker and Welter, 2017). For instance, Stead (2017) described identity-switching as a process in which women entrepreneurs stretch the boundaries of their gender and entrepreneurial identities to belong within their current environment. Similarly, García and Welter (2011) examined how women entrepreneurs constructed their identities based on a perceived dissonance between womanhood and entrepreneurship. As Welter (2020) suggested, women entrepreneurs' agency may be characterised by resistance and defiance. They may resist, for instance, the separation of the private and public spheres of life (Gherardi, 2015; Hamilton, 2013) and stereotypical gender prescriptions (Swail and Marlow, 2018). They may also defy established business and social norms (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2018), engaging in entrepreneurship despite the barriers.

Feminist phenomenological research may bridge the divide between agency-structure by focussing on how women entrepreneurs make sense of their experiences within gendered contexts (structures), enabling specific actions whilst constraining others (situated agency). Finally, by reflecting on their embodied experiences, women can develop new vocabularies or re-signify current meanings, disrupting dominant discourses that have served the status quo (Alcoff, 2000).

As mentioned earlier, entrepreneurship research has often portrayed entrepreneurs as rational and agentic (Marlow *et al.*, 2019), in which entrepreneurship is characterised by masculine hegemony (Dean *et al.*, 2019; Ogbor, 2003). Alternatively, some scholars (Abebrese, 2014; Berglund, 2015; Raco and Tanod, 2014; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021) propose using phenomenology as a philosophically coherent methodology to investigate the lived experiences of entrepreneurs as embedded in contexts in a co-creative relationship. This article advocates for a critical feminist phenomenology (Oksala, 2016) that examines “the sedimented or ‘hidden’ assumptions that inform [one’s] experiences” (Dolezal, 2015, p. xiv) of gender, race, sexuality and so forth. It emphasises the importance of understanding agency through a gender lens (Kruks, 2014). By considering women entrepreneurs' experiences in their socio-historical contexts (i.e. being-in-the-world; Heidegger, 1927/1962), feminist phenomenology offers a new perspective to critically, politically and ethically re-evaluate women's entrepreneurship research and practice (Kruks, 2014). Its conception of lived experiences as situated, intersubjective, intentional and temporal provides ways of knowing that other qualitative methodologies cannot capture (discussed in the next section).

Due to its roots in phenomenology and hermeneutics (Smith *et al.*, 2022) and a focus on the meanings of lived experiences (Basini *et al.*, 2017), IPA is suggested as a suitable methodology to explore lived experiences from a feminist phenomenological framework. Nonetheless, whilst the former emphasises how meanings are articulated through language (Smith *et al.*, 2022), the latter focuses on embodiment (Olkowski, 2017). Therefore, the following section explores the suitability of IPA to feminist phenomenology and its potential as an underused methodology to advance the study of women's entrepreneurship.

IPA as a suitable methodology to explore the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs

Dean *et al.* (2019) and Welter (2020) called for innovative methodologies in entrepreneurship research to deepen the understanding of entrepreneurial phenomena. In this article, IPA is

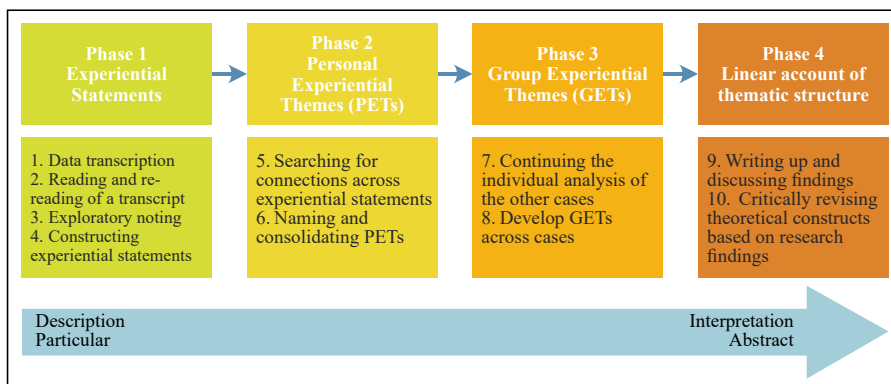
proposed as a suitable approach for investigating the meanings of a phenomenon as it occurs in everyday life (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021), representing a slice of life localised in time-space (Basini *et al.*, 2017). IPA is a qualitative research methodology rooted in health psychology that offers a systematic and inductive approach. Although IPA has been applied in various disciplines (Smith *et al.*, 2022), it remains relatively underused in entrepreneurship research, particularly in women’s entrepreneurship.

