

# **The managed hearts and lives of co-preneurs**

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## **Introduction: a small business on the brink of liquidation**

Elizabeth is anxious. She and Simon are on a plane to see some business clients overseas. She is trying not to let her anxiety pass on onto Simon. He is quietly reading the newspaper and trying to project an image of calm composure in readiness for the meeting. But she knows that 'on the inside' he is 'stressed' with what is at stake here. The stress was expressed in the morning at the airport when a business problem occurred resulting in a shouting match on the telephone between him and his Site Manager. She knows by the fact that he has not slept properly for the last two months. She also knows he is anxious by the slightly higher than usual colour in his skin tone and the fact that he keeps putting his hand to his stomach to soothe a skin irritation which, his doctor tells him, is stress induced. There is much to achieve from the meeting. The Jersey clients are key funders and part developers in some large development projects in the UK. Their cooperation and investment is needed to keep Simon's business 'afloat'. If he does not get this deal set up, his chances of surviving the recession are impossible. If this is the case, Elizabeth and Simon have decided that they have no option but to liquidate the business. This is, in their words, an immensely 'difficult decision' and Simon feels 'a massive responsibility' to not let this happen. The business has operated for 25 years and has been successfully employing workers/subcontractors for all of this time. But, although the UK is officially out of recession, the impacts (or 'lag effect') are still being felt in certain sectors. The construction sector is one of them. They have not told anyone this yet. It is an internal and implicit decision between the two of them which they discussed at the weekend and which, unless anything changes, they will 'hold in' until early 2010. If the deal comes off, however, Simon has the chance to 'kick-off' a new line of construction work, to keep his good men in work through 2010 and 'to fight his way out of the crap'.

What is reported in these opening paragraphs is just one small segment of an ethnographic study of the lives and households of small business owners. The ethnographic study demonstrates how emotion work is practised by small business owner-managers and their partners in their day to day handling of responsibility and ownership. It is argued that entrepreneurship is sustained by the managed hearts and emotions of its participants and associated actors – emotions which are tied to feelings of responsibility for the business and a

‘desire to make things work’. As Hochschild (1983; 2003<sup>1</sup>) argued in her classic text on the commercialisation of human feeling, emotions are continuously managed by workers and managers in all spheres of their life and work. In inducing or suppressing love, anger, envy or other emotions to provide a service to clients so as to achieve organisational tasks/goals, managers (or entrepreneurs) are adapting to commercial purposes. The same applies to small business or entrepreneurial contexts although we rarely get to hear about the ‘emotion work’ that goes on in the pursuit of entrepreneurial endeavours. Evidence of emotion work can be identified in the above account. Elizabeth is not officially a business owner but she informally supports her husband as he runs his business. They have run their business for twenty-five years and they have organised their whole lives, holidays and very being together around ‘their business’. She suppresses her own anxiety about the business situation in order not to increase his. He is also suppressing his anxiety and his feeling of failure but this is ‘showing itself’ in some physiological representations (skin rash, high skin colour etc). He has been quiet and withdrawn over the last few weeks/months and neither of them are sleeping well. Both are suppressing the fear of what might happen to the business and their home and, for this reason, are keeping the information away from their children and workers at this point in time.

This study demonstrates how, in achieving their commercial aspirations and sense of duty to the business, there is a significant managing of hearts and emotions in entrepreneurial endeavours. This is because entrepreneurial/small business situations are ‘highly absorptive’ occupational contexts. This term was introduced by Kanter (1977) to distinguish occupational pursuits that not only demand the maximum commitment of the worker and define the context for family life, but which also implicate other family members in the work system (p.87). She identifies five occupational contexts that activate an organisational demand on partners<sup>2</sup> and one of these is entrepreneurial situations. Several features can be identified as distinctive of entrepreneurial contexts. The first is that entrepreneurial situations are greedy of time and resource so they ‘absorb’ the emotional support, labour and other resources ‘available’ in the household/family. Second, entrepreneurs and owner managers have personal investments and capital tied up in the business. These investments are not only characterised by financial issues but also social, cultural and emotional capital which relate to obligation and responsibility for making things work/getting things right. These obligations and responsibilities mean that there is a degree of personal risk for the couple (Fletcher 2010). Third, there is also a strong sense of what Bjonberg and Nicholson (2008) refer to as ‘emotional ownership’ (to signify the sense of closeness, belonging and attachment that people feel for businesses that they own, work for or are related to (p.3). With the exception of accounts linking family, kinship, gender relations and emotional labour in enterprise development (Kepner, 1983; Wheelock, 1991; Hamilton, 1986), studies addressing the

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<sup>1</sup> Hochschild, A. R. (1983; 2003). *The managed heart: commercialisation of human feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>2</sup> These are situations in which a spouse has a career or management/leadership role in one of the following contexts: political roles, small towns, total institutions (i.e. care homes or boarding schools), in times of controversy and in entrepreneurial climates.

emotion work and commercialisation of feeling that is central to the realisation of entrepreneurial activities, are rare.

