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Institutionalizing women's enterprise policy:
A legitimacy-based perspective

Abstract

Despite efforts to increase the quantity and quality of women-owned business, enterprise policy has enjoyed only modest success. This article explores the role of legitimacy in these outcomes by examining how and when individual stakeholders evaluate and then influence the legitimacy of women's enterprise policy. We draw on 45 interviews with actors in the UK enterprise policy ecosystem and an ethnographic study of the policy process. We present a multilevel model of two opposing legitimacy processes: a legitimacy repair loop and a delegitimizing loop. In doing so we provide a novel perspective on policy institutionalizing.

Key words: Women's Enterprise Policy, Legitimacy, Legitimacy as Perception, Institutions, Deinstitutionalization

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that the increased participation of women in entrepreneurship can play an important role in improving macroeconomic performance (Brush, Carter, Gatewood, Greene, & Hart, 2006). Accordingly, governments have deployed a range of women-specific enterprise policies designed to foster beneficial economic and social outcomes (Jennings & Brush, 2013). There is some recognition however, that despite significant effort and expenditure, policy interventions have struggled to achieve their objectives, and thus women remain underrepresented in the small-to-medium sized business sector (Carter, Mwaura, Ram, Trehan, & Jones, 2015). Explaining the underperformance of policy therefore remains one of the most pressing challenges for women's enterprise policy researchers.

Women's enterprise policy (WEP) has been examined from a number of perspectives. Primarily, scholars have sought to evaluate the efficacy of (Orser, Riding, & Weeks, 2017) or rationale for gendered policy instruments (Wilson, Whittam, & Deakins, 2004). Feminist and post-feminist critiques of policy have also drawn attention to structural issues that lead to the 'othering' of women through policy discourses (Ahl & Nelson, 2015) and broader business support services (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Finally, there have been moves to apply institutional perspectives to women's enterprise research (Ahl, 2010), with recent studies examining policy as a constituent part of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Brush, Edelman, Manolova, & Welter, 2018).

Surprisingly, however, none of these strands of research have directly addressed the pivotal role of legitimacy in the institutionalizing of gender-based policy instruments. We know from related literatures that individuals hold diverse opinions on social justice and public policy (Coate & Loury, 1993), yet this heterogeneity has not been reflected theoretically or empirically in debates around gendered enterprise policies, primarily because many categories of ecosystem actor have not been integrated into extant WEP literature. This

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leaves a significant gap in our understanding of WEP, as legitimacy is a requisite condition for any stable and successful institution (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Thus, any conflicting evaluations of legitimacy by actors engaged with a policy institution may yield valuable insights into dysfunctional institutionalization of policy.

In pursuing this legitimacy-based account of public policy, we examine the policy institutionalization process and ask: *how and when do ecosystem actors interpret, evaluate and influence the legitimacy of WEP?* To answer our question, we turn to the micro-foundations of institutions in organizational studies (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012), specifically theory which has sought a more agentic and practice-oriented explanation for institutional change and deinstitutionalization (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). We adopt a socio-psychological perspective to understand *how* individual ecosystem stakeholders evaluate the legitimacy of a policy instrument when faced with some form of environmental trigger (Tost, 2011) and then trace the impact of their judgements as they are socialized through various externalizing 'response tactics.'

To explore these processes, we analyse a case of the women's enterprise policy ecosystem in the UK, developing an inductive model and conceptualizing two processes which account for both stability and change to the macro-level legitimacy of the policy institution: a legitimacy repair loop and a delegitimizing loop. We demonstrate how these distributed processes can interact over time to destabilize women's enterprise policy, thus undermining the effective delivery of policy objectives. This model provides a novel perspective on the implementation of contentious gender-based enterprise policies, where those engaged in the policy ecosystem have typically been treated in a benign or passive manner, thereby overlooking their agency in shaping the institutionalization and outcome of policy (Arshed, Carter, & Mason, 2014). Furthermore, our model extends recent discussions

relating to the role of gender in enterprise policy and support (Malmström, Johansson, & Wincent, 2017; Henry, Orser, Coleman, & Foss, 2017) by showing how the macro-level reproduction of stereotypical gender norms (Ahl & Marlow, 2012) trigger 'bottom-up' legitimacy responses from women entrepreneurs and other stakeholders. This subordination can lead to individuals engaging in practices that destabilize WEP, a finding we offer as a novel contribution to recent feminist critiques of gender-based policies (Ahl & Nelson, 2015).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Policy Institutionalization

The term 'policy' represents a diversity of meanings to scholars. For the purposes of this study, we distinguish between policy as an expression of prevailing political rationale and policy as a complex multi-actor system (Cairney, 2015). Thus, policy can denote a "plan of action", typically formulated by powerful government actors to guide political responses to societal challenges (Richards & Smith, 2002, p. 1). Under this perspective, it is largely an instrumental tool that is applied in a top-down fashion. The latter interpretation, however, conceives policies not as technical, neutral devices but as 'institutions' that structure the collective activities of participating actors (Arshed et al., 2014; Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007).

Distinctions between these two understandings of policy surface some important issues. Scholars working within a variety of empirical contexts (e.g. Singh, Heimans, & Glasswell 2014) have noted how macro-level policy objectives, when refracted through multiple layers of localized interpretation, tend to deviate (sometimes dramatically) from their original ostensive purpose (Burch, 2007; Arshed, Mason, & Carter, 2016). Thus, while policies are representative of certain normative ideas, they are also changeable during the

social processes of enactment, and their institutional maintenance is ultimately beholden to the ever-shifting agendas of diverse participating actor groups (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007).

In studies of policies introduced to support marginalized or under-represented groups, scholars have often observed how variances in the experiences of target and non-target audiences can lead to a range of unintended (often negative) consequences (Heilman, 1994; Leslie. Mayer, & Kravitz, 2014). Studies of WEP, however, have displayed comparatively limited recognition of the pluralistic nature of socially enacted policy. This is unsurprising, given that much of the early work in the field focused on explaining the economic performance of women-owned businesses (Hughes, Jennings, Brush, Carter, & Welter, 2012). Women's enterprise policy research has accordingly tended towards instrumental assessments of intervention efficacy (Robson, Jack, Freel, 2008; Orser et al., 2017), policy rationales and designs (Wilson, Whittam, & Deakins, 2004; Marlow and McAdam, 2013), female-specific barriers (Brush et al., 2018), or broad 'fixes' to such barriers (see Foss, Henry, Ahl, & Mikalsen, 2018). Such perspectives primarily frame WEP as a monolithic, static discourse (e.g. Ahl & Nelson, 2015) and not as a distributed social institution. To address this gap, there is a need to examine policy from the perspective of the diverse actors that constitute the policy enactment ecosystem. We initiate theorization of the relationship between micro and macro perceptions of policy institutionalization by turning to institutional theory, and specifically to the concept of legitimacy.

Legitimacy-as-perception

Legitimacy is a core concept in organizational theory, defined by Suchman (1995, p. 574) as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions." Legitimacy has formed a central component of neo-institutional theory (Meyer

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& Rowan, 1977), explaining both the functioning of institutions and the survival of organizations within institutional fields.

To address our research question, which seeks to understand how and under what circumstances individual actors make ongoing evaluations of a policy institution, we adopt a legitimacy-as-perception lens (LAP). LAP is an emerging strand of theory which advances a cognitivist perspective to analyse how legitimacy judgements are made by individual evaluators (Tost, 2011). In comparison to the more prevalent contingency views, whereby legitimacy exists between two entities (e.g. an organization and a regulator) (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002), LAP proposes that legitimacy resides in *the eye of the beholder* (Fisher, Kuratko, Bloodgood, & Hornsby, 2017). This principle has led to scholars taking a less passive view of individual legitimacy evaluators by considering the relationship between their micro-level legitimacy judgements and a higher-level, aggregated legitimacy. Bitektine and Haack (2015) and Tost (2011) distinguish between two cross-level components of multilevel legitimacy judgements: 'propriety' and 'validity.' At a micro-level, propriety represents the degree of individual approval for a legitimacy object. At a macro-level, validity is the "extent to which there appears to be a general consensus within a collectivity that the entity is appropriate for the social context" (Tost, 2011, p. 689). Significantly, an individual can attribute a negative propriety judgement to an item that has high collective validity and vice-versa. However, the extent to which this propriety view is expressed publicly is contingent on the macro 'validity belief' formed by the evaluator of said object, and the associated pressures for conformity within the organization or system. That is, individuals may hold relatively negative personal judgements of a specific legitimacy object (propriety), but - in a strongly conformist context - these judgments are unlikely to be expressed if they are perceived to be at odds with the general judgement (validity).

