5

A Woman's Place is on the Street: Purposes and Problems of Mexican American Women Entrepreneurs

Alfonso Morales

ABSTRACT

Given our interest in micro-entrepreneurship, this chapter asks how Mexican American Women (MAW) become street vendors. More importantly, the chapter comprehends variation in social context that produces entrepreneurship in this population. The account unites economic history, contemporary behavior, and distinct socio-institutional contexts to examine small business formation among MAW amid the businesses found at Chicago's Maxwell Street Market in the 1990s. By using archival research and ethnographic interviews, we discover how the Market came to be and how women weave and reweave business and familial aspects of their lives in the course of business. The chapter combines two literatures—social psychology with ethnic entrepreneurship—to develop a concern with social context that fills the structural gap in the former and the model of action in the latter. The data analysis produces a contextually based typology of business formation, labeled Context Constrained, Context Enabled, and Context in Transformation (CC, CE, and CT). The details of the cases show how people tie together emotion, rational-
A Woman's Place is on the Street: Purposes and Problems of Mexican American Women Entrepreneurs

Street markets loom large in business history and the public imagination (Tangiers 2003). Such markets have incubated businesses in the United States for more than a century. Whether it is an early twelfth-century Eastern European Jewish immigrant who will go on to found what are now Phillips-Van Heusen and New York's Beth Israel Hospital, or a mid-twentieth-century Mexican Immigrant who will found Chicago's largest western wear company, Alcala's Western Wear, or a late twentieth-century immigrant woman from Mexico who develops a micro-business in Chicago, street vending businesses have made a permanent mark on the American psyche. Indeed, the American dream is of the entrepreneurial self-starter who discovers a niche, finds the motivation, and seeks the social support to create a business that generates wealth and other benefits to self, family, and society. For more than one hundred years, successive waves of immigrants have realized this dream at Chicago's Maxwell Street Market (Berkow 1977; Eastwood 2002).

Yet even the praise (Bernanke 2007) and policy behind micro-entrepreneurship, it is somewhat surprising that the general entrepreneurship literature has not spoken to how people in general, and immigrant women in particular, initiate street business—especially given the long history of large businesses with these humble beginnings (Eshel and Schatz 2004). The reason for this is that the entrepreneurship literature left-censors its object of study by concentrating on the practices deemed legitimate at a given point in time. Street markets and merchants were legitimate policy tools enumerated by government and developed by cities across the country (Tangiers 2003; Morales 2000). Today street markets are once again becoming policy tools, but they are not drawing much scholarly attention. By relying primarily on quantitative measures and ignoring part-time and small-scale street business, we forego a more complete understanding of the continuation of business practices. Qualitative research is particularly useful for locating business formation and decision-making processes in a larger socioeconomic context.

Understanding the processes and products of immigrant women's business formation requires attention to gestation processes. Although the international development literature attends to micro-enterprise and street vendors (Yunus receiving the Nobel Prize in 2006), the literature in the United States mostly ignores micro-business. Furthermore, what we generally know of women-initiated business is mostly survey based (Hisrich and Brush 1986; Shim and Eastlick 1998; Reynolds, Carter, Brush, Greene, and Owen 2004) and not attentive to interpersonal dynamics, particularly those in families or between friends. The literature that examines interpersonal dynamics—the social psychology of entrepreneurship—mostly ignores the ethnic entrepreneur and either ignores the role of family (Mitchell, Busenitz, Lant, MacDougall, Morse, and Smith 2002; Baron 2006) or finds that a supportive family facilitates business formation, especially for women and minorities (Brookhaus 2004). Indeed, one of the most frequent claims about ethnic entrepreneurship is that family support (Ram, Sanghera, Abbas, and Barlow 2000) facilitates the pool of labor power and financial resources (Sanders and Nee 1996). However, these findings do not uncover what women do in the absence of supportive relationships—the tactics they devise and deploy to generate neutral, if not supportive, relationships and finally business. By examining the intersecting social processes that produce Mexican American women (MAW) street vendors, this research explores the variation in biography and interpersonal contexts and how that variation is related to the presence or absence of entrepreneurial values.