To address this, the analysis in this article focuses inwards on the couples at the centre of the businesses. Couple-owned businesses are the fastest-growing segment of the small business sector (Marshack, 1993; Fitzgerald & Muske, 2002; Philbrick & Fitzgerald, 2007). In a 2005 UK Household Survey of Entrepreneurship (Dti/SBS), 26% of the firms surveyed reported that a spouse or domestic partner 'worked with them' in the business. In a US context, Muske et al (2002) report that the entrepreneurial couples represent 30% of all family business. These findings indicate that although the term entrepreneur is commonly associated with certain types of special people who single-handedly identify market opportunities, it is important to acknowledge that many business ventures are, what can be referred to as, co-preneurial situations (to denote specific situations of co-habiting couples, whether mixed or single gender, who start a business venture together). The term copreneurship originally generated from the family business field and was first coined by Barnett and Barnett (1988) to signify couples with a marital or pseudo-marital link who share ownership of, commitment to and responsibility for a small business venture (de Bruin and Lewis, 2004). As a result, co-preneurship is closely associated with the business venturing activities of the household (Baines et al. 1997; Baines and Wheelock, 1998) rather than the wider family involving parents or siblings. Furthermore, co-preneurship is distinctive from other forms of entrepreneurship in that work, love and family responsibilities (Marshack, 1993; 1994b) are intertwined.

Little is known, however, about the ways in which love and work interrelate to shape new venture creation. In studies of entrepreneurship, the dominant focus on 'lone' entrepreneurs who enact market opportunities, means that we rarely get to hear how couples come to construct their 'productive capacity' as having enterprise (or market) potential. In addition, whilst there has been widespread attention within the small business literature to both the formal and informal (family/household) activities and resources shaping new venture creation/entrepreneurship, we have little detail about: how organisational creation is realised/managed within and between couples. If we turn to family business inquiry, a 'family embedded' perspective of entrepreneurship is being acknowledged to take account of how family dynamics (such as the interaction between death, marriage, child birth), resources (financial, human, labour, information), values (attitudes to work) influence the emergence and shaping of new venture creation (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003). Empirical studies of family start-ups, however, have been 'severely neglected' (Astrachan, (2003: p.567).

Studies of co-preneurs are rarer still, with a flurry of research activity in the 1980's and 90's (Epstein, 1971; Barnett and Barnett, 1988; Brown, 1989; Cox et al. 1984; Jaffe, 1990; Kadis and McClendon, 1991; Marshack, 1993; 1994; 1998; Nelson, 1986; Wicker and Burley, 1991) and only a few studies subsequent (Bruin and Lewis, 2006) to this. The term copreneurship originally generated from the family business field and was first coined by Barnett and Barnett (1988) to signify couples with a marital or pseudo-marital link who share

ownership of, commitment to and responsibility for a small business venture (de Bruin and Lewis, 2004). As a result, co-preneurship is closely associated with the business venturing activities of the household (Baines et al. 1997; Baines and Wheelock, 1998) rather than the wider family involving parents or siblings. Co-preneurship is distinctive from other forms of entrepreneurship in that work, love and family responsibilities (Marshack, 1993; 1994b) are intertwined. In addition, reports indicate a New 'Alterpreneur Economy' in the UK made up of people starting new businesses for 'life-making' reasons associated with alternative life styles (MORE THAN Business, 2005). This is also consistent with reported post- post-corporate shifts in work patterns where enterprise development is frequently cited for explaining the 'longing for more satisfying engagement with work, a desires of relationships, being and production in spaces not limited by conventional actions of labour and knowledge' (Fenwick, 2002: p.718).

It is timely, therefore, to examine co-preneurial forms of working that are specific to the post-2000 economic/social context. Also, given the post-recessionary context, it would be pertinent to examine the effects of organisational creation on couples who start out with a bright vision of the possibilities in sharing their productive and capacity creativity. Reports indicate that 4,941 firms went into compulsory liquidation in the first quarter of 2009<sup>3</sup> (an increase of 56% on the previous year from,) and many businesses are still experiencing the lag-effect of the recession. Whilst, it is not the intention to consider failure rates and effects in this article, it is appropriate to examine how, as Kanter (1989) says, 'from something as simple as the human drives of love and work, 'spring complex social arrangements and small business forms/structures/ that locate people in time and space..'

The current article reports on several co-preneurial situations in which new organisational ventures and arrangements have been created.

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<sup>3</sup> Insolvency Service Statistics, November 2009

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