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This scope for misalignment between propriety and collective validity creates the potential for institutional change. In a stable institutional environment pressures to suppress any negative or deviant judgements are considerable, leading to reinforcement of collective validity and a high validity belief by evaluators. During periods of institutional instability however, individuals often invoke a broader range of evaluative frameworks when forming judgements (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Furthermore, there is also increased scope for individuals to *make public* unacceptable judgements within the established 'stable' environment. Such actions, in turn, may weaken the collective validity of a legitimacy entity. Thus the legitimacy-as-perception lens has enabled scholars to unpack the multilevel nature of these institutional processes to gain an understanding of how macro-level institutions iteratively shape and are shaped by the judgements and actions of individual actors (Barley, 2008; Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010).

Legitimacy and Institutional Change

While a significant focus of institutional theory has been on the enduring nature of institutions (Scott, 2001), less attention has been directed towards explaining why institutions weaken or disappear (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Deinstitutionalization happens when the legitimacy of an institution is called into question by an audience or evaluator (Oliver, 1992) and institutional entrepreneurs then work to transform the institution (Gilmore & Sillince, 2014; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Such a process may be initiated by an 'insider' within an institutional field, or by an outsider e.g. as in the seminal case of the deinstitutionalization of the chemical DDT (Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

While deinstitutionalization is inherently tied to the concept of legitimacy (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Oliver, 1992), few studies have theorized the relationship between individual propriety legitimacy judgements and actors' engagement in deinstitutionalizing work (see, for

example, Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014). Moreover, in past research, there has been a tendency to focus on individualized accounts of institutional entrepreneurs who destabilize institutions (Gilmore & Sillince, 2014), despite Maguire and Hardy's (2009) explicit rejection of the 'heroic' individual in such institutional work. Extending upon previous deinstitutionalization research therefore, we perceive a need to analyse everyday distributed examples of (de)institutionalizing work arising from individual judgements, formed across enterprise policy ecosystems, at the 'coalface' of a policy institution (Barley, 2008). So, by combining these theoretical strands, we can more fully explore the gap in WEP research concerning the role of legitimacy in policy institutionalization.

METHODOLOGY

To address our research question, we adopted a grounded, interpretative methodology designed to capture the everyday microfoundational activities of actors operating within the WEP ecosystem. Not only does research conducted at microfoundational level offer an opportunity for scholars to directly observe systems-level institutions (Collins, 2004; Dacin et al., 2010), it also acts as a means to elucidate links between local practices and macro-level phenomena. Our methodological approach sought, therefore, to conceptualize how constituent actors interpreted and managed situated legitimacy tensions with a view to understanding the wider implications of their responses.

Research Context

Our study was conducted in the UK between late 2008 and late 2009 during the latter stages of the Labour administration but prior to the ascendency of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in May 2010. The government of this period (1997-2010) established the first explicit WEP agenda, building on the publication of the '*Strategic Framework for Women's Enterprise'* (DTI, 2003) to consolidate previously piecemeal support programmes

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into a coherent strategic approach (Forson, 2006). The aim of the UK government's 'Enterprise Strategy' at this time was to foster a "culture of enterprise" (BERR, 2008, p. 13) through supportive regulatory frameworks, advisory services, enterprise education, and improved access to finance. Under this umbrella, WEP was primarily focused on removing specific barriers to female participation in enterprise, notably those concerning access to public sector procurement contracts, international trade, and bank finance (Alexander, Stone, Ahmad, Carter, & Dwyer, 2009). Key to this development were 'female friendly' business support services, which, in conjunction with a range of existing non-governmental services and networks, were aimed at improving a perceived lack of accessibility to mainstream 'universal' support provision (Alexander et al., 2009).

Data Sources

Our study is built upon a single in-depth case study detailing the workings of the UK WEP ecosystem. Consistent with other studies of large complex organizational systems (e.g. Wiedner, Barrett, & Oborn, 2017), our case encompassed a wide range of data sources - observational notes, a researcher diary, semi-structured interviews, and archival data - which were designed to empirically mobilize three broad stakeholder groups (formulators, implementers, and users).

Viewing legitimacy as "a subjectively bestowed judgment that is variably ascribed by different audiences" (Suddaby, Bitekine, & Haack, 2017, p. 470), we captured actor behaviours at multiple localized sites. Our aim was to explore a range of research contexts reflective of where and how different stakeholder groups typically experienced their particular version of 'doing' policy. In examining policy formulators, for example, we accessed senior civil servants and policy-makers working within relevant branches of central government (notably, the Enterprise Division of the Department for Business, Innovation and

Skills - BIS). To investigate the implementation of policy, we focused on the workings of a Regional Development Agency (RDA) based in the West Midlands of England that was responsible for the translation of higher-level policies into actionable localized strategies. We also conducted research within the context of nine local advisory services operating under the purview of this RDA, which were responsible for localized programme delivery. To draw boundaries around the data collection, we deliberately focused on implementation activities carried out by local business *advisors*. Thus we did not explore WEP within the context of broader agendas surrounding, for example, non-adult enterprise education or regulatory reform. Finally, we explored the usage of policy by examining women entrepreneurs who had either directly engaged with, or had specifically elected not to engage with, one or more of the services offered by a support agency.

The research design was inductive and our purpose was to build conceptual explanations for the multifaceted experiences reported by respondents rather than to impose an *a priori* framework. Consequently, we treated participants as sensemaking subjects, who, through their efforts to explain their realities, constructed rich portrayals of key phenomena and associated organizing processes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Table 1 provides an overview of the various actors, roles, contextual settings, and corresponding data sources that we used to represent the WEP ecosystem. We detail our data collection methods below.

Semi-structured interviews: Between December 2008 and 2009, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews in a series of phases. We carried out a total of 45 interviews (eight with policy-makers, two with senior civil servants, four with RDA senior staff, nine with local agency advisors, and 22 with women entrepreneurs). To recruit participants, we employed a hybrid purposeful and snowball sampling strategy, initially utilizing the extended professional networks of our research team to access respondents in senior policy-making roles, before leveraging interviewee recommendations to initiate further introductions. The

sampling approach was used to capture data from respondents with relevant knowledge and generalize to theory rather to a larger population. Lasting between 1.5 and 2 hours, our semi-structured interviews followed a broad thematic protocol aimed at elucidating the perceptions, motives, and rationales underpinning respondents' participation in policy enactment processes.

Insert Table 1 here

Participant observation diary: Between August and December 2009, the lead author conducted ethnographic research within the Enterprise Division of BIS, acting as a participant observer while performing a 3-month full-time role as an enterprise Policy Advisor. Actors within the host organization were made aware of the research project and of the researcher's dual role. Participants agreed to take part in our study under conditions of anonymity. Data were recorded in diary format and entries were submitted daily. Entries included observations of informal conversations, formal discussions, and day-to-day behaviours, as well as numerous follow up interviews with key actors, designed to clarify specific points or reflections. The researcher also attended and took field notes from a total of 32 policy meetings, which involved actors both internal and external to the host organization.