Congruent with feminist phenomenology, IPA follows a phenomenological tradition in qualitative research (Abebrese, 2014; Berglund, 2015; Raco and Tanod, 2014; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021). It combines phenomenology (i.e. philosophy of experience), hermeneutics (i.e. philosophy of interpretation) and idiography (i.e. exploration of particular cases) (Smith *et al.*, 2022; Zhao and Thompson, 2023). Smith *et al.* (2022) recommended a flexible heuristic framework for IPA data analysis, which was adapted for the purpose of this article. As shown in Figure 2, the process is organised into four distinct phases (Larkin, 2021), starting from data transcription and finalising with the writing up of findings.

Drawing from its phenomenological roots, IPA aims to understand the intentional relationship between individuals and the world as it appears in experience (Raco and Tanod, 2014). It is particularly interested in exploring experiences that lead to deep reflection for those involved (Smith *et al.*, 2022), such as in the context of entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurial leadership (Cope, 2011; Lewis, 2015, 2021). In this sense, feminist phenomenology can conceptualise how the embodiment of gender translates into distinctive lived experiences (Fielding, 2017; Stawarska, 2018).

Incorporating hermeneutics, IPA acknowledges that lived experiences are inherently subjective interpretations of social reality (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013). These interpretations are reflected upon and articulated through language (Heidegger, 1927/1962), highlighting the importance of language as a tool for making sense of experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2022) (a point examined in more detail in the next section). Within feminist phenomenology, the body is a mediator and interpreter of the lifeworld and its meanings. This perspective emphasises the role of the senses, perception and cognition in constructing and making sense of experiences (Fisher, 2011).

In the process of “double hermeneutics”, “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). This recursive process recognises the interplay between the researcher and the participant in uncovering the meanings attributed to lived experiences beyond the surface. Through a self-reflexive process, or bracketing, a researcher brings their own assumptions to the forefront



Source(s): Adapted from Larkin (2021) and Smith *et al.*(2022)

Figure 2. IPA data analysis process

whilst actively listening to participants' voices, recognising that interpretations of others' experiences are inevitably influenced by the researcher's own positionality (Finlay, 2014). Bracketing also involves attending to the ontological dimensions of lived experiences (i.e. situatedness, intersubjectivity, intentionality and temporality) and their foundations on cultural normativity (Oksala, 2016). Ultimately, research can challenge experiential accounts of normality by challenging them and making way to bring about social changes. IPA also endorses the "hermeneutic circle", applying an iterative process in which the whole informs the part and the part refers back to the whole (Gadamer, 1975/1989). Similarly, feminist phenomenology emphasises the hermeneutic circle as a means of turning knowledge "back upon itself, questioning and modifying itself in an effort to articulate what it secretly thinks" (Oksala, 2016, p. 127).

Another strength of IPA is its idiographic commitment, focussing on exploring experiences from the individual perspective and producing fine-grained rich data (Cope, 2011; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021; Zhao and Thompson, 2023). It recognises that individuals are always thrown into a world of meanings shaped by their specific social, cultural and historical contexts (i.e. Being-in-the-world; Heidegger, 1927/1962), which form one's "horizon of interpretation" (Gadamer, 1975/1989). Drawn from Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) explained that a picture (i.e. an experience) only makes sense against its background (i.e. context). Therefore, whilst IPA is designed to bring the individual experience to the centre, experiences are always situated-in-context (Smith, 2011). Therefore, to understand experiences fully, the researcher must be attentive to both their own and the participants' assumptions, ideas and preconceptions through a continuous reflexive process (Basini *et al.*, 2017) to achieve a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1975/1989). By comparing and contrasting individual cases, IPA can also reveal what is particular to a specific group within a specific context and what is unique to each individual in their idiosyncratic relationship with a phenomenon. Hence, whilst generalisations in the nomothetic sense do not apply to IPA, contextualised general claims can be made through theoretical transferability (Cope, 2011).

