



## Transgressive desires: new enterprising selves in the new capitalism

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### **ABSTRACT**

The growth of self-employed enterprise and the supposed ascendancy of the 'enterprising self' are commonly associated with the forces of flexibilization and individualization in contemporary work arrangements. What is driving these forces and their effects can be understood, in part, by examining what psychoanalytic theory would name *desire*. The focus here is upon the dynamics of desire among individuals who leave jobs to enter the growing ranks of the self-employed. Drawing from findings of a qualitative study of such new women entrepreneurs across Canada, changing concepts of the enterprising self are explored with specific attention to the relations between their desires and their conception of work. This article addresses three questions in particular: How is desire enmeshed in the development of enterprising selves? How do women come to desire work through self-employed enterprise, often entailing personal and economic pain? Do these desires configure possibilities for new alternatives in enterprise? The study findings suggest not only that contradictory desires are closely integrated with identity in the transition to enterprise, but also that some women's desires appear to form resistance to aspects of conventional models of business development. Through analysis informed by psychoanalytic theories of desire, these impulses are named 'transgressive desires' and their importance is demonstrated in their links to the new models of entrepreneurship that seem to be appearing among these women's enterprises.

### **KEY WORDS**

desire / enterprising self / learning / psychoanalytic theory / self-employment

In what some have called the 'new capitalism' of neo-liberal<sup>1</sup> knowledge economies, (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996), the conception and organization of work are increasingly animated by twin forces of flexibility and individualization. Workers, including those in the technical-professional-managerial group, are expected to adapt themselves to conditions of flexible jobs, flexible knowledge and skills, and flexible work locations. Gee (2000) claims that individuals' employability has become dependent on their ability to flexibly 'shape shift' for new projects in fast-changing circumstances, while du Gay (1996) has argued that the 'enterprising self' has become the driving identity in the so-called new economy. This is the new ideal of individualization, where individuals are self-reliant, engaged in continuous reflexive self-assessment and self-marketing. Much critical concern has been voiced about the effects on workers of flexible specialization and responsiveness demanded in the post-Fordist or 'new capitalism' organizations (Edwards, 1998; Garrick and Usher, 2000). These effects are suggested to include increased anxiety, deteriorating collectivity and solidarity, work intensification and a subjection of life and community to the marketplace. Du Gay's (1996) portrayal of the 'enterprising self' is one of subservience to organizational needs – not emancipation.

What is driving these forces, effects and phenomena can be understood, in part, by examining what psychoanalytic theory would name *desire*. Social theorists adopting psychoanalytic concepts, such as Bracher (1993), Britzman (1998) and Todd (1997), have variously argued that the choices and changes observable in individuals and groups are shot through with contradictions and non-transparent psychic dynamics. Analyses should focus less on reported meanings and motivations and more on what is occurring under the surface of daily encounters: things resisted and ignored, the nature of longings, and the slippages among action, intention, perception of self and experience. At more macro-analytic levels, Deleuze and Guattari (1995) in an interview with Lothringer, have argued that capitalism is a formidable 'desiring machine': the monetary flux, the means of production, of manpower and of new markets, is all a flow of desire. All of economics, they contend, boils down not to ideology but to:

... investments of desire that cannot be confused with the investments of interest, and on which interests depend in their determination and distribution: an enormous flux, all kinds of libidinal-unconscious flows that make up the delirium of this society ... the true story is the history of desire.

Thus desire constitutes the very texture of society in its entirety, including its mechanisms of production and reproduction.

Nowhere may the contradictory phenomena of desire enacted in conditions of work – flexibilization and individualization – be more evident than among individuals who leave organizational employment to pursue self-employment. Entrepreneurism, particularly in small business and particularly among women, has been a fast-growing vocational sector in Canada (Lowe, 2000) as well as in Europe and the UK (OECD, 2000). Forms of entrepreneurism have expanded

to include 'boundaryless' and 'portfolio' employment (Sullivan, 1999) as well as increasing micro-enterprise and virtual enterprise networks (Lowe, 2000). This article centres on work-related desires of women who leave jobs to enter the growing ranks of the self-employed. Why they decide or are compelled to go solo, and how they manage themselves and their new work venture, were the foci of a recent qualitative study<sup>2</sup> of 109 of these individuals across Canada. The study was limited to women, as the burgeoning ranks of women entrepreneurs in the latter 1990s appeared to merit particular attention in Canada (Industry Canada, 1999). While gendered work conditions certainly play an important role in women's negotiation of enterprise, the issues surfacing in this study would appear to have wider implications, for reasons that will be made clear.

Among these enterprising selves, new energies of desire and work seem to emerge that resist 'the master discourse: economic competition and employee performance and productivity within a neo-liberal framework' (Forrester, 1999: 194–95). As this paper will illustrate, these women tell tales indicating conflicting desires enmeshed with empowerment, transformation and transgression of conventional capitalist models to create some sort of alternate vision of work. As analysis proceeded in a recent study of these narratives, described in later sections, complex and circular relationships were discernible between these enterprising women's knowledge, environments and desire. Specifically, participants' stories integrated work desires with personal desires. Aspirations, development of self as well as the enterprise, meanings of success, relationships and their emerging work environments appeared to be tightly interconnected. Some described negotiation of the marketplace and other cultural structures in apparent desires to carve out spaces in which to flourish socially, psychically, intellectually and economically. Some appeared to have crafted new patterns balancing work and personal/family life which transgressed dominant discourses of productivity, profit, knowledge and success.