Archival data: Finally, we collected a range of documentary evidence, including governmental guidelines (e.g. the 'Green Book'), relevant policy proposals ('White Papers'), internal memos, published reports, training and advisory guidelines. The collection of archival data served two main purposes. Firstly, it allowed examination of ostensive policy objectives and implementation guidance, thus acting as a means for us to build a sense of the 'idealized' policy discourse. This, in turn, provided a reference point for examinations of supportive or divergent enactment behaviours. Secondly, it served as a means of data

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Analysis

Initially our analysis sought to understand how the WEP ecosystem worked in practice. Starting from an analysis of secondary and archival data, we used policy guidelines, training manuals, internal memos, and promotional literature to form a baseline understanding of core policy rationales, and of the ostensive roles played by different actors within the ecosystem. We then used this information to map relationships between stakeholders and organizational entities.

Next, we focused on data collected from primary sources (observations and interviews), developing enactment narratives for each of the individual actors in our sample. The objective was to elucidate first-person perspectives of how actors 'do' WEP, thus allowing us to draw out comparative variations between idealized practices and localized interpretations. We found that points of discrepancy and/or tension between ostensive and localized practice typically resided at the heart of actor judgement processes. Consequently, we conducted a systematic analysis of our interview and observational transcripts to identify such episodes. Comparing interlinked incidents and behaviours within and across interviews, as well as over the timeline of our ethnographic observation period, we constructed a series of multi-actor longitudinal narratives, each of which detailed the antecedents, content, and repercussions of various judgement processes.

Our analysis revealed that policy actors typically felt compelled to justify why they enacted or engaged with policy in the ways that they did. These justifications were typically manifested as responses to interview questions or as observed communications with other policy actors (cf. Huy et al., 2014). Our initial round of 'open coding' (Gioia et al., 2013)

uncovered three dimensions of actor justifications. Firstly, we examined participants' reflections on the contextual pressures that enabled, prevented, or otherwise impacted their policy engagement behaviours. These included shifting policy targets, signalling from other actors and competing policy institutions. We categorized these pressures as 'evaluative triggers', which typically acted as antecedents to judgement formation.

Secondly, we interpreted the expressed content of legitimacy judgements (see Tost, 2011). Our evaluations of judgement content gathered evidence of both the basis and the targets of actor evaluations. Judgement targets proved to an important element of the evaluative process, as actors would often base their assessments of the wider policy institution on interactions with a particular stakeholder or stakeholder group. In this way, individual interactions within the policy ecosystem (e.g. a single meeting with a local advisor) could often act as proxies for wider evaluations of WEP. By recording and coding these numerous individual judgements, we were able to construct a tapestry of the different views that underpinned overall evaluations.

Thirdly, we analysed the talk and actions employed by policy participants i.e. the 'externalized' discourses and tangible practices that caused internal judgements to become "consequential to the organization" (Bitektine & Haack, 2015, p. 53). Importantly, we observed frequent discrepancies between the internal evaluations and subsequent actions of policy actors. Using evidence of 'consequential' actions built from triangulated observations and documented practices, we were able to compare the evaluative content of actor reflections with their externalized behaviours. This allowed us to conceptualize various institutionalizing and deinstitutionalizing 'response tactics.'

Building on this set of inductive observations, we developed second order themes and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013) (see Figure 1). These served as a basis for our theorizing. Throughout this process, we iteratively returned to key extant literature

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(e.g. Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011), comparing our observations and categorizations with existing theoretical constructs. Figure 1 provides a representation of the links between our raw data and the theoretical categories underpinning our contributions. Lastly, we refined our second order constructs by scrutinizing them against our multi-actor vignettes. This allowed us to explore relationships between constructs, thus forming the basis for an emergent theoretical model. The following sections detail our themes and outlines our legitimacy-informed interpretation of women's enterprise policy institutionalizing.

Insert Figure 1 here

FINDINGS

Evaluative Triggers

In a stable institutional environment, the legitimacy of an institutional entity is taken for granted by actors who remain in a passive cognitive mode (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011). What then are the destabilizing triggers that induce those in the policy ecosystem to enter a mode in which the legitimacy of WEP is actively re-appraised? We identify three trigger categories through our field work, and in doing so, reveal the underlying catalysts for individual propriety judgments in this setting.

Shifting Strategic Agendas

A key source of instability within the policy ecosystem relates to the short-term approach politicians are perceived to adopt by other ecosystem actors. Often ministerial policy announcements are made with little warning and the delivery infrastructure (i.e. the 'implementer' group within our study) is expected to enact the new policy within a very short timescale. This creates a tension between ministers and the various implementer

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organizations such as regional and local delivery agencies, who can often take years to transform a policy directive into effective support. In such circumstances, where ministers launch policy before previous initiatives have been fully implemented, stakeholders begin to perceive WEP as reactive and faddish as opposed to strategic and considered: "I think inevitably when we talk about enterprise policy it's going to be subject to the comings and goings of particular ministers and policies and economic priorities…schemes that were flavour of the month a year or so ago, are no longer" (DH, RDA).

This rapid pace of activity, and the scope for considerable discontinuity, signals to the policy ecosystem a degree of institutional instability, and a lack of ministerial resolve to see strategies through. As one RDA (PR) observes: "There are some genuinely decent individuals [ministers] but there are many who are doing it to be re-elected and if it makes sense to hang their hat on women's enterprise then they would do so." This prompts individuals to enter an evaluative mode in which they begin to critically reflect upon the credibility and overarching legitimacy of WEP.

Signalling from Other Stakeholders

Very often, ecosystem stakeholders are spurred to re-evaluate the legitimacy of WEP based on interpretations of the externalized legitimacy judgements of other actors. Through ongoing sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995), micro-interactional signals that may take the form of an 'off-the-cuff' comment or even a gesture (an eye roll during one of the meetings in our ethnography, for example), reveal potentially deviant judgements that diverge from prescribed normative positions. In one case, a women entrepreneur entered an active evaluative mode following a chance conversation with a conference delegate that challenged her normative assumptions relating to women's enterprise policy and equality:

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"I was at some lunchtime networking thing and it was all about diversity and I got to the

ticket machines after this lunch and stood there putting my money in and these two men,

British, mid-40s, white, stood at the ticket machine and said "well, I hope you feel better than

we do." I said "what do you mean?" They said, "you know what happened to us?"…he said

"everything is for everyone else and we're not allowed to do anything to help the British

white, UK middle-manager, whatever, because everything is about diversity and different

agendas and females and minorities." And it was actually, like, "we really feel like we're the

bottom of the pile now" (GM, Entrepreneur).

Further trigger signals from ecosystem stakeholders emerged through the lack of

reciprocal engagement between potential users and implementers of support, exemplified by

the very low interest in some women's enterprise events. The apparent rejection of the policy

support measures by those intended to benefit from the provision, problematized the

overarching legitimacy of WEP for some individuals involved in policy implementation:

"… when you mail shot these businesses, only about 3 of them said 'yes we would

like to come.' So anyways, in the end we had 'rent-a-mob' turn up in our region at short

notice because that's who you're going to get" (SB, Local Agency).

Finally, a section of women entrepreneurs highlighted the significance of the formal

messaging surrounding gendered enterprise policy in sparking legitimacy evaluations. For

example, one entrepreneur was highly sensitive to the potentially stigmatizing effect of

promoting women-only support, fearing it might mark women entrepreneurs as inferior: "Do

women want to place a label on themselves saying 'I'm part of a special support group',

because it almost makes you come across weaker by labelling it as women only" (HC,

Entrepreneur).

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Thus, individuals in the policy ecosystem enter evaluative mode not only because of macro-level shifts to policy strategy, but, as we discover at a micro-interactional level, a cutting joke or provocative comment can signal a challenge to the validity of WEP that warrants re-appraisal by the individual evaluator.

