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Stream 2. Innovation and Entrepreneurship

- 'Mumpreneurs': Desperate housewives or wonder women?, Rachel Morrison
- Innovation collaboration: lessons from a regional cluster, Karyn Rastric
- Dynamic capability emergence in the venture creation process, Trish Corner and Shuyuan Wu
- Kairotic Moments, Ron Beckett
- Social entrepreneurship: a content analysis, Wendy Cukier, Susan Trenholm and Shelley Smarz
- How Do Financial Crises Affect the Venture Capital Emergence Process? David Lingelbach
- Capability Development in the Pharmaceutical Commercialisation Process, Lisette Pregelj, Martie-Louise Verreyne and Damian Hine
Mumpreneurs: Desperate Housewives or Wonder Women?

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We seek to question understandings of mumpreneurship and to provoke questioning of the assumptions that pervade – not just in relation to mumpreneurship but also to the field of gender and entrepreneurship generally. From a gender perspective, business ownership has historically been viewed as a male preserve and, even though women have often worked side by side with their partners or siblings, they were frequently perceived as silent partners (E. A. Walker, 2004). However, the 21st century has seen some changes to this perspective – for example, the recognition being given to the notion of ‘mumpreneurship’. Mumpreneurship “is an emergent phenomenon, which has yet to settle on a widely accepted definition or be researched from a social scientific point of view” (Korsgaard, 2007, p.43). However, it is underpinned by a need to strike a balance between the needs of one’s workplace or career on the one hand, and the needs of one’s family on the other, while pursuing exciting and challenging work experiences (Korsgaard, 2007). In the context of mumpreneurship this work experience is enacted in the form of an entrepreneurial venture.

Women, particularly mothers and those in traditionally female occupations such as nursing and education, have been researched exhaustively in multi-disciplinary Work Life Balance (WLB) research. Yet a review of the literature reveals that work and family issues, which are increasingly popular topics in contemporary organizational research, have received little attention in entrepreneurship and small business literature (Jennings & McDougald, 2007). This is a puzzling gap, given the number of small businesses that are home based and therefore operated within the family environment.

We propose that existing business practice in much of the commercial and corporate sectors in New Zealand and Australia operates to “push” women who start families to explore other options and to redefine themselves as business women as well as mothers. For many women self-employment fits more easily around their family commitments than traditional nine-to-five employment. That is, the start-up decision is, in some way, motivated by the accommodation of family needs; and a family orientation drives the way in which the firm is managed, and (initially at least) mediates goals in relation to firm performance. This paper focuses on Mumpreneurs, who can be defined as mothers who move from traditional employment to owning and operating new ventures, either to better fit with their role as mothers, or motivated by opportunities identified by the experience of pregnancy or having children.

The predominant discourse in the literature has moved from “family friendly” to WLB, and in doing so, has become quite deliberately gender neutral (Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007). WLB has the advantage of presenting a more holistic approach to the challenge of integrating paid work into employees’ lives, and the fact that this then encompasses the whole of the workforce may increase pressure for change (Todd & Binns, 2011). Irrespective of the change in discourse, what has not changed is that that responsibility for children almost always remains solely within a particular family unit; “co-workers and society are not expected to be interested in their colleagues’ needs in the private sphere and the provision of affordable quality childcare... is an economic rather than a social issue” (Todd & Binns, 2011, p.4). In a departure from the problematisation of the family, Haddon, Hede and Whiteoak (2009) draw attention to the growing body of research to suggest that work and family can positively influence one another and that participation in multiple roles can be stimulating and can enhance the well-being of individuals (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Clarke, Koch and Hill (2004) argue that structural factors such as working hours and the household division of labour tend to influence other constructs such as work-family fit; conceptualised as the fit between