A comparison of IPA with other qualitative methodologies

The combination of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography sets IPA apart from other qualitative methods. For instance, as a recognised qualitative methodology, the Gioia method is commonly applied to generate a conceptual model of the phenomenon investigated (Gioia *et al.*, 2012). Alternatively, IPA is more exploratory and iterative, aiming for a deeper understanding of people's lived experiences from their own perspective (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Another difference is the theoretical approach taken in the second-order analysis within the Gioia method (Gioia *et al.*, 2012). In IPA, researchers are advised to "bracket" theoretical assumptions that could cloud the interpretation of participants' experiences (Finlay, 2014). Theory comes at a later stage when researchers critically review theoretical constructs in light of research findings (Berglund, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2022). In a joint article about the use of templates in qualitative research (Gioia *et al.*, 2022), Mess-Buss, Piekkari and Welch criticised the Gioia method for taking interviewees' accounts at face value, ignoring issues of power, ideologies and cultural practices. They advocated for a hermeneutical approach that acknowledges the interpretative nature of research, including, for instance, how researchers make sense of participants' experiences. IPA follows the hermeneutical tradition in which bracketing is central to the research process. However, it should be noted that theoretical transferability is central to both methodologies (Gioia *et al.*, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

Whilst having many similarities with thematic analysis (TA), IPA applies an idiographic method, whose analytical procedure differs from the more general approach of TA (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Besides, IPA focuses on experiential statements (Smith *et al.*, 2022) and TA

on thematic patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Additionally, whilst IPA follows a hermeneutic phenomenological ontology/epistemology, TA has more flexibility regarding the research paradigm and theoretical approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

One of the ways that IPA can further the understanding of entrepreneurship is by bridging the divide between agency and structure, as previously suggested. According to Welter (2020), research on gender and entrepreneurship moved from context as given to context as gendered and socially constructed. In the first group, research mostly takes an individual perspective (e.g. individual differences; Adachi and Hisada, 2016; Vamvaka *et al.*, 2020), whilst institutional approaches (e.g. Angulo-Guerrero *et al.*, 2024; Thébaud, 2015) and discourse analyses (e.g. Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2017) belong to the latter. However, Welter (2020) also argued that to move knowledge forward, there needs to be more research “looking into the agency of entrepreneurs and other actors in gendering contexts” (p. 33). That is precisely what IPA proposes (Berglund, 2007, 2015).

IPA's contribution to entrepreneurship research

In areas dominated by quantitative research, phenomenological studies can provide a deeper understanding of how behaviours are enacted and given meaning (Berglund, 2007; Raco and Tanod, 2014; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021) and how meanings are constructed from within social, historical, cultural and geographical contexts (Berglund, 2015; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021). IPA presupposes that the act of talking about something can help individuals to make sense of their individual stories reflectively (Smith *et al.*, 2022) and how such stories, whilst idiosyncratic (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021), are situated within prevailing social/entrepreneurial discourses (Berglund, 2007).

Departing from the positivist paradigm of most entrepreneurship research and the gender as a variable approach (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2016; Serrano-Pascual and Carretero-García, 2022), Zhao and Thompson (2023) applied IPA to explore entrepreneurial motivation and attitudes from a temporal perspective (i.e. time-effect motivation). They demonstrated how the interplay between extrinsic motivations (e.g. job dissatisfaction) and entrepreneurial attitudes or chance resulted in shifted motivations towards entrepreneurship. Their article makes a significant contribution to how individuals in deprived areas experience and respond to life contingencies. They emphasised that, over time, eventualities can develop into entrepreneurial opportunities through serendipity, regardless of negative exogenous factors (e.g. economic deprivation) and endogenous determinants (e.g. low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence). Furthermore, by approaching emotions as experienced by entrepreneurs after a failure, Cope (2011) demonstrated how the reckoning of painful emotions through self-reflexivity resulted in a radical transformation, what they called transgenerative failure (Cope, 2011). Similarly, Heinze (2014) emphasised how making sense of a failure is affected by an entrepreneur's social environment and other people.