Competing Policy Institution

A pervasive challenge to the legitimacy of WEP is the pre-eminence of mainstream enterprise policy support. It was clear from our interviews there was a preference amongst policy formulators, implementers and even many women entrepreneurs for providing universal support, albeit support that adequately catered for women. There was a perception from some of the enterprise agencies that the provision of gender-based services results in a zero-sum-game, where resources are transferred away from mainstream provision: "There is a danger if there is too much gender provision the mainstream provision which is of high quality may suffer" (AR, Local Agency).

Conversely, other enterprise support providers found there are inadequate resources for delivering on gendered policy promises, and this undermined the legitimacy of the overall WEP institution: "You know women only support… we can't afford to run it… a unit cost of activity that sustains interactions with an individual client over a period, is beyond the cost of the contract we've got" (PH, Local Agency).

Partly as a consequence of underfunding, and partly driven by individually-held values, a number of ecosystem stakeholders actively championed a focus on mainstream policy in lieu of specialised WEP. As one female enterprise agency lead responded when asked about the legitimacy of WEP: "Mainstream…mainstream….it's about circumstances and not necessarily sex" (JL, Local Agency).

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These opinions were expressed frequently during informal conversations between stakeholder groups as part of our ethnographic study and provide insight as to how tensions between mainstream and specialized policy institutions can trigger ongoing, active, legitimacy evaluations from individuals during the course of a normal workday.

Propriety Judgement Framing

Uncertainty and instability can result in multiple concurrent interpretations of a single situation or event (Louis, 1980). To answer the second component of our research question, which seeks to understand the basis on which stakeholders perceptually evaluate the legitimacy of the WEP institution, we identify three normative frames utilized by ecosystem stakeholders to make either favourable or unfavourable propriety judgements when faced with an evaluative trigger (Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

Fairness Framing

By some distance the most polarizing framing of women's enterprise policy legitimacy encountered in our study was when the 'fairness' of the policy was invoked as an evaluative lens. Debates over fairness as a specific form of morality judgement are at the heart of controversies surrounding many affirmative action policies (Shteynberg et al., 2011), and we found two competing perspectives in our interviews. The first, is that women have additional needs both as primary caregivers and as individuals who face discrimination in the workplace, and hence, are deserving of extra support to ameliorate such barriers. This framing was common, particularly amongst policy formulators and implementers, who are each targeted with increasing economic participation amongst women:

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"Women are significantly more likely to start a business from a position of unemployment than male counterparts. It's a particular issue for women, it's not only the numeric side of it but it's also the fact that women start their businesses at a slightly more gradual pace. And the new deal for self-employment really doesn't support that, it is very focused on the male model of you know quicker paces etc." (Policy-maker 8).

The alternative 'fairness' framing, resulted in some contestation around why women as a category deserved additional support at the expense of other groups considered to be similarly marginalized. For example, one RDA (MR, RDA) queried why women and not ethnic minorities receive additional resources, citing the Afro-Caribbean community where the self-employment rate is only around 8% (compared to 20% of women). Perhaps surprisingly, many of the intended recipients of women's enterprise support themselves, framed WEP as unfair. These (often more successful) women entrepreneurs viewed policy support for women as already adequate, and considered that other groups may now be more deserving:

"To put a woman in a separate category from a man it's like saying one is greater than the other and I believe that everybody should be judged as one. To have charities dedicated to women, that service can be providing excellent service to a man as well but because he is a man he might lose out. You're excluding men" (CBD, Entrepreneur).

Lastly, the 'fairness' of WEP is evaluated by some stakeholders in terms of what groups of women benefit from the additional resources. In these instances, it is possible to view negative evaluations of the policy where assets and resources are directed towards elite, high-growth businesses, often at the expense of more modest 'lifestyle' ventures:

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"…it was about £15 million, it's a fund for...it's only going to benefit about 10 to 12

female entrepreneurs…the types of people it's going to target are those who already know

what they are doing anyway" (DH, RDA).

In sum, where public resources are limited, it is perhaps inevitable that the legitimacy

of a gender-segregated policy, which was perceived to take resources from both mainstream

provision and support for other disadvantaged groups, was evaluated on the basis of fairness.

It is surprising, however, that amongst those most likely to invoke a fairness frame, were

individuals who stood to benefit from policy provision, yet still judged the policy as unfair.

Impact Framing

An alternative frame for evaluating the legitimacy of WEP concerned the anticipated

effect of the policy and associated support measures. Where individual evaluators had

observed either ongoing successes or failures of WEP, there was a tendency to frame

legitimacy judgements in terms of 'impact.' Most typically, this 'impact' frame was invoked

to emphasise a focus on 'talk' versus 'action' in relation to policy delivery. Here stakeholders

perceived a misalignment between high-level policy announcements and their outcomes,

forming a negative judgement based on low perceived impact. As one RDA observed: "…it's

(WEP) scratching the surface really and I think fundamentally there's been a lot of talk about

encouraging women to go into business but it's...that hasn't been followed up by any action

which has been disappointing" (JW, RDA).

The impact framing encompassed judgements relating to tensions between delivering

quality support as opposed to quantity (i.e. reaching more potential users). Various

stakeholders took a cynical perspective, perceiving government to only care about being able

to report impact through 'numbers', with little concern for the actual effect on women

entrepreneurs: "Rather than the numbers, the quality of the projects, the impact it's having on society…is more important" (AR, Local Agency).

The managerialist focus on 'numbers' was used to form a judgement on the legitimacy of policy for a number of enterprise agency employees. It was considered that reporting of policy support interventions was focused on "how many inquiries have you dealt with, how many businesses have you assisted, what's your percentage customer satisfaction level, those sorts of things which are operational management information things" (DB, RDA) as opposed to more tangible socioeconomic impacts.

One female lead within a local agency took exception to the tokenistic approach towards evaluating impact, querying why the focus was on achieving gender parity with male entrepreneurs in terms of the volume of women entrepreneurs in the economy. She commented: "We got the female minister saying that we need 50% of women starting businesses. Why? Sometimes women don't always want to start…why half? Just because over half the population is women but why do they have to start a business?" (JL, Local Agency).

This focus on achieving volume, rather than 'meaningfully' addressing specific needs was further echoed by a male RDA participant, who observed: "It seems to be focus on just getting everybody to start thinking to starting a business regardless of whether it's the right career path" (DH, RDA).

Finally, we encountered a number of women entrepreneurs who framed legitimacy judgements of WEP based on the perceived impact of the support on their businesses. The poor reputation of some implementer organizations who were contracted to provide WEP support, led to negative propriety judgements from users:

"I'd heard of Business Gateway but I've heard so many bad things about it that I just thought I'm avoiding it because the last thing I want is somebody to put me down or put me off

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starting something...what are they going to tell me that I don't already know, basically?" (PH, Entrepreneur).

And, for those who had engaged support, evaluations of provision were equally scathing, with one entrepreneur commenting: "I'm sat there and somebody is teaching me how to administer a SWOT in a business…and this was supposed to be *the be all, end all* of SME support and we're doing – pardon my French – bloody SWOTs" (SV, Entrepreneur).

Esteem Framing

The final frame used to judge WEP echoes the 'relational' norm identified by Tost (2011, p. 690) whereby legitimacy is afforded to entities that affirm "individuals' social identities and bolsters their sense of self-worth." We specifically identified 'esteem' as a key judgement lens, which emerged as a strong theme amidst the highly politicized and contested nature of contemporary gender-identity debates (Marlow & Dy, 2017). Women entrepreneurs often rejected specialized support, and WEP more generally, on the basis that it undermined their status as competent business people. As SC, a successful women entrepreneur, reflects: "I get the equality, but I don't want to go out there and start saying I'm something different. I'm a business leader, my gender doesn't make a difference!" Such a view is reflected by other entrepreneurs who feel that WEP signifies a lower status relative to their peers.