Thus, through an examination of these women's developmental experiences and the forms of enterprise they create, this article argues for a reclaiming of the enterprising self. A psychoanalytic framework is employed to conceptualize *desire* at the heart of certain examples of enterprising work. The intent is not only to describe these examples, but also to explore how women *develop the desire* to mobilize a creative and transgressive impulse in enterprise, which somehow unfolds within and sustains itself alongside market discourses of global competition.

### **'Enterprising self', desire and work**

Before turning to the study findings, the two conceptualizations framing this discussion require clarification: the emergence of the 'enterprising self', and the utility of 'desire' as a site for analysing the enterprising self. Two literatures are brought together in this argument. The first is the 'individualization thesis'

advanced by Beck (1992) and others, portraying the reflexive self emerging in the 'risk society' of late modernity. The second is psychoanalytic literature examining psychic dynamics of human desire, which helps enrich and expand the 'enterprising self' conception.

### Risk, flexibility, and the new ideal of enterprise

According to Beck (1992: 87), the emergence of a risk society is accompanied by 'a social surge of individualization', where 'reflexive modernization dissolves the traditional parameters of industrial society: class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles'. That is, women confronting the anxieties attending global risk and uncertainty feel compelled to take personal responsibility for *choosing* and planning their own lives, including their education, careers, identities and general well-being. Self-discovery and reflection are primary processes in the project of designing one's self and life-path, by choosing and consuming among the myriad choices available in the global marketplace. The risks are both exciting and threatening; tantalizing with fantasies of limitless consumption and identity possibility, balancing high over deep pits of potential economic, environmental, social and personal disasters. Safety nets of community, family, mutual dependencies and social welfare are increasingly eroded in enterprise society. And of course, the nature of risk in choice-making and the availability of choices themselves continue to be distributed unequally along lines of wealth, gender and other structural dimensions. For Giddens (1991), the continuous question of 'How shall I live?' is to be explored by the individual through a range of ambiguous and insecure decisions, mobilizing a wide range of social and psychological information, and creating general existential anxiety: 'Living in the risk society means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence' (Giddens, 1991: 28).

The double-edged conditions of risk and danger have naturalized flexibility in so-called post-Fordist work environments. Edwards (1998) shows how in current regimes of reflexive modernization and flexible specialization, people must construct their own biographies as workers, choosing between different lifestyles, subcultures, social ties and identities. Awash in desires forming the cultural stew of western society's late modernity, the individual feels compelled to pursue personal development, purpose and fulfilment, relationships, creativity, even spiritual growth through employment. For their part, organizations desire and reward entrepreneurial workers who thrive on uncertainty, innovation and risk. Foucaultian notions of governmentality through self-regulation appear regularly in critiques of workplace appropriation of individuals' desires: 'Through the managerial discourse of "excellence", technologies of work (power) and technologies of the self (subjectivity) become aligned with technologies of success (motivation and enterprise) such that ... the government of work now passes through the psychological strivings of each and every indi-

vidual for self-fulfilment' (Garrick and Usher, 2000). In this new contractualism, the process of reflexive individuation works through individuals' and organizations' desires to produce a dominant worker subjectivity as autonomous and competitive, self-reliant and continuously innovative – in other words, an entrepreneur.

### Desire and the 'enterprising self'

Thus amidst the discourses of flexibility and individualization in work, the characteristics of an 'enterprising self' have gained ascendancy. Du Gay (1996) proposes that an 'ethos of enterprise' has pervaded all spheres of our consumerist risk society, such that the dominant project of individuals' lives is constructing and regulating their own human capital (their work capacities, biographies and success) in an 'enterprise of the self': 'The character of the entrepreneur ... must be seen as assuming an ontological priority' (du Gay, 1996: 181). The individual's circumstances are presumed irrelevant, as the enterprise discourse suggests that all possess the desire and opportunity to engage the enterprise of reflexively constructing their own human capital.

Du Gay (1996) argues that the language, priorities and conduct of enterprise are increasingly permeating cultural forms and social institutions. Other critical analyses of this 'enterprising self' discourse have worried about its obvious ignorance of structural inequities, and its repressive effects on workers' subjectivities (Garrick and Usher, 2000), blurring boundaries between individuals' private aspirations and their capacity to produce and consume. Smyth (1999) attacks the whole turn to enterprise culture as triumphal, individualist, economic rationalism threatening democratic, civic-minded community. In technologies regulating the enterprising self (such as the new emphasis on continuous learning in work) systemic problems are projected onto the individual, and represented as conditions of risk and personal responsibility in which one must choose wisely, or perish.