Thompson-Whiteside *et al.* (2018) pointed out that women entrepreneurs' perception of their environment influences how they “redo” (García and Welter, 2011; Stead, 2017) impression management strategies to communicate their personal brand. For instance, whilst being “out there” is a normative business practice for entrepreneurs, women perceived it as too risky due to social gender prescriptions of how they should behave. Instead, they employed authenticity (e.g. showing their true selves) and supplication (e.g. showing their weaknesses) to mitigate the risks of self-promotion. Therefore, whilst their behaviour and cognition were shaped by the environment (e.g. gender social roles), they enacted their agency by pushing the boundaries of both domains (i.e. womanhood and entrepreneurship) in a way that felt safe for them. In another example, Pret and Carter (2017) examined how the embeddedness of craft entrepreneurs in their communities influences their individual practices. Accordingly, whilst most entrepreneurship literature, including liberal feminism,

assumes that entrepreneurs are rational beings guided by self-interest (Ahl, 2006), their findings pointed out that a sense of fellowship between community members gave place to collaboration, resulting in social value creation.

IPA as a suitable methodology for exploring embodiment

IPA concerns “the lived experience of a conscious, situated, embodied Being-in-the-world” (Larkin *et al.*, 2011, p. 330). Drawing from its phenomenological roots, IPA recognises that language encompasses cognitive and embodied aspects (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) and that cognition involves a dynamic, affective, situated and embodied process (Smith *et al.*, 2022). However, IPA has faced criticism for not adequately addressing the embodied dimension of language (e.g. Murray and Holmes, 2014; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013), which is narrowly dichotomised into verbal and non-verbal utterances. This limitation could hinder the integration of feminist phenomenology into IPA due to the former’s strong focus on embodiment (Olkowski, 2017).

As previously introduced, IPA follows a systematic, detailed and iterative data analysis process. However, to enhance its trustworthiness and rigour (Smith *et al.*, 2022), particularly regarding the interpretation of embodied meaning, the current article advocates for the application of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) in the exploratory noting (phase 1, step 3). As such, IPA can address criticisms regarding its limited treatment of embodiment (Murray and Holmes, 2014; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013). In CMT, metaphorical language is not merely a literary or rhetorical device but is pervasive in how individuals structure conceptual thinking, drawing on everyday embodied and cultural experiences (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Primary metaphors result from a child’s bodily encounter with the world and others (Grady, 1997), such as bodily perception, orientation, movement and object manipulation (Johnson, 2017). In the example, AFFECTION IS WARMTH (Grady, 1997), temperature (e.g. warm, cold) is used to express the quality of affection. Warmth is a metaphor that arises from a child’s experience of bodily warmth produced by being physically close to a caregiver (Grady, 1997). Furthermore, complex conceptual metaphors stem from primary metaphors applied to more abstract concepts (e.g. LIFE IS A JOURNEY; Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). These form the cultural frameworks of knowledge from which individuals derive meaning in everyday life (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), in language, thought and action (Clarke and Cornelissen, 2014; Sarasvathy *et al.*, 2020). In a nutshell, a primary metaphor involves understanding one domain of experiences (often abstract) in relation to another (often concrete), whilst complex conceptual metaphors derive from a combination of primary metaphors (Grady, 1997; Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

Sarasvathy *et al.* (2020) acknowledged the centrality of metaphors that guide entrepreneurship research and practice, such as INSTITUTIONS ARE THE RULES OF THE GAME (North, 1990) and MARKETS ARE CONTAINERS (e.g. market entry/penetration/share/exit) (Sarasvathy *et al.*, 2020). They advocated for a “a cognitive-linguistic analysis to entrepreneurship [in which] the “reality” we investigate is contingent upon the conceptual metaphors we implicitly assume in the language we use to describe it” (Sarasvathy *et al.*, 2020, p. 420). This article argues that phenomenological research, particularly IPA, offers a potential methodology to explore how individuals make sense of their encounters with the world and others as articulated through embodied metaphors. It is worth noting that both domains (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 2022) are paradigmatically aligned, drawing from Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), who argued that the divide between mind and body is merely an artificial construct.