Conversely, other entrepreneurs identified mainstream policy support as leaving them open to discrimination and sexism. For example, PG (Entrepreneur) noted that at traditional mixed-gender networking functions, some men treated events as a 'dating opportunity', in doing so challenging the self-image of women entrepreneur attendees:

"So, yes, it's almost like, do men take us seriously enough when we're actually at networking? Yes, we might have a skirt on, we might have high heels on, we might have a

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top that might be a blouse that shows a bit of chest, whatever, but we're not there to have a date. And that's where I'm coming from having the Women in Networking events because I know that's not going to happen at the Women in Networking event. I know it's clear-cut; I know we're there to do business; I know none of the women are going to come back to me and say *somebody emailed me and they're asking to go for a coffee, for a date*."

Lastly, many of those responsible for delivering policy support (implementer group) felt that ongoing association with women's enterprise policy threatened *their* overarching legitimacy with the mainstream user population. As one local enterprise agency manager observed: "We get a lot of complaints from men because we actually do so much for women-only entrepreneurs" (JL, Local Agency), an observation underlining the Janus-like complexity of delivering gender-segregated or affirmative action policies in addition to mainstream.

Externalizing Response Tactics

For the final component of our research question, we sought to discover how and when individual actors influence policy legitimacy by externalizing their judgements. Suddaby et al. (2017) argue that understanding the mechanisms by which people either withhold and express judgements can explain the 'illusion of consensus' observed by institutional theorists. To explore this intriguing aspect of enterprise policy institutionalization, we build on previous research by Lamin and Zaheer (2012) and others (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Oliver, 1991) to identify four response tactics deployed by individuals in the policy ecosystem. These ranged from responses that maintain or even strengthen the institution, to responses that overtly reject and seek to discredit WEP. We examine how these responses are related to the validity belief formed by evaluators, to piece

Supressed Judgement Tactic

As Bitektine and Haack (2015) note, it is possible for individual evaluators to form a low propriety evaluation of an entity that has high collective validity. In such cases, the perceived strength of the institution has some bearing on the likelihood of an individual expressing a deviant evaluation. Similarly, we found a common tactic for dealing with incongruent propriety judgements, was for individuals to supress negative judgements, thus maintaining the collective validity of the policy entity. This was evident within the policy-making group for example, where some individuals confided to us that they thought WEP was unfair and rarely worked yet felt powerful normative pressure to align with the ministerial agenda. As one Policy-maker noted "we have a political driver, and ministers want to be re-elected."

Insert Table 3 here

Championing Tactic

As the policy ecosystem reflects a diversity of opinions and perspectives, we encountered many individuals who passionately supported WEP. When these individuals sensed that the collective validity of WEP was weakened or under threat, they engaged in 'championing' activities that shored up or repaired the legitimacy of policy. This often entailed providing support and assistance that was not contracted for, and generally going 'above and beyond' normative expectations. This is exemplified by one enterprise agency head who said: "We think (support for women) is very important and one of the things we are

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working on - not because we are contracted to do it - we're doing it because it's the right

thing to do" (AW, Local Agency).

Playing-the-game Tactic

We encountered many instances of individual stakeholders paying 'lip service' to the

overall institution by abiding to minimum regulative or social expectations, while

simultaneously signalling disapproving legitimacy judgements to other stakeholders, often

triggering further propriety judgements in others. These individuals thought of themselves as

'playing-the-game' to either avoid conflict, maintain personal legitimacy, or acquire

resources, suggesting that there was at least a moderate, or conditional belief in the validity of

the WEP institution. Examples include women entrepreneurs who openly mocked women's

enterprise support, but nevertheless signed up and attended meetings in order to access

financial assistance. At the more extreme end, some enterprise agencies accepted funding to

provide dedicated women-only support, but in practice, fudged the contractual requirement

by directing women entrepreneurs towards a beefed-up mainstream offering. Such

decoupling (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992) has a deinstitutionalizing effect as other stakeholders

who observe the intransigencies, either through changes to everyday practices or through

signalling from fellow stakeholders, are likely to form a lower validity belief of WEP which

may affect subsequent legitimacy judgements.

Guerrilla Tactics

Although rarer, there were instances of individual stakeholders electing to defy or

reject women's enterprise policy as a legitimate institution. These included our 'non-user'

women entrepreneur cohort who were each entitled to business assistance and financial

resources, but purposively withdrew support for the policy institution. In many instances, this

involved publicly denouncing the policy and working to institutionalize mainstream

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enterprise policy instead. Other examples included an 'implementer', who, many years ago

had pioneered women-only support in the UK but recently decided to end segregated

practices owing to a belief that gender discrimination had been ameliorated:

"Then a few years later and I had got half of my women advisers as women anyway and a lot

of things had changed, the attitude of the banks had changed, banks no longer laughed at

women who wanted funding, they wanted to see their proposal and there didn't seem to be

any real issues and we did a little bit of research, they said they were not bothered whether

we see a man or women. We then disbanded the women's agency because more often than

not they would be seeing a woman, and we treated them the same, and there was no big

issue" (JL, Local Agency).

Such a decision to move away from providing gender-segmented support is

significant, as it typically entails sacrificing legitimacy with other ecosystem actors,

particularly policy-makers. Guerrilla tactics thus constituted a potent though costly means of

resistance.

A MODEL OF WOMEN'S ENTERPRISE POLICY LEGITIMACY

We have now reported the circumstances in which individual actors enter into

evaluative mode in the policy ecosystem, how they frame their legitimacy judgements and

then how they engage in legitimacy work to externalize these judgements. Drawing upon our

ethnographic case study and interviews with three groups of stakeholders, we propose a

model explaining how individual legitimacy judgements and their related actions influence

the macro-level validity of the WEP institution. We do so by synthesizing previous

theoretical models by Tost (2011) and Bitektine and Haack (2015) with our inductive

findings, to identify two recursive processes underpinning the contemporaneous

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institutionalizing and deinstitutionalizing of WEP (Figure 2). The first process, which we term the *legitimacy repair loop*, refers to judgements resulting in actions that maintain or strengthen ongoing policy institutionalization. The second, which we term *the delegitimizing loop*, describes how negative propriety judgements, which are in some way externalized by individuals, contribute to an erosion of the generalized validity of the policy institution and consequently, the deinstitutionalizing of policy.

While it is possible to trace a course of action between a single judgement externalization and a significant shift in the collective validity of policy, typically in cases where a powerful or centrally important figure expresses the judgement (e.g. a politician or leading industry figure), aggregate changes to policy legitimacy are typically found to happen in a more gradual manner, often enacted by non-powerful actors. To illustrate this dynamic, we invoke a biological metaphor to describe a 'viral' amplification effect that judgement externalizations can trigger. In our model, this occurs when the judgement response tactics of one actor triggers a propriety judgement in others. This amplification effect is only halted when individual actors either suppress judgement owing to normative constraints, or because they intrinsically support the policy, triggering the *legitimacy repair loop*. Elucidating these dynamics, we respond to Gray, Purdy, and Ansari (2015, p. 35) who identify a need to better understand how "micro dynamics concatenate to yield an institutionalized social order."

Insert Figure 2 here

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

It has been our ambition to unravel the puzzle of why women's enterprise policy has struggled to substantively increase rates of small business ownership by women

entrepreneurs. To do so, we conducted an in-depth, inductive analysis of the UK policy ecosystem to explore the complex, but hitherto under-investigated, processes underlying policy institutionalization. Our literature review identified only a few studies conceptualizing enterprise policy as a dynamic social institution (Arshed et al., 2014), with many WEP studies focusing on static or instrumental analyses of policy (e.g. Wilson et al. 2004; Orser et al, 2017). Furthermore, our review established that the legitimacy of WEP has not been considered in relation to policy institutionalizing; something we considered a limitation given the intrinsic relationship between legitimacy and institutionalization (Colyvas & Powell, 2006). We responded to these two gaps by developing a theoretical model that bridges a social psychological legitimacy perspective with institutional theory, to show how competing legitimacy judgements within the policy ecosystem might negatively affect the institutionalization, and hence efficacy, of WEP. Our research provides a number of further implications for enterprise policy theory which we will now address in more detail.