At the heart of this whole argument are questions about how the desire and capacity to be 'enterprising' in these ways is stimulated among particular individuals. In most organizations, consent to particular subjectivities such as the 'enterprising self' is not unproblematic in its manufacture, interrupted by dynamics of worker resistance, inertia and tensions produced by still-prominent Fordist hierarchies. The very energies animating enterprise ideals – active, self-responsible subjectivities that corporate organizations attempt to regulate – can be observed to have enabled individual refusal of corporate subjugation, and exploration of transgressive spaces. Parker and Slaughter (1994) show that the most enterprising individuals within organizations are in fact actively subverting 'empowerment' efforts to shape them as loyal, entrepreneurial employees. Besides, individuals vary in their capacity and willingness to be self-reflexive. And surely it is overstating the case to presume that the dominant desire of most work organizations is for entrepreneurial, creative, autonomous risk-takers –

when often such individuals are hardly tolerated, and when in any case the majority of jobs do not require high-level knowledge skills and innovative ability (Lowe, 2000).

Furthermore, entrepreneurship is not unitary. As I have indicated elsewhere (Fenwick, 2001), self-employed individuals negotiate multiple discourses and identities among which competitive individualism is not the most dominant. Others are negotiating 'portfolio work', an entrepreneurial orientation in which individuals create flexible packages of work arrangements to contract their skills in a variety of contexts (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Gee, 2000; Sullivan, 1999). Boundaryless workers (Arthur and Rousseau, 2000) flow in and out of entrepreneurial and employed work relations, expanding what constitutes enterprise, knowledge and success in work. In such conditions, what prompts diverse individual desires to be entrepreneurial, and how are these desires enacted in diverse ways?

### Desire: a psychoanalytic perspective

In *Learning Desire*, Todd (1997) employs psychoanalytic theory to turn this question slightly to ask: How do individuals understand and engage desire itself? How are conflicting desires at the heart of their encounters? She shows that desire is not a straightforward 'lack' of something compelling individuals to seek it, but can be understood in multiple ways. First, desire may be both learned and implicated in learning processes. For example, individuals may not have any desire to seek self-employment or to learn about enterprise until one or more experiences cause them to develop or *learn* a desire to learn more. The more general question is, How do people come to desire the work and knowledge that they currently pursue in their endeavours?

Second, the location and direction of desire is more complex than traditional psychological notions of innate 'human needs' and theories of human motivation would imply. As Todd (1997: 7) observes, 'There are conflicting desires at the heart of the [learning] encounter itself between what is said (what we say we want) and how we say it (the affective and psychical investments embedded therein; what is left unsaid)'. Psychoanalytic theorists claim that humans avoid confronting their deepest desires by projecting them onto objects – particular people, things, activities, knowledge and so forth. Bracher (1993) explains that the self is, in essence, these projections of desire to *have* some other things or *be* some other things, or to have others possess or desire one. Through the process of becoming social in a particular culture, people learn to represent or adapt some of these projections in particular language. They also learn which of these desires are allowed or even rewarded by a culture, which are disapproved of and repressed, and which have yet to be named.

To understand how particular desires develop, Todd (1997) suggests examining the individual's relations between the outside world of culture and objects of knowledge, and the inside world of psychic energies and dilemmas of relating to these objects of knowledge. These dilemmas unfold through struggles

between unconscious and conscious desires. The conscious mind is aware of unconscious rumblings but can neither access them fully nor understand their language. Britzman (1998) views learning as *interference* of conscious thought by unconscious desires, and the 'uncanny' psychic conflicts that result. Our desires and resistances for different objects, which Britzman argues we experience as matters of love and hate, create daily, disturbing inside-outside encounters that we attempt to ignore. But when we truly attend to these encounters we enter the profound conflicts of desire that are the most difficult truths about the self (Britzman, 1998).

These psychoanalytic concepts help raise new questions for examining the experiences of enterprising selves. How is desire enmeshed in their development? How do people come to desire work through self-employed enterprise, often entailing personal and economic pain? Do these desires configure possibilities for new alternatives in enterprise? These questions guide the discussion of the study that follows.

## Research context

In the empirical research underlying this argument, women who had left organizational employment to pursue self-employment were interviewed across Canada. The study employed an interpretive qualitative approach to explore the meanings women ascribed to their experiences of self-employment. Potential participants were solicited through snowball referrals, business and women's organizations and advertising. Criteria specified that a woman must have left a job with an organization to start an enterprise, and be still self-supported by the venture after four years. Participants were selected to represent a range of business sectors, types, sizes, provincial locations and communities. The 109 participants ranged in age from 29 to 72, with most (72%) between 35 and 54 years. A majority (62%) of enterprises were situated in the service sector (business services, education and health care), and the most common size (43%) was very small: two to five staff. Single-employee ventures were also common (34.8%): two-thirds of these sub-contracted or brought together associates for particular projects. Few (12%) had any formal business training. These demographic statistics, however, must be interpreted with caution; they are not in any way intended to be representative of women's self-employment, for the snowball sampling methods relied on participants' self-selection. Thus the study is limited to the experiences of those attracted to the study topic and methods, who felt comfortable being interviewed by white women academics, and who were able to make time for study participation.

In a personal, open-ended, reflective interview, each participant narrated her work-life history through the transition from organizational employment to developing her business, up to the present. Women explained specific challenges and their own reasons, as far as they understood them, for particular choices they made. They also described challenges they experienced and approaches to

meeting these challenges (strategies and resources). Each identified personal changes perceived over their time spent in self-employment, values and meanings of success that she felt had influenced her choices and changing self at various points of her story. All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed.