To summarise, it can be concluded that feminist phenomenology combined with CMT could strengthen IPA as a suitable methodology for investigating women entrepreneurs’ unique and contextualised lived experiences (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009; Moi, 1999; Young,

2002), as proposed within this article. Accordingly, a phenomenon (i.e. women's entrepreneurship) is not detached from the world (e.g. residing only in the mind) and is not separate from the individual (e.g. residing only in language) (Berglund, 2015). A phenomenon is always situated (i.e. Being-in-the-world) in which the entrepreneur, the context and entrepreneurial practice merge as lived experiences (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, critical feminist phenomenology, as advocated here, should explore how descriptions of embodied lived experiences acquire meaning through language (Oksala, 2016). Feminist phenomenology is not merely concerned with language as a cultural artefact. It recognises language as an embodied practice that enables individuals to make sense of their situated, intersubjective, intentional and temporal experiences.

Discussion and suggestions for future research

Based on the potential combination of feminist phenomenology, IPA and CMT for advancing women's entrepreneurship research, this article proposes a new research agenda exemplified in Table 2.

Similar to the feminist phenomenology perspective, Welter (2020) recommended that future research should analyse how gendered processes enable or constrain entrepreneurship, emphasising "the ways entrepreneurs understand their world" (p. 33). Phenomenologically, this idea aligns with the concept of perception, a sense-making perspective regarding the lifeworld or how individuals apprehend their reality (Ahmed, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Rather than measuring context based on geographical variables (Baker and Welter, 2020), new research can explore how women entrepreneurs make sense of their contexts through a gendering lens (Young, 2002). This research stream would complement existing studies on the gendering of entrepreneurship discourses and policies

Topic	Research questions
Gendering processes	How do women entrepreneurs perceive and make sense of the gendering of institutions, organisations, and/or places?
Situatedness	How do women entrepreneurs make sense of their everyday contingencies?
Intersubjectivity	What are women entrepreneurs' lived experiences of microaggressions within the entrepreneurial institutional/organisational context?
Intentionality	How does the experience of body shame affect women entrepreneurs in achieving their goals? How do women entrepreneurs learn and make sense of the entrepreneurial habit?
Temporality	What are the experiences of women entrepreneurs regarding the potentiality of technological affordances? How does the temporal orientation of women entrepreneurs inform their approach to entrepreneurial opportunities? What are the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs regarding entrepreneurial spaces?
Ontological dimensions of lived experiences	How do the ontological dimensions of lived experiences of women entrepreneurs affect women entrepreneurs' identity (or entrepreneurial outcomes, or entrepreneurial process/practices)? What are the underlying assumptions of women entrepreneurs' accounts of lived experiences from a Foucauldian perspective?
Situated agency	How do women entrepreneurs enact their situated agency within gendered contexts?

Source(s): Authors' own

Table 2.
Suggestions for a new
research agenda

(Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Hamilton, 2013; Malmström *et al.*, 2017; Ogbor, 2003) and institutional and organisational practices (Hamilton, 2013; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; McAdam *et al.*, 2019; Richards and Mattioli, 2021), uncovering the complexity and heterogeneity of women's entrepreneurship and contexts (Welter, 2020).

Institutional gender biases that promote a stereotypical perspective of entrepreneurship have resulted in the objectification of women, adding challenges to the enactment of their agency (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Malmström *et al.*, 2017; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Motoyama *et al.*, 2021). Whilst the adverse effects of women's objectification are known (Hampton *et al.*, 2009; Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Motoyama *et al.*, 2021), an unexplored research area is how women make sense of their situated contingencies. Applying feminist phenomenological approach (Moi, 1999), new research could extend studies on effectuation (Martinez Dy, 2020; Sarasvathy, 2001), exploring whether women's everyday contingencies can be sources of entrepreneurial opportunities under specific conditions.