Using ethnographic interviews, we discover how MAW weave and reweave business and familial aspects of their lives in the course of pursuing business opportunities. The approach synthesizes three interacting elements: prior business experience, interpersonal and familial dynamics, and current labor market experience. An analysis of these three intersecting processes provides a comprehensive sense of the social context of business formation. This knowledge generates a typology that integrates the three elements and provides an understanding of business formation and subsequent prospects for business expansion and for adopting entrepreneurial values to other, nonbusiness, practices. The types are Context Constraining (CC), Context Enabling (CE), and Context Transforming (CT). By CC we mean a social context that inhibits the growth of entrepreneurial values and limits how participants understand the social or economic potential of their activity. Some contexts are enabling, thus, by CE we mean a context that promotes entrepreneurial values and fosters the adaptation of those values to other contexts. CE enables women to imbue their street business with meaning, facilitating both social and economic potential disproportionate to the income they earn or the scale of their business. Finally, CT indicates a context in flux, where women are reinterpreting themselves and their activities and slowly, even by fits and starts, negotiating a new role for themselves and new possibilities for their lives. Each of these types is developed and exemplified further below.

Ethnographic and participant observation methodology is especially useful in revealing the differences in business formation among Mexican American women entrepreneurs. Interview data help us understand how Mexican American women shape their experiential and social contexts into new businesses and the consequences of those dynamics for future labor force participation. The approach is inductive: the data inform the categories and the cases exemplify stable relationships and values as well as illustrate re-
Although important, the structural account explains little about interpersonal variation in business formation. Perhaps more importantly, it sheds little light on the problem of process: how women become potential entrepreneurs, how potential entrepreneurs form a business, and finally, if and how they come to see the business as a tool of other social goals. Interpersonal processes embody structural realities (as exemplified by Willis 1977; MacLeod 1987; Pearce 1995), and although this does not suggest a "stages" argument, it does indicate that gestation processes are complex and influenced by a variety of sources. A typology that integrates structural and institutional opportunities and constraints enables a more complete understanding of how interpersonal and family dynamics vary, how they are organized in particular relationships, and what the implications are for entrepreneurial values and practices.

However, the ethnic entrepreneurship literature is focused mostly on the structural, with consequences for whom we think is in business. Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) examine the macrostructural forces that influence business formation, and they emphasize market conditions and access to ownership. Market conditions are favorable when there is a high demand for ethnic products, stimulated by a growing ethnic population and the interest of the general population in ethnic products. State policy facilitates business formation. They emphasize that these two factors interact to produce business formation. Because they consider the street merchant, access to ownership and state policy decrease in importance. These nascent business people are not thinking of ownership in terms of the rental, lease, or purchase of a storefront, and when they think of state policy, they are not thinking of government loan programs, incubators, or similarly minded policies. Ownership need not include a store, and state policy can establish physical market places, not just favorable market or ownership conditions. Our emphasis here is on developing a firmer sense of the interpersonal and familial dynamics antecedent to and operating in the course of business formation.

Context units social structure and individual behavior and it is composed of the physical environment as well as the congeries of ideas and behaviors learned, practiced, and modified over the life course. The particular ideas are from biography, work experience, and interpersonal relationships, but we are interested in the interpersonal differences in context and how these differences produce different types of businesses with different implications for what women want from their businesses. The typical story told about ethnic entrepreneurship highlights structural elements, discriminatory employers, government attitude, and an entrepreneurial culture. Thus, this literature points us to the structural part of each element in the typology.

Although we know the importance of family resources for initiating small business (Sanders and Nee 1996; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward 2000), we lack attention to the interpersonal dimensions of these processes. In other words, we have strong knowledge of the structural context for the ethnic
The recent work on the social psychology of entrepreneurship is directed to the interpersonal dynamics that produce new businesses. The economic situation ebbs and flows, and somewhat independent of it are employer attitudes and policies that influence the supply of potential business people. Some households promote business values and practices, while other households do not, and still others change to become supportive of entrepreneurial values over time. The sociological approaches to ethnic entrepreneurship incorporate the structural influence of politics, kinship, and economics and foreshadow the interpersonal and familial dynamics. Work on the social psychology of entrepreneurship is directed to the interpersonal dynamics that produce new businesses.

To enrich the general story for ethnic entrepreneurship, we turn to contributions that focus on social-psychological or cognitive processes. This research considers entrepreneurship primarily an economic function, outside the complex interplay of contextual ideas and behaviors that the ethnic entrepreneurship literature addresses. Baron (2006) explains how entrepreneurs recognize opportunities for new business. The emphasis here is on the psychological aspects of opportunity recognition. For Baron, people identify entrepreneurial opportunities by being alert and this quality of alertness is founded in intelligence and creativity. He suggests that the alert entrepreneur identifies opportunities by recognizing patterns in their environment and comparing those to prior experience. Baron's potential entrepreneur uses prototypes to discover whether or not the entrepreneurial opportunity resonates, signaling an opportunity he or she should follow.