Data analysis began with an interpretive approach to examine participants' development processes. Each transcript was first analysed manually using qualitative coding methods described by Ely et al. (1991) to identify categories and themes for participants. Categories were determined according to topics emphasized by each woman. Individual life histories were prepared. In a second stage of comparative data analysis, categories derived from each individual transcript were compared across the 109 transcripts to identify shared themes and differences among participants' narratives. Working from these patterns, a master matrix of themes and subcategories was constructed and refined to examine the nature and process of developing an enterprise, and transitions self evident in the participants' experiences. The themes resulting from this interpretive analysis have been reported elsewhere (Fenwick, 2001).

But upon re-reading the women's words and re-thinking these rather too-decidable themes, subtle traces were evident of what Ellsworth (1997: 188) describes as 'chasms opened up by lived experience that map onto no known or authorized concepts, words, or arguments'. The theme categories contained but did not particularly help answer deeper questions about the nature of the enterprising self. Frequently participants iterated that they 'loved' their work as an adventuresome risk, that they were passionate in their search for creative challenge. Yet what inaugurated, sustained or fulfilled this love? The importance of desire was clear, as a productive, if perhaps contradictory, aspect of women's learning encounters in enterprise.

## Desires of women creating enterprise

Outlined in this section are three themes providing insight into relations of desire and learning, illustrated with examples of desires that seemed most compelling for these women. That desire is prominent in these self-employed women's experience of work was clear in their frequent references to love and even passion for what they were doing. Some, like one swimwear designer, said they entered self-employment because it was the only way to be paid for doing what they 'loved': 'The other definition of my success is that I truly am doing what my passion is, that desire... [designing fabric] and being in control of things' (I-55, 1999-03-17, p. 3).<sup>3</sup> This sense of total engagement provides such pleasure that some women, like this business image consultant, could not view it as work: 'While a lot of people find networking to be draining, for me it's a passion. I love meeting people and I'm able to connect people with people. ... so it's not work. I look at that as a little holiday' (I-06, 1999-03-8, p. 8). One woman who with two others had started a bakery that unexpectedly became a supplier to an international fast-food giant, said she could not see herself retir-



ing even though she was past 50 and now financially independent: 'I love to create the product, I love to write the books, I love to be able to keep the creative energy going in what you're doing. Well heck, you'd do it forever for free wouldn't you?' (I-76, 1999-05-07, p. 3). In fact, love of work activity itself became a driver, as one web designer explained: 'I find it hard sometimes to stop working because I'm so passionate about what I'm doing' (I-101, 1999-04-22, p. 10).

In traditional discourses and relations of work these terms of love are what Martusewicz (1997) calls 'outlaw desires'. Passion typically alludes to ecstasy – uncontained, unmanageable, irrational and potentially violent. In using such language, women resist bodiless, abstract versions of knowledge and work, and models of enterprise that distance the owner-manager from the business activity. Throughout their narratives, participants indicated specific desires as they talked about their needs in work, their goals and how these emerged, their meanings of success, the rewards and knowledge they valued. These encounters appeared fundamentally to be as much about learning as they were about work performance or production.

### First longings: contradictory desires

In this study, about two-thirds had left organizational jobs unhappily, citing reasons of serious ethical conflicts, lack of recognition and creative opportunity. Many said they started an enterprise because they longed for more freedom and control over their lives. For some, past jobs were stifling experiences with limited opportunity for taking initiative and exercising creative authority – but this realization came gradually. A former marketing director who opened a firm manufacturing small gifts, said:

I've worked for a lot of corporations and you know not having been told anything different I thought well that's just how everything goes ... I've honestly found that most of the companies that I worked for were really not interested in innovation. They were more interested in running the day to day. If I had been probably more alert I would have recognized it 20 odd years ago instead of trying to fight the system.

(I-27, 1999-09-14, p. 2).

Glass ceiling issues, frustration with organizational politics and hierarchies were also reasons cited for leaving a job. Many stated a desire to start their own business partly to gain control over their work, as well as to pursue different desires to realize a dream, create their own work environments, contribute meaningfully to their communities, and obtain more personal flexibility in their work and lives.<sup>4</sup> These reasons corroborate findings of other qualitative studies exploring women entering business-ownership (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Moore and Buttner, 1997.)

Desire was, therefore, an important focus in their conceptualizations of themselves in the business of enterprise. Most participants stressed a

fundamental desire for freedom – to determine how to manage their enterprise and their work activity. ‘I prefer to do things my way ... if I can take charge of something I do much better than having to always follow orders’, explained one woman who left a human resources job where she felt her ideas were slowed down by office politics and orders, and opened a grain brokerage:

That was a moment of realization – I knew I could do this because what I’m doing is a real benefit ... and if I take the concept of how I’m doing my business model compared to others out there, I have the best model. It’s different from everybody else. I do it the right way, the best way.