Distributed agency in the enterprise policy ecosystem

Our study addresses limitations in past WEP research where ecosystem actors have been marginalized in theory, thereby overlooking their potential agency in policy institutionalizing processes. Perhaps understandably, the primary focus of gender-based enterprise research has been on the individual (female) entrepreneur (Hughes et al., 2012). Yet, recently, scholars have highlighted the need to "study both the resource providers and the connectors within the ecosystem" (Foss et al., 2018, p. 2). We believe this is a particularly instructive call, as our empirical case reveals ways in which notionally peripheral actors (e.g. non-using women entrepreneurs, business advisors) can materially influence the generalized validity of WEP, and therefore policy institutionalization.

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Furthermore, our ethnographic analysis of the enterprise policy ecosystem enabled us to observe the policy institution from the rarely utilized micro-interactional vantage point. Here we connected to practice-based approaches in institutional theory literature (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), which posits that institutions are reproduced through the effortful accomplishment of actors (Jarzabkowski, 2005). We suggest this offers a much-needed corrective to the balance of the WEP literature, which has mostly examined policy as it is reproduced through high-level discourses, typically involving policy documentation (Ahl & Nelson, 2015). While these policy texts are a vital source of data for understanding enterprise policy structures, they offer little guidance as to how policy is reproduced through practice. Thus, through our ethnographic perspective, it becomes possible to observe the mundane reproduction of WEP through meetings, coffee breaks and other episodes of practical work where individuals adapt WEP within the constraints of their own local contexts and networks of relations. While our model identifies a viral effect, where diverging individual legitimacy judgements and response tactics can be amplified by triggering legitimacy judgements in others, we suggest more work is required to understand how this distributed agency integrates to become "more than the sum of its parts" (Lawrence, 2017, p. 1792).

Studying individual-level WEP legitimacy judgements also led us to some surprising findings around judgement framing. We discovered for example, that the notional 'stakeholder' categories we identified in our research (e.g. women entrepreneur, implementer and formulator), which we though may reflect the 'thought worlds' in Lamin and Zaheer's (2012) Wall Street versus Main Street distinction, did not hold in our study. Across the three judgement framing categories (fairness, impact, esteem), there was scant evidence of any consistency by stakeholder type in terms of which frame was invoked and whether a positive or negative propriety judgment was formed. This underlines the lack of any strong

conformity of opinion across policy ecosystem stakeholder groups[1]. It also affirms that that macro-level 'consensus' (Suddaby et al., 2017) afforded to WEP is not replaced by meso-level group 'consensus', in turn obscuring individual examples of distributed agency that *actually* drive change (e.g. Lawrence, 2017; Van Wijk, Stam, Elfring, Zietsma, & Hond, 2013). These findings underline the need to further explore the heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs (Hughes et al., 2012) and other policy ecosystem stakeholders to fully understand policy institutionalization.

Gender and Enterprise Policy

Our study also sheds new light on how the social positioning of women in enterprise policy can influence their entrepreneurial activity. Scholars have observed, for example, that masculine norms shape both entrepreneurial meanings and practices (Ahl, 2006; Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Datta & Gailey, 2012; Malmström et al., 2017). In a recent study of women's enterprise policy discourse from Sweden and the USA, Ahl and Nelson (2015) found that the subordination of sex-segregated policy contributed to the 'othering' of women-owned businesses in the economy. Here, reification of women as somehow 'lesser' or inferior to men, was institutionalized across society through policy support measures that were developed and delivered by national governments and partner organizations. Our study builds upon these recent insights into policy discourse formulation (Ahl & Nelson, 2015; Arshed et al., 2014) by elaborating on the practical consequences of gendered social positioning to the ensuing policy institutionalization. This was achieved through exploring the 'other side' of the policy process, which examined how policy is institutionalized (and deinstitutionalized) through the everyday practices of actors in the policy ecosystem. Notably, our study differed

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[1] Our theoretical categories revealed some strong thematic patterns, however these spanned the various stakeholders and did not closely correspond to specific groups.

from other feminist and post-feminist analyses of enterprise policy, by exploring how male social actors - in addition to female - experience and reproduce gendered institutions, something Ahl and Nelson (2010) have called for to add depth to gender-based critiques of entrepreneurship.

We also found ample evidence of the reification of gender stereotyping (Gupta, Turban, Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009) of male and female businesses in policy and support services (Marlow and McAdam, 2012). Here, our work echoes Saridakis, Marlow, and Storey (2014), who identified a bias towards the 'feminized' social (i.e. caring roles and domestic responsibilities) rather than the 'masculine' economic sphere for women making self-employment decisions. This finding suggests that the top-down reproduction of stereotypical gender norms through policy is problematic for successful policy implementation (Tillmar, 2007), a finding that also surfaces in analyses of ethnic minority entrepreneurs in terms of racial stereotyping (Ram, Trehan, Rouse, Woldesenbet, & Jones, 2012). Finally, we were able to further contribute to these studies by outlining the consequences of perpetuated subordination in enterprise policy support, in the form of 'playing-the-game' and 'guerrilla' response tactics, that we show can reduce the generalized validity of WEP.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study yields some practical insights that might be leveraged to improve the efficacy of enterprise policy. Firstly, policy-makers should move beyond a narrow focus on the external legitimacy of policy (i.e. the legitimacy of policy with voters) to consider how the internal legitimacy of policy (i.e. with ecosystem stakeholders) is better managed. In a practical sense, this means giving more consideration to the impacts of pursuing political strategies that trigger legitimacy judgements, particularly relating to the frequently shifting agendas or 'initiative churn' (Greene & Patel, 2013) that we show can destabilize the policy

institution. Policy-makers should also consider the implications of pursuing ambitious policies without commensurate resources for enterprise agencies and other implementers. Our findings show that individuals in these organizations form negative 'impact' judgements under such circumstances and engage in deinstitutionalizing behaviours that ultimately undermine the policy. Finally, our study reopens the debate on mainstream versus gender-segregated policies (Carter et al., 2015). While our findings reveal passionate support for both sides of the argument across various stakeholder groups, we believe the amplification of negative judgements can be so profound that WEP is unlikely to attain 'taken-for-grantedness' with a critical mass of ecosystem stakeholders (including, many potential policy beneficiaries), and therefore will struggle to achieve a 'self-reinforcing' (Colyvas & Powell, 2006) state in the face of persistent bottom-up resistance. While this is not intended as a moral judgement on the appropriateness of WEP, it is a practical consideration that nevertheless should have some bearing on future policy decisions.

While we believe our study has relevance to policy institutionalization in other socio-economic contexts, we recognize that caution must be applied when generalizing from single-case studies. We identify some important boundary conditions and limitations to our model. Firstly, our study takes place in the UK, which has a highly developed and well-funded ecosystem that grants a significant degree of autonomy to implementer organizations. Hence, while there are evidently pressures to conform to normative evaluations of policy legitimacy (particularly to secure funding), the scale of enterprise support organizations and agencies across the UK inevitably creates scope for conflicting legitimacy evaluations (for example, shortly before our empirical materials were collected, it was estimated that 3,000 general enterprise support schemes existed in the UK (National Audit Office, 2006)). It is reasonable to assert therefore, that countries with a less complex ecosystem, less competition for funding between implementer organizations, and a more homogenous population with less specialized

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support needs, may not be subject to the same bottom-up resistance to WEP depicted by our model.

Second, while we undoubtedly benefited from the rich data afforded by our ethnographic study, we relied significantly on interview data to elicit legitimacy judgements. Such a method, while common in LAP studies (see Huy et al., 2014 for example), means data is subject to post-hoc rationalization which could subtly obscure linkages between judgements and response tactics. We suggest future research therefore extends upon our approach to use emerging methods such as experience sampling methodology which can reduce biases and improve the ecological validity of process studies to capture distributed judgements and responses, as they happen (Uy, Foo, & Aguinis, 2010).