Research that adopts gender as a variable (e.g. Adachi and Hisada, 2016; Bönte and Piegeler, 2013; Comeig and Lurbe, 2018; Cuberes *et al.*, 2019; Dilli and Westerhuis, 2018; Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019; Vamvaka *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2019), has contributed to the perpetuation of the myth of women's underperformance (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Conversely, studies applying gender as lens (Ahl, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2017; Ogbor, 2003) highlighted the othering of women entrepreneurs within the institutional context (e.g. Hampton *et al.*, 2009; Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Motoyama *et al.*, 2021). A novel research area is exploring microaggressions directed at women entrepreneurs as a subtle form of hostility against minority groups. It has the potential to illuminate everyday instances of self-shaming and intersubjective control (Dolezal, 2015).

Women entrepreneurs often experience their bodies as the "wrong" entrepreneurial body due to the association of entrepreneurship with hegemonic masculinity (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Adopting a feminist phenomenological perspective on body shame (Bartky, 1990; Dolezal, 2015), future research can explore the effects of the male gaze on women's self-surveillance and self-regulation.

Moreover, whilst research has established that women need to learn the entrepreneurial *habitus* to fit in (McAdam *et al.*, 2019; Swail and Marlow, 2018), it is unclear how they make sense of it and internalise it as an embodied *habit*. It should be noted that *habitus* emphasises socially structured (behavioural) dispositions (Bourdieu, 1980/1990), whilst *habit* focuses on the body's mechanical but skilful and intentional engagement with the lifeworld (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Finally, an intriguing research path involves considering technology as potential affordances (Gibbs, 2005; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962; Romdenh-Romluc, 2011). This exploration could examine whether, how, which technologies and under what circumstances they act as mediators in shaping the (female) body's relationship with the external world, enhancing its entrepreneurial capabilities (McAdam *et al.*, 2020).

Entrepreneurship research has predominantly focused on time as a proxy for experience or success or a variable detached from space. However, such accounts do not represent entrepreneurs' experience of time/space (Lippmann and Aldrich, 2016). Considering temporality as a phenomenological orientation (Ahmed, 2006; Husserl, 1952/1989), an interesting research possibility is exploring how women entrepreneurs' motivations, growth aspirations and the meaning of success (Welter, 2020) are embedded in cyclical, not linear, experiences of time (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Hamilton, 2013).

Additionally, by framing temporality within a Gestalt approach of foreground and background (Ahmed, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962), researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the implications of having an entrepreneurial orientation (with growth and profit as the foreground) in relation to the support network (representing the background), especially concerning household responsibilities. Existing research indicates that women

often bear the largest share of these responsibilities, potentially influencing their availability of time and, consequently, their opportunities and growth potential (Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Warnecke, 2013). Moreover, expanding investigations into gendering and temporality, an overlooked aspect is how the physical organisation of spaces impacts women's experiences of entrepreneurial environments. This includes examining the influence of architecture and interior design in spaces like accelerator and incubator offices (Welter and Baker, 2020).

For a more comprehensive understanding of women's entrepreneurship, this article recommends new research that applies feminist phenomenology to investigate how women entrepreneurs' lived experiences influence their identities, entrepreneurial outcomes and entrepreneurial processes/practices. A potential starting point for these studies could be the exploration of how the interdependencies of the ontological dimensions of lived experiences (i.e. situatedness, intersubjectivity, intentionality and temporality) give rise to specific yet varied forms of entrepreneurship. This approach views entrepreneurship as a situated and subjective phenomenon, framing the entrepreneur as a subject-in-context (Berglund, 2015; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021), reflecting the heterogeneous and complex nature of everyday entrepreneurship (Welter, 2020; Welter *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, by adopting a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1969/1989), researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the discourses available to women entrepreneurs and how these discourses contribute to their sense-making of experiences. Current discourse analyses have predominantly focused on discursive practices in entrepreneurship research (e.g. Ahl, 2006; Ogbor, 2003) and policy (e.g. Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Ahl and Nelson, 2015). New studies could delve into whether and how women entrepreneurs deconstruct dominant discourses as a sense-making device (Smith *et al.*, 2022; Weick *et al.*, 2005).

To bridge the gap between agency and structure (Berglund, 2007, 2015), as previously explored, forthcoming research can focus into how women entrepreneurs actively express their situated agency within gendered contexts (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009). This investigation should consider how gendering might impose limitations on women's entrepreneurship (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Malmström *et al.*, 2017; Marlow and McAdam, 2015) whilst also exploring how it presents opportunities for creative agency (Fielding, 2017; Lewis, 2013; Stead, 2017; Swail and Marlow, 2018).