(I-105, 1999–10–05, p. 2)

A primary outcome of building and running an enterprise appeared to be increased confidence: the knowledge that one’s choices were as good or better than others’ advice. But this knowledge appeared to be both a burden and a source of power. A woman who left a lucrative sales position with a high-tech firm because she felt ‘trapped’ by supervisors’ views about what problems were worthwhile, opened an organic farm supplying herbs wholesale to restaurateurs:

Now I’m very good at solving problems because I am allowed to solve them. Yeah, all the problems that are created are my problems but at least I have the power to do something about them and the decisions that are made are my decisions ... I can take the responsibility and I can also have the power to change the situation.

(I-38, 1999–06–22, p.2)

Freedom brought complete and perpetual responsibility for one’s decisions. An independent bookseller explained, ‘I have a great jealousy for my staff who work 9:30–5:30 and go home and it’s all over. It never ends for me. I’m still thinking of things at 11 at night’ (I-40, 1999–04–21, p. 5). Work for many participants became intensified and elastic, stretching into home hours and family time, evenings and weekends. The constant overload was exhausting, yet several emphasized how much they enjoyed ‘work’ over any other activity: ‘I need work, I need projects I can throw myself into’. Although many participants claimed to want more ‘balance’ between family, work, and personal time, they often admitted making choices to prevent this balance. Some observed that while they thought they desired more flexibility and family time, in fact they discovered that more personal needs for creative challenge and expression of identity were at issue.

Control appeared to be one of these needs, and often presented a dilemma. Some women said they learned they had to give up control and trust others, stepping back from the centre of the enterprise both for its survival and their own. Yet this gives way to a fear of losing a personal imprint on their work by surrendering control to others. A woman whose firm consults to other women-owned businesses explained that delegation is difficult for new enterprise-owners: ‘How to retain control when you’re not in the driver seat on every single thing. And that’s a big challenge ... to find business processes that have

control in place without controlling it, women doing it themselves' (I-49, 1999-05-26, p. 6). A beauty-shop owner said she learned over time that 'the whole control thing uses so much energy you just don't last. ... It's not about that – it's about believing that there's a space out there for everyone, we all work together' (I-99, 1999-06-21, p.3).

Thus desires related to the major work transition of leaving a job to create an enterprise are often contradictory. Reasons given for leaving by participants in this study reflect a combination of what others have called 'push' and 'pull' factors governing women's reasons for starting a business (Moore and Buttner, 1997). But as Cohen and Mallon (1999) have also pointed out, there is rarely clear division between these factors: they are complex and integrated, and sometimes conflicting.

### Learning desire, and working through its conflicts

After a taste of entrepreneurial life, many participants noted the stimulation of unpredictable activity. *Challenge* appeared to be a prominent desire. Many indicated discovering what they wanted to know as they confronted particular problems, and realized that they had to take responsibility for managing these. Innovation and trial-and-error were the most commonly employed strategies for problem-solving. In these processes intuition was described variously as being alert to new information, observing subtle cues and being confident in one's own breakthrough ideas. One woman, who designed most items manufactured in her internationally exporting home decor firm, explained how she envisaged a new, successful product line:

I just spent eight days [at a show] in Atlanta and so I research there by just the look and the feel – what is going on here? And so you have to be able to say, ok, ribbons. ... So you'd get this feel like 'I think bows are coming in'.

(I-50, 1999-06-29, p. 5).

A second strong desire implied in many participants' stories was *servicing through relationship*: serving clients, sometimes at great personal sacrifice; and serving staff by creating, as the owner of a 70-fleet aircraft service explained, 'a place for people to come to work where they enjoy themselves, that was very important' (I-28, 1999-05-12, p. 4). Serving employees frequently was described in terms of creating nurturing work environments, and honouring their work. As the owner of a speakers' bureau described:

We need to treat [staff] with dignity, whatever we want back from them, we need to do things – we need to show them by example and we need to cultivate an environment in which they will have both dignity and respect. And when you do that, the most difficult of people respond. But it takes courage ... to care.

(I-73, 1999-06-21, p. 6)

*Servicing* in these terms transcends transactional exchange of goods and services for compensation. There is emphasis on developing long-term caring bonds

with most people connected to the enterprise, even competitors. As some women became aware of their potential to exert long-term positive effects on their communities, their enterprise began focusing on *making a contribution* to the broader community. Reputation, being recognized for high quality, ethical work by those one respected, became very important for many participants. Here may be the desire for recognition, for becoming the object of another's (client's, community's) desire. In psychoanalytic terms, perhaps striving to fulfil the customer's desire fulfils an individual's own desire to come into presence through the other's desire.

Participants' desires appeared to shift and change over time as their businesses and lives changed. When particular desires became fulfilled, new desires emerged. For example, survival or achieving business viability was often an early desire. This often transformed later into seeking new challenges for the business direction or a more tightly focused niche, wishing for more personal time, or recognizing that one's desire is most fulfilled through relationships or the sense of good reputation. A few participants who had experienced several years of volatility in running a small enterprise indicated experiencing a decline in aggressive personal ambition, or tendency to focus more on rewarding daily activities than long-term goals. Overall, a clear movement for many appeared to be a gradual clarification over time of these desires.