Finally, our work carries some further implications for women's enterprise scholars. Specifically, we draw attention to criticisms of policy recommendations offered by the women's enterprise literature over the previous 30 years, which are held to be vague and neglectful of gender structures (Foss et al., 2018). Our legitimacy-based account of WEP can therefore guide future studies in developing actionable, pragmatic policy recommendations that are cognisant of the likely resistance they will face when introduced to the policy ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

Given the vast sums invested in enterprise development and support, it is perhaps surprizing that there have been so few insights into how legitimacy shapes policy institutionalizing. Our study responds by providing a detailed account of the origins and aggregated effects of individual legitimacy judgments and externalization work within the women's enterprise policy field. Such a perspective provides new insights into the agency of policy ecosystem stakeholders and the effects of subordinating women through enterprise

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policy, something that we argue has significant implications for how policy-makers engage

women-business owners in the future.

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Table 1: Research sites and data sources

Stakeholder Group	Actors, Roles & Group Description	Research Setting(s)	Data Sources
Formulators	The Enterprise Division of BIS was the core governmental department devoted to high-level policy design. Agenda setting, resource & funding allocations were primarily dictated by government ministers and senior civil servants. Research, public consultation & dissemination, communication with the implementation network was carried out by a hierarchy of policy officers	Enterprise Division, BIS. Central London.	Interviews (8 senior policy makers; 2 senior civil servants) 3 months full-time participant observation, researcher diary, follow-up enquiries* Observational notes from 32 meetings Secondary/archival data (The 'Green Book', 'White papers', internal memos, organizational hierarchy maps)
Implementers	RDAs were responsible for improving regional competitiveness, building institutional capacity & fostering partnerships with local level delivery agents. RDA board comprised of business owners & representatives from local government, trade unions & voluntary organizations. The board was supported by a managerial & admin staff of 100+	RDA HQ, West Midlands	Interviews (4 RDA staff; 9 local agency advisors) Secondary/archival data (promotional descriptions of services offered, advisor training guidelines) 7 of the 32 observed meetings conducted within central government also involved representatives from RDAs and other associated delivery bodies
	Local advisory agencies represent the public facing hubs of the enterprise support system, and were typically located in easily accessible high-street sites. Their business support provision primarily took the form of by-appointment advisory services & support workshops	9 local advisory branches throughout the West Midlands	
Users	During 2009, there were an estimated 1.1 million self-employed females (Labour Force Survey, 2009-10). Government figures for the 2009-10 period (BIS, 2011) indicate that 55 per cent of women-led SMEs had sought external advice or information on matters affecting their business	Entrepreneur's typical place of business	Interviews (22 policy-using and non-using women entrepreneurs, 11 of each) Secondary/archival data (advisor/client correspondence, advisor recommendations)

*While on site, the lead author primarily engaged with actors that were responsible for policy formulation tasks (responding to ministerial queries, collating research evidence, preparing policy outputs dissemination). However, as BIS required to liaise with a range of implementing agencies, regional development bodies, and end user groups, our ethnographic collection also captured policy enactment practices undertaken by a diversity of relevant actors.

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Figure 1: Data structure and themes

First-order concepts	2nd-order themes	Aggregate dimensions

Frequent alterations to core policy messages (e.g. announcements and policy 'fads')
Incongruences between top-down and localized objectives (e.g. target setting)
Insufficient 'bedding in' time allowed to carry out top-level agenda changes

> Shifting strategic agendas

Verbal and non-verbal micro-interactions between policy stakeholders
Public discourse surrounding the policy institution
Signals from external actors (e.g. external policy evaluations)

> Signalling from other stakeholders

> **Evaluative Triggers**

Challenges associated with disentangling 'mainstream' and 'specilaist' provision
Unfavourable performance comparisons with mainstream services

> Competing policy institution

Women face specific barriers and/or circumstances; therefore, it is right to address these
Women do things, or think, differently and policy needs to cater to this
Gender is an arbitrary (and therefore unfair) way of segmenting support provision
Policy should cater to all entrepreneurs; specialisation unfairly marginalises other groups

> Fairness framing

WE policy is legitimate if it has positive impact on the wider economy
WE policy is legitimate if it has positive impact on individual businesses
WE policy focuses too much on 'lip service' and 'box-ticking' rather than tangible impacts
Tangible outcomes of WE policy are not worth the effort and/or resources

> Impact framing

> **Propriety Judgement Framing**

Specialist women-only policy builds the confidence of policy users
Supporting WE policy is a source of personal pride
Specialist women-only policy undermines actors and makes women look weak

> Esteem framing

Actors engage fully with institution despite negative judgement
Actors surpress negative externalizations

> Surpress

Actors identify threats to the policy institution
Actors work to reapair institutional instability

> Champion

> **Externalizing Response Tactics**

Actors display symbolic-only alignment with the policy institution
Actors draw resources and other benefits from the institution while disparaging it

> Playing the game

Actors work to champion alternative policy agendas
Actors disengage from or disidentify with the policy institution

> Guerilla

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Table 2: Judgement frames employed by WEP stakeholders

Framing Category	Judgement Orientation	Description	Representative Data
Fairness	Positive Judgements	It is legitimate to cater to underrepresented groups	I think there's an equity element. If you look at the headline figures in particular women are under-represented in terms of business ownership. There's a huge resource there that's not being capitalised on (Policy-maker 6).
			To me, [WE Policy] is obviously very important. People should be given the opportunity to show what their ideas are and to make them happen, irrespective of their background or gender (Policy-maker 1).
		Women face specific barriers and/or circumstances; therefore, it is right to address these	I'm not saying that there aren't men that lack confidence or fear of failure, but if it's mainly a women's issue there must be enough flexibility to give as many women as you need to help support (Policy-maker 6).
			It's becoming clear that women have a different way of doing things. We're now finding about the impact of our sort of brain wiring or the impact of hormones. Feminists have been very nervous about this argument because you know it's the whole biological determinism argument which is usually used against women (Policy-maker 8).
	Negative Judgements	Gender shouldn't matter; women are no different	You need a policy that's relevant to your business, not necessarily relevant to you just because you're a woman (JS, Entrepreneur).
			The line of business I'm in is female-oriented but generally in business it shouldn't matter whether you're male or female really (BP, Entrepreneur).
		Gender is an arbitrary (and therefore unfair) way of segmenting support provision	One of the things that drives me mad when women are talked about as a homogenous group 'oh well let's just print it like that and all women will come to that' (Policy-maker 4).
			I don't think it's important to separate; what about a man who is shy or who lacks confidence…or what about people from Africa? Should they have agencies for Africans? I think there is enough agencies out there. I think it's the person; who you are (IA, Entrepreneur).
		Policy should cater to all entrepreneurs; specialisation unfairly marginalises other groups	Sometimes there's an over-emphasis on one issue [women's entrepreneurship] to the exclusion of others, supporting everyone equally is important. We get a lot of complaints from men because we actually do so much for women-only entrepreneurs (JW, Local Agency).
			I think it should be for everybody because if you were to have one just for men then there would be an uproar so I think you should have the same for women (SB, Entrepreneur).
Impact	Positive Judgements	WE policy is legitimate if it has positive impact on the wider economy	[WE Policy] is a really important area. This isn't just a nice to do. This is an actual economic sense to do it. This is about closing the productivity gap (Policy-maker 4).
		WE policy is legitimate if it has positive impact on	Policy has to be about looking at what is the evidence base tells us, what is working well, what polices appear to be helping women develop businesses or grow businesses? And where are the gaps? Good enterprise policy will be