A shared theme amongst the proposed ideas in this section is their exploration of women's entrepreneurship through the lens of lived experiences. Nevertheless, whilst retrieving (subjective) experiences (e.g. back to the things themselves; Husserl, 1913/1982) as an epistemic construct (Alcoff, 2000), this article acknowledges that individuals are inseparable from their contexts. Subject and context co-constitute each other (Heidegger, 1927/1962), with the body acting as the mediator in one's relationship with the lifeworld (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Consequently, the emphasis on situated lived experiences underscores the suitability of IPA methodology (Smith *et al.*, 2022).

To go even further into the meaning of experiences, research can leverage CMT to examine how women entrepreneurs shape their perceptual and experiential reality through conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Sarasvathy *et al.*, 2020). For instance, these studies could reach a new understanding of what women's "horizons of interpretation" (Gadamer, 1975/1989) entail for their present and future possibilities as entrepreneurial agents. As currently posited in women's entrepreneurship research (Hampton *et al.*, 2009; Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Motoyama *et al.*, 2021), it can be argued that women's situatedness and intersubjective relationship with entrepreneurial/institutional stakeholders are articulated through the metaphor WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS ARE THE OTHER. From their own perspective, what does it mean to be the other? Can they visualise different realities/metaphors? Is it possible (and desirable) to create a typology of archetypes that represent the distinctiveness of women's entrepreneurial journey to counterbalance the

mainstream narrative of the male hero (McClelland, 1987; Ogbor, 2003; Schumpeter, 1934/1949)? The predominant positivist orientation of entrepreneurship research (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2016; Serrano-Pascual and Carretero-García, 2022) may not readily embrace metaphors as credible constructs of observable reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Nonetheless, CMT offers a valuable lens through which to explore the subjective, contextual and often nuanced dimensions of women's entrepreneurial experiences that might be overlooked in a purely positivist framework. Ultimately, the integration of metaphors enriches the research landscape, providing a holistic understanding of women's entrepreneurship beyond traditional, narrowly defined perspectives.

By adopting the proposed framework, particularly by placing the personal within context (Larkin *et al.*, 2011; Moi, 1999; Young, 2002), researchers can bridge the divide between theoretical insights and practical implications (Berglund, 2015; Raco and Tanod, 2014). This approach can enable the formulation of meaningful recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders that align with the specific needs and aspirations of women entrepreneurs, addressing a critical requirement for future research (Foss *et al.*, 2019).

Conclusion

The present article highlights a significant gap in entrepreneurship research, which predominantly characterises entrepreneurship as a cognitive pursuit whilst neglecting the embodied aspect of entrepreneurial action (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014). The universalisation of the disembodied entrepreneur and the adoption of a gender-neutral perspective (Jennings and Brush, 2013) have resulted in ambiguous ideas regarding women's entrepreneurship, as evident in the underperformance hypothesis (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). The ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches employed in the field have limited the understanding of entrepreneurship to a narrow, male-biased characterisation. The normalisation and institutionalisation of masculinities implicitly impose a gender hierarchy (Dean *et al.*, 2019; Marlow *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, policies and government programmes designed to support women entrepreneurs may inadvertently have adverse effects (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Hechavarría and Ingram, 2019).

To address these limitations, the article proposes the adoption of feminist phenomenology as an alternative framework for understanding women's entrepreneurship. It moves beyond a binary view of agency and structure by using gender as a tool to analyse how power dynamics (Young, 2002) shape women's lived experiences within entrepreneurial contexts. Furthermore, by exploring the ontological dimensions of situatedness, intersubjectivity, intentionality and temporality, feminist phenomenology challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions about agency as a given or its structural determination (Berglund, 2015).