### Coming to presence in one's enterprise: clarifying desires

The popular notion of following one's dream by starting an enterprise requires both clarity to understand one's work desires and courage to enact them. An enterprise often represents a vision of something new, which departs from previous models. Women had to invent their business into being, convince themselves and others that it was real, and learn everything to make it work – simultaneously figuring out business goals, financing, a unique product or service, customer relations, marketing, accounting, staff management and operational processes. As the process unfolds, business owners must continually define and redefine the changing shape of both the enterprise and their own enterprising self as these emerge together. As one woman who founded a news magazine explained, the 'coming out' – when she first found herself talking confidently about the enterprise as a real thing – is a major threshold of identity and learning. She said she had difficulty 'owning' this creation as hers, or recognizing the bold decisive self that she had become as its creator (I-86, 1999–05–26, p. 3).

Many women interviewed claimed that the systematic, pre-determined goals development required by standard models of business planning and development didn't fit their experience. One business start-up consultant explained that the business plan, with its logic of prediction and control and ethic of competitive profit-and-loss, was incongruent with many women's preferred approach:

Business planning to me is really exciting and its creating. ... Business planning is not just – I mean business language is very – I don't want to bring in the whole gender thing, but it is very male and it is also very rigid and almost confrontational. Like competition, strengths, weaknesses, you know, all of that language is – it's a real battlefield kind of flavour and that's not what my vision of business is. ... You need to understand your competition, not to know how to steal, but to know who's out there so that you can when someone comes to you, you, if you can't serve them, be able to refer them, refer and there's so many out there and there's so much business for everybody and so much energy and money.

(I-15, 1999-03-03, p. 14)

Enterprise purposes for many participants seemed to emerge over long periods through gradual clarification: 'rear-view mirror planning'. Women indicated that this process of focusing the enterprising desire was an important site for their learning: figuring out exactly what one wants (identifying the work activity that is creatively challenging, holds meaning and affirms a desired identity), naming and refusing what one doesn't want, and determining which among these is marketable. One woman who started a human resources consulting firm explained:

I have no intentions because I always believe there is something else around the corner. I don't want to commit myself to something and disappoint somebody. Where else it will take me I don't have a clue yet. I just don't have a clue ... because every day in this business I meet more people and make more connections and that takes you to new adventures. You never know what's going to happen.

(I-74, 1999-04-20, p.4)

Other knowledge and skill required to conduct an enterprise described by participants also seemed more fluid and personal than popular concepts of intellectual capital or transferable knowledge appear to imply. Technical knowledge related to financing, marketing and product development often changed from project to project or year to year. In fact, these entrepreneurial women, while emphasizing the importance of learning processes to the emergence of their enterprise, often had difficulty articulating actual 'lessons learned', i.e. 'knowledge' accumulated from a series of problem-solving 'learning' work activities. They claimed difficulty in generalizing knowledge from one specific situation to the next. Rapid shifts continually altered their relationships with suppliers, other providers, economic conditions and policies. Changing customer demands required continual innovative experiments. Unanticipated opportunities – and inspiration – continually presented themselves. One individual who ran a management consultancy firm described knowledge as something that emerged during the doing of a project, among the group of people involved in a particular project; then it was on to 'the next thing':

When we've achieved that, we're finished with that. I'm going to try the next thing – whatever it may be. I love spontaneity. Let's not plan this for a year, why don't we just figure it out and do it tomorrow morning?

(I-1, 1999-06-17, p.2)

Thus knowledge developed quickly as a figure-it-out response to dilemmas that arose from start to finish in the doing of a project, ranging in nature from instrumental problems related to finance or manufacturing, creative problems in designing product/service or marketing, and interpersonal dilemmas with staff, clients, suppliers and competitors.

However, when probed to talk about the 'knowledge' they had desired and sought, many described self-knowing as the most important 'residue', if any, of their enterprising work experience. Becoming confident in one's choices and ability was probably the most frequently mentioned personal change. Participants said things like 'I am a different person today than I was in that job – completely different'; 'The biggest thing is learning how to problem solve for yourself, taking responsibility for your own mistakes and your own decisions'; 'Now I don't beat myself up – just admit it and fix it'; 'I've learned not to take things so personally'; 'I am respected in this community, I have built a reputation – that's what I have learned'; 'I've shown I can do it – I love it – I would never work for someone else, ever again'.

Thus work, enterprise and self seem entwined in an essential metaphor of *creation* that involves but does not necessarily serve labour, production, and acquisition. They are not linear or pre-planned, but unfold spontaneously and continuously on many levels. A whole new sphere of activity, relational networks, and desires leading to new understandings emerge around the woman's imagination; and at the same time, she comes into presence as a fluid and continually evolving self. From this perspective desire is not a simple longing for pleasure or fantasy, but a learned assertion of the legitimacy of desire to reject a perpetual human capital project (du Gay's vision of the 'enterprising self') and seek immersion in fulfilling work for its own sake. Many entrepreneurs interviewed in this study were clear in affirming a personal sense of freedom to choose, within many networks of possibilities. One woman who ran a home renovation business employing mostly male contractors explained that coming to understand one's own agency within the systems one works allows freedom of choice:

... about money, about what job is going to come into place next, about where I'm going to go, who I'm going to be working with. That's freedom and I have that right now. From one step to the next I have set out the intention to the universe and I've gotten back exactly what I've asked for. So that tells me that I have a great deal of power, internal power and it's the same power that everybody else has but I have been accessing mine and I'm utilizing it. Now I have that freedom because I know that I have that power.