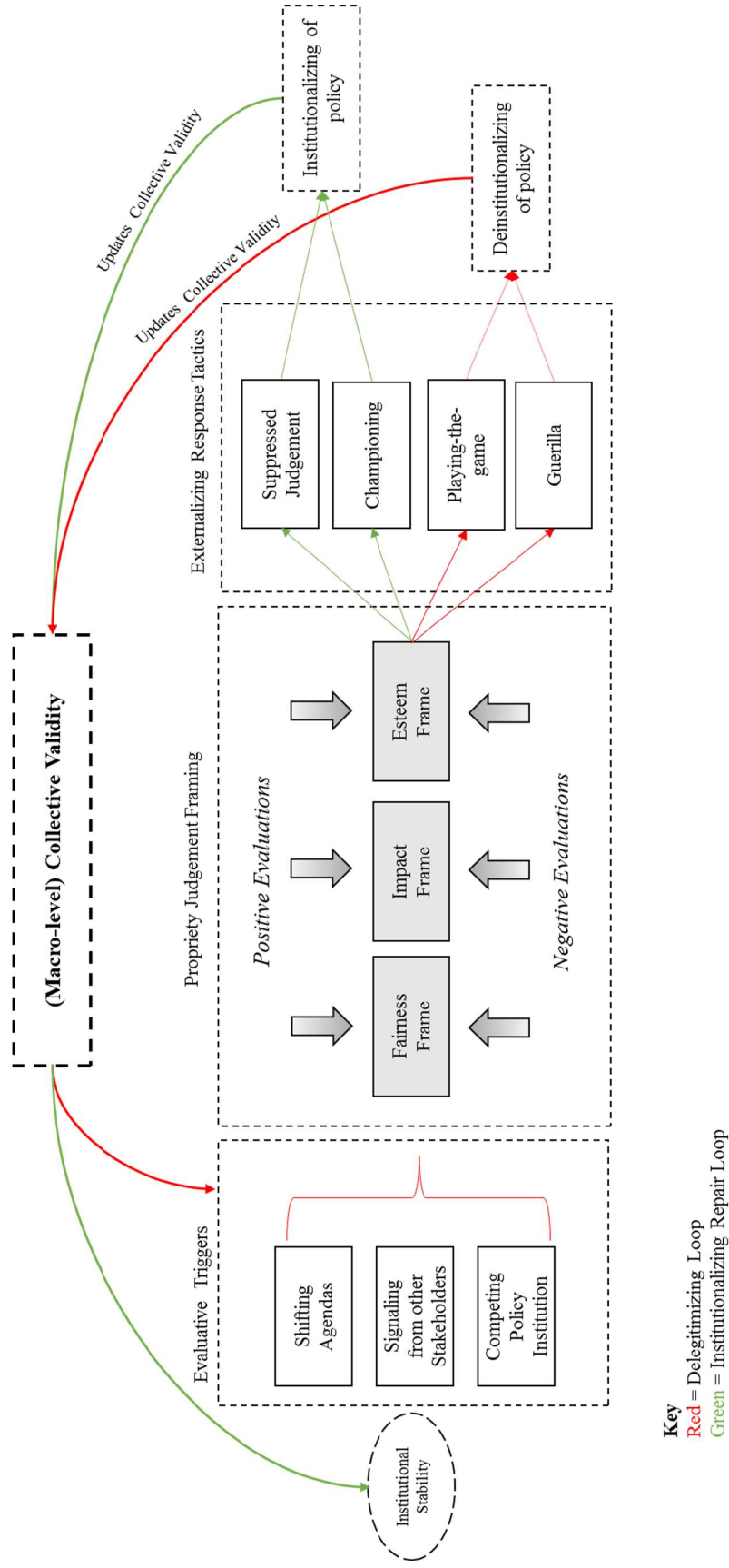|			
		individual businesses	looking at those market failures and those barriers continue to and will be addressing them (Policy-maker 5).
	Negative Judgements	WE Policy focuses too much on 'lip service' rather than tangible impacts	Some of them [policy making agencies] continue to do lots of research on women's enterprise and take very little action and it tends to be focused on bringing out a new leaflet or a website. So, it's lip service (Policy-maker 8).
			I'm not sure how much is being done [for women entrepreneurs] but I think some of it is lip service (PH, Local Agency).
		Having specialist policies undermines the impact of mainstream support provision	I think anything that's slightly more specific, often it becomes under-funded, it can become weakened by not being part of the mainstream (Policy-maker 2).
			I think there is an attitude from the mainstream that the gender-based provision is not of as high a quality as mainstream provision, it's seen as an add on. There is a danger if there is too much gender provision the mainstream provision which is of high quality may suffer (AR, Local Agency).
		Tangible outcomes of WE policy are not worth the effort and/or resources	Women only support; we can't afford it…we can't afford to run it…we've just been looking at our numbers and our achievement is as good as you could expect given that we don't do special things [for women] (KG, Local Agency).
			The unit cost of activity that sustains interactions with an individual client over a period, is beyond the cost of the contract we've got (PH, Local Agency).
Esteem	Positive Judgements	Specialist women-only policy builds the confidence of policy users	There's no doubt in my mind that you need something gender specific because there are issues about confidence and walking into a room trying to network when it's a room full of men (AR, Local Agency).
			If [women entrepreneurs] are surrounded by positive women who are there to support them, yes, that's a fantastic idea. Some women feel intimated by men…because you do actually have that where you go into somewhere and the guy automatically knows more because of your age and a woman is slightly more understanding about kids, etc. (CBD, Entrepreneur).
		WE policy is a source of personal pride	This year, we updated our strategy and I think maybe it's four of five years to say where we are now. And I'm really genuinely proud that when we first set up our strategy in 2005, which is slightly less time, we set a target to open 10,000 new women-owned businesses in the South East and we hit that target this year (Policy-maker 4).
			We think that providing services for women is important. Although it's not a formal part of our contract it's something we aspire to do (AL, Local Agency).
	Negative Judgements	Specialist women-only policy undermines actors and makes women look weak	There's a minority, we know it's a minority because we've asked women, say about 10-15%, who are quite offended and actively not interested in targeted provision (Policy-maker 8).
			I don't see why women should be treated as a special case. I think the idea is patronising. I can't imagine how the contents of such programmes would differ from those given to men (CM, Entrepreneur)

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Table 3: Externalized judgement responses

Response Tactic	Validity Belief	Propriety Judgement	Description	Representative Data
Supressed Judgement	High	Low	Individual evaluator withholds negative propriety judgement owing to high validity belief.	It's not always effective in that ambition because we are essentially we are a contractor and at times that is put very clearly to us, that, that is our job and we must fulfil the terms of the contract. Despite whatever our goals might be in regards to specific client groups or priorities the buck stops with delivering the numbers, we have all sorts of issues around whether the numbers is the right thing to be aiming at (KG, Local Agency)
Championing	Low/medium	High	Individual evaluator acts to repair or strengthen the generalized validity of an entity they form high propriety judgement of.	There are times during the year where agendas change so therefore we're asked to do certain things which are not necessarily within our remit but we are a pro-active organization and we are quite used to quick change and working in changing directions (AR, Local Agency).
'Playing the game'	Medium/high	Medium/Low	Individual evaluator symbolically complies with expectations but signals negative propriety judgements to others and engages in divergent practices.	I think when I start to take it to the next level then I'll probably have another go and look at what's out there. I mean, I'm a business woman so I'm not going to say no if the funding is gender oriented but that would not be my first choice (SH, Entrepreneur).
Guerrilla	Low/medium	Low	Individual evaluator fundamentally questions the existence of the institution and works to delegitimize and deinstitutionalize the entity through new practices, in spite of potential sanctions.	I sit in two camps with gender. Having been in the business environment since I started I've come across discrimination, of course, particularly in the '80s and early '90s but I've worked extremely hard to prove myself that I'm not better, no worse than any other male business leader, entrepreneur. So, when we start to now segregate and institutions like Women in Management which is a spin off from the Chartered Management Institute, they keep saying to me "why aren't you joining us?" I'm still uncomfortable about trying to move back to something that I've worked very hard to move away from (SC, Entrepreneur).

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Figure 2: A Model of legitimacy judgements and WEP Institutionalizing