Methodologically, this article suggests integrating IPA, as an underused yet promising methodology in entrepreneurship research (Abebrese, 2014; Raco and Tanod, 2014; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021), into feminist phenomenology to enrich both approaches, particularly in capturing the embodied dimension of language. Within feminist phenomenology, the meaning of words is understood intersubjectively, intentionally and temporally and should be interpreted within the context of women's situated experiences (Stoller, 2017). IPA, with its focus on understanding the meaning of lived experiences as expressed through language, aligns well with the embodied dimension emphasised by feminist phenomenology. However, to deepen the understanding of how language and embodiment are intertwined, CMT can also be incorporated into the data analysis process due to its compatibility with IPA. This combined approach recognises the significance of participant voices and aims to uncover hidden aspects of entrepreneurship that may be overlooked or misunderstood within prevailing institutional discourses (Kruks, 2014; Larkin and Thompson, 2012). In a phenomenological inquiry into language, the interplay between

“what” (words), “how” (perception, feelings) and “why” (discourse) should be embraced. Cognition, embodiment, language and discourse are interwoven and intrinsically embedded in the lived experience of individuals (Berglund, 2015).

The limitations are also acknowledged whilst proposing new avenues for advancing women’s entrepreneurship research. This article has focused explicitly on the regulatory institutional environment within Western developed economies to exemplify the application of the proposed framework. However, the same can be employed to explore women’s entrepreneurship within different contexts, such as countries at different economic development stages or geographical contexts (e.g. factor-driven or efficiency-driven, Middle East, etc.).

Feminist phenomenology constitutes a rich philosophical tradition that entrepreneurship research has yet to explore fully. For instance, future work could explore a phenomenological intersectional analysis of the lived experiences of migrants, gender non-conforming and other minority entrepreneurs (Ahmed, 2006; Fanon, 1952/1986). For instance, Ahmed (2006) defines positionality as the position that bodies occupy within social spaces/structures that determine their relationship with objects and others, shaping individuals’ perceptions, experiences and actions. Accordingly, some critical aspects of positionality are directionality and relationality. She exemplifies these ideas by using the metaphor of a line in which normative bodies are aligned with normative orientations, following a straight path. Conversely, non-normative bodies (specifically queerness) disrupt the linearity of normative social expectations, challenging the notion of a single, predetermined path in life. For Ahmed (2006), each aspect of social normativity is represented by a different line, creating a web of intersectional points that marks how various forms of oppression converge and reinforce each other. These concepts could be applied to women’s entrepreneurship research to understand better the lived experiences of women with intersectional identities and the cumulative effects of discrimination.

Although the current article has focused on women’s entrepreneurship, it should be emphasised that research should move beyond equating gender with women (Welter, 2020). As an illustration, new research could investigate the lived experiences of male entrepreneurs who do not follow hegemonic masculinity as a normative orientation (Ahmed, 2006), unveiling the complexities of how gender, masculinity and privilege are perceived and navigated in entrepreneurial contexts. This includes examining how various expressions of masculinity intersect with other aspects of identity and how they contribute to or challenge existing power structures. Alternatively, feminist phenomenology can uncover how individuals make sense of their privilege (e.g. male, White and class privilege) regarding one’s positionality within entrepreneurial ecosystems and their sense of orientation/direction within entrepreneurial spaces.

IPA can also be combined with other methods, such as multi-perspectival studies (Larkin *et al.*, 2019), multimodal analyses (Boden and Eatough, 2014), video methods (LeBaron *et al.*, 2018) and photo/video elicitation (Ormiston and Thompson, 2021). These methods can further enhance the understanding of pre-reflective experiences or facilitate a second-order analysis of non-verbal language by exploring imagery, visual metaphors and emotions.

In conclusion, the adoption of feminist phenomenology and IPA combined with CMT presents a promising framework for advancing women’s entrepreneurship research and addressing the limitations of current approaches.

Notes

1. In a similar fashion to Young’s (2002) concept of gendering, intersectionality is a tool to explore how intersectional identities are positioned within social structures (Crenshaw, 1991). Accordingly, it should be noted that entrepreneurship concepts are constructed not only from the male perspective

but are a confluence of normative beliefs and practices about sex/gender, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, race, ableism, etc. This research acknowledges the importance of an intersectional analysis, although focussing on the gender dimension.

2. This article uses the later translation of *The Second Sex*, from 2009. The first translation (1953) has been strongly criticised by feminist phenomenologists due to the mischaracterisation of key aspects of de Beauvoir's thought that links her work to the phenomenological tradition.

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