(I-64, 1999–05–17, p. 4)

This impulse is reminiscent of the risky desire to learn that Martusewicz (1997: 111) describes:

Part of the desire that pushes me to ask about this world, that pushes me to that precipice, is a desire to understand myself in this world – the desire (and anxiety) to face the other that both is and is not 'me'.

Perhaps through enterprise, individuals can learn the possibility and permission to seek the challenges of perpetual difficulty that they love, to make up their own work and knowledge in these conflicts, to name their own know-how, to decide by their own convictions, and to serve their own desires as worthwhile and morally good.

### **New enterprise in new capitalism – site for transgression**

The discussion above addressed the first two questions posed earlier in this paper: How is desire enmeshed in the experiences of enterprising selves? How do people learn this desire to pursue work through enterprise, often entailing personal and economic pain? The final question awaits response: Do these desires configure possibilities for new alternatives in enterprise?

Overlying the themes outlined in the foregoing sections, one central finding of this study was the evident attempt by many self-employed women to position themselves resistantly against conventional models of competitive ‘corporate’ entrepreneurship emphasizing profit, size and growth. Many described struggles to craft alternate models of enterprise offering collaborative, meaningful work and relationships. For example, women explained desires to create nourishing workplace communities; to commit to sustainability before expansion; to honour ‘right relationships’ before competition; and to uphold ethical integrity before profit. Attempts to enact such altruistic desires sometimes engendered difficult conflicts with other desires, such as maintaining a healthy profit margin or raising one’s profile by landing a high-status contract.

An unexpected finding was the deliberate breaking of conventional business ‘rules’ by these new entrepreneurs. As noted in a previous section, about one-third of these women had not written a business plan delineating financial objectives, competitors and market share. Some set prices according to alternate considerations besides maximizing profit. Several maintained activities that did not contribute directly or indirectly to business productivity; or chose decidedly ‘inefficient’ approaches to business development and operation. Many, instead of expanding their business when faced with the opportunity to do so, chose instead to contract and focus only on activities from which they derived personal gratification. Several maintained interdependent alliances with so-called competitors. And several drew only small personal income from the enterprise even after several years of operation. Perhaps some would assess this as evidence of gendered opportunities for enterprising women, or lack of business success. Such analyses, while important, are perhaps irrelevant for the present argument when most of these women claim they would rather continue than return to organizational employment, perhaps at higher salary.<sup>5</sup> For all of these women, personal income considerations aside, their businesses remained viable in that they had survived and supported themselves, their families, and in some cases their employees for at least four years at the time of interviewing.

Here is what appears to be a different enterprise culture, that may be characterized as 'post-corporate', that challenges the commonly-held notion of enterprise as subjugating humanity to material markers of success and size. Ecological economists such as Hawken (1993) and Korten (1999) have offered evidence of this transgressive behavioral shift away from traditional models of corporate entrepreneurship. The characteristics of what Korten calls post-corporate capitalism include the active, self-managing, risk-taking virtues associated with the 'enterprising self' described by du Gay (1996). But Korten also envisages enterprises that emphasize fluid planning, sustainability, local focus, ethical integrity, quality of life, mutually supportive relationships and a rejection of conventional 'success' markers: profit, size, growth. These are the very themes that appeared in some women's approaches to enterprise evident in this study. Enactment of these post-corporate values may be argued to represent resistance to and transgression of dominant western enterprise development models emphasizing competitive edge in a globalized market to attract investors and secure wealth.

## Discussion and conclusion

While du Gay's conception of 'enterprising self' has provided us with an important signifier and harbinger of the dark side of entrepreneurial discourses, it deserves further enrichment and diversification. Certainly enterprising selves are not unitary, and the energies of innovation constituting their subject position and fields of meaning cannot be contained or repressed for long – by organizations or by sociological constructs. The present argument pushes forward du Gay's concept to address certain overstatements as well as to explore productive possibilities in particular generations and enactments of enterprising selfhood. In particular, this discussion examines the psychic dynamics involved in the bringing forth of enterprising selves and their constituent environments, exploring the flow of desire apparent in their emergence in the new capitalism.

Undoubtedly, enterprise as a discourse, employment form and identity is increasingly evident, according to sources cited throughout this article. Clearly conditions of risk, flexibility, and the new ideal of enterprise prevalent in neo-liberal western society are, at least in part, influencing the trend of people 'choosing' or being compelled to 'choose' to enter various forms of self-employed enterprise. However, their values and learning do not always or even often appear to be captured, machine-like, by the profit motives of global capitalism. Critical concerns that enterprising selves are governed through the alignment of their psychological strivings with technologies of success, while important, appear to be overstated. Among the examples of enterprising women here, many demonstrate resistance to values of individualistic competition for global market share, and some appear to transgress altogether norms of business development driven primarily by economic logic. These women's enterprising



lives and selves appear to challenge concerns that, as Usher and Solomon (1999) put it, individuals' work experience is subjugated as 'manageable and in need of management'. In fact there is clear evidence of struggle over how the meaning and significance of experience is interpreted and by whom.

Furthermore, concerns about the enterprising self appear rooted in an understanding of striving and motivation driven by *lack* – of fulfilment or meaning in work, of skill and knowledge, and of feelings of security – and individualization such that one's lack becomes an unending project of personal development for employability. But in fact the examples here reflect desire functioning not as response to a lack, but as something productive and far more broad-reaching than fitness for market use. This expression of desire is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's (1977) conceptualization of desire in capitalism as positive, a process requiring liberation from private fantasy and economic infrastructures, and amplification throughout social processes.

In fact, some women seem to be creating, through their everyday work activity, new models of enterprise and success that interweave desires of relationships, being and production, in spaces not limited by conventional notions of labour and knowledge that can be commodified and exchanged. Some enterprises do not reflect individualist selves at all, but seemed to enact vivid, empowering environments and subjectivities in networks of collective activity. Many seemed to echo what Edwards (1998: 387) has described as 'post-Fordist artisans' that contest the oppressive structures and discourses of Taylorist workplaces: 'active, creative, reflexive, risk-taking workers with certain degrees of autonomy in how they define and achieve their work goals, engaging in practices of social entrepreneurship'.

The question then became – why? Not only why are more women attracted to enterprise, but why a transgressive path in entrepreneurship? Desire appeared to be a fundamental motivator for these choices, as well as for the learning embedded in becoming aware of them and taking action to realize them. Psychoanalytic learning theory, particularly that advanced by Britzman (1998) and Todd (1997), was useful in illuminating links between desire, learning and action. Application of psychoanalytic ideas helped refine the questions that initiated this discussion: How is desire enmeshed in the development of enterprising selves? How do women come to desire work through self-employed enterprise, often entailing personal and economic pain? Do these desires configure possibilities for new alternatives in enterprise? To the first two questions, the study findings indicated that various conflicting desires, not always consciously recognized, drive reasons for enterprise start-up: for freedom and responsibility, flexibility and control, demanding work and time for demanding families, as well as escape from assorted oppressions perceived in organizational employment. The stimulation of constant learning and challenge, of inventing one's way through problems and of serving others (clients, staff, community) in meaningful ways, appeared to be desires some learned through the experience of developing their enterprise. Finally desires that

shaped enterprise purposes, identity and learning appeared to shift over time, and come into clearer focus. For some, desires became more immediate and less ambitious. For many, desires seemed to echo what Korten (1999) has named post-corporate conditions, valuing quality of life and sustainability above unmitigated production and growth. Certain approaches to enterprise development demonstrated by some women also reflect what is described here as transgressive practices: eschewing rigid goal-setting in favour of fluid planning, and mutually supportive relationships over competition. Contradictions were apparent in all of these themes, among conflicting desires and their performance.

This argument has been intended more to explore the nature of transgressive enterprising desires than present a report of research. The study from which this discussion has drawn examples is limited by its focus on enterprising women who, while representing the fastest-growing groups of entrepreneurs (Industry Canada, 1999), are characterized by unique learning and business development patterns (Moore and Buttner, 1997). Furthermore the sample of Canadian women, while differentiated regionally and sectorally, may represent certain values and choices influenced by Canadian culture and economic structures. But they suggest the importance of enterprising work as a rich site for further exploration. Questions suggested through this analysis might be worth exploring in future studies: What dynamics of desire are constituted in the conflicting images of post-Fordist enterprise culture? How and where do transgressive desires emerge in the cultural imaginary amidst dominant models of enterprise? How are these desires integrated with individuals' processes of learning and reflexive self-construction? What possibilities are thus configured for individual workers' participation in new knowledges and forms of work? Such questions may enable a more complex analysis of the subjectivity of workers – who are too often cast as oppressed learning creatures: knowledge-producers and regulated subjects of their 'workplace' and its discursive practices. For those committed to action for social justice and a belief in human agency, such inquiry may offer hope for resistance to 'the managerial discourse of "excellence", technologies of work and technologies of self becoming aligned with technologies of success' (Garrick and Usher, 2000). It also may help interrupt a scholarly tendency to simplify and demonize enterprise as a slippery slope to the worst excesses of globalized corporate capitalism.

## Notes

1. Neo-liberal in this context refers to a market-focused society in which education and lifelong learning are understood to service the economy. Privatization and deregulation are promoted to limit barriers to free market exchange of resources. Individuals are viewed as having unlimited choice and opportunity to develop themselves and market their skills broadly.

2. The three-year research project 'Canadian Women Entrepreneurs: A Study of Workplace Learning and Development' was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
3. Data reference indicates the interviewee number, date expressed as year-month-day, and page of transcript on which the quoted passage appears.
4. These people are not just the affluent middle class exercising the luxury of seeking meaningful vocation. Thirty-one percent were single mothers. Twenty-two percent did not have any post-secondary education, and of these two claimed self-employment to be the only means of earning a 'decent salary' to support themselves and their families.
5. The issue is complex. Sometimes personal income drawn by the self-employed appears low because they choose to invest profits back into the business, or are able to charge certain expenses to the business, under Canada's tax laws, that normally would be paid from after-tax salary. In terms of organizational employment, some women cited negative reasons for leaving: gendered restrictions to opportunity, recognition or promotion; unpleasant organizational climate and politics; ethical conflicts; or tyrannous managers. Such memories may be partly responsible for the reluctance of some to return to organizational jobs.

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