Alertness, intelligence, and creativity are situational characteristics, and relative to particular circumstances, Baron does not see them as innate or objective measures of some psychometric category. It is this relativity of perspective that makes these notions useful for understanding how MAW initiate business. However, Baron's view assumes preexisting entrepreneurial aspirations and is not attentive to emerging business interests. In other words, his focus is on existing enabling contexts (CE), without attention to the consequences of CC or what happens when we try to understand how alertness develops over time (CT). By specifying a process approach to intelligence, we can reconfigure his theory to show how the psychological processes and perception of the opportunity structure is part of interpersonal dynamics conditioned by a particular social context.

Central to Baron's approach is the notion of individual intelligence. Central to the sociocontextual approach advocated here is the notion that intelligence is not an individual trait, but rather, following Dewey (1929), it is relational and the product of deliberation regarding particular circumstances or problems. Deliberative reflection is engaged when ordinary behavior or habits are impeded or when opportunities are perceived. Impeded action or aspirations require people to stop what they are doing. Opportunities also stop people in their tracks. Either way, people can then reflect and communicate about the new situation and seek some mutual adjustment so they can return to the activity or pursue some new, more appropriate activity. People do not always deliberate about the causes that disrupted their activity or what they can do with the new opportunity. How people reflect, experiment, and communicate helps determine whether we locate them in (Context) Constrained, Transforming, or Enabling. As people think about their circumstances and relate to other people about their situation, then aspects of the problem become clear, choices are resolved into lines of action, and action follows on the choices. Thus, by reconfiguring Baron's use of intelligence to include deliberation and social relationships, we have a tool to understand the interpersonal dynamics of particular circumstances. This reconfiguration is in keeping with a relational and contextual approach that sees the importance of reflection, experimentation, and communication.

The cognitive approach to entrepreneurship (Mitchell et al. 2007) privileges a process approach focused on situations and problem-solving processes. Mitchell et al. ask: How are entrepreneurs' cognitive processes and cognitions organized, and how does this organization produce different outcomes, among them value and wealth? Importantly, they distinguish between creating economic value and establishing or modifying social values, yet besides emphasizing that both are important, they provide little understanding about
how social values are created and transformed in the entrepreneurial process. These questions regarding how social and economic values are created are directly addressed by this research. We are very interested in the processes by which Mexican-American women create economic value and transform personal values into becoming entrepreneurs.

Mitchell et al. (2007) are also interested in these interwoven social processes. They write, "Thus, the study of entrepreneurial cognition has—using the social psychology lens—sought to move beyond the static, to invoke the 'situation,' or the environment as a 'dynamism-creating factor'" (2007, 13). They further indicate a process approach by invoking intra- and interpersonal processes producing a dynamic understanding of entrepreneurship. "Thus as a field, our discovery and our articulations concerning the patterns involved in any entrepreneurial person's perceptual and thinking processes make more sense in the context of a purpose or problem. Accordingly, because explanations of behavior, especially cognitive behavior, are domain specific, we can expect the patterns of entrepreneurial cognition that we study to vary depending on a person's purpose or problem" (2007, 6). It is precisely this attention to domain and context and to variation in how people respond to changing situations that gives the CC-CE-CT typology its power.

Sociological and social-psychological theory and empirical research provide us two lenses for examining how MAW form businesses; the social psychology urges us to look at individuals within the economy—how they recognize opportunities, how they identify problems and purposes—and to locate them in their situations and context. But it assumes society is something of a level playing field. Ethnic entrepreneurship literature emerged to account for business formation despite an unequal playing field. But its social psychology is incomplete. Drawing the two together to examine contextual influences on business formation and tactical choices in the process of forming business provides a way to overcome this impasse by adopting a frame of reference and typological tool that comprehends context and behavior.

Methods and Data

The author observed and interacted with vendors at the Maxwell Street Market for more than three years, starting in March 1989 and ending in July 1992. During this time, the author employed multiple methods of investigation: ethnographic and participant observation, structured interviews, and archival analysis.

Ethnographic and Participant Observation

The data reported here rely on an ethnographic research design. Ethnography is the firsthand and long-term study of social systems. The idea is to observe and inquire how participants know what they know and why. Participant observation is a form of ethnographic analysis where the researcher experiences

the social activity as the "natives" experience it in order to gain familiarity with the group and their practices. Most often this is done by becoming an integral member of the group. In this case, the author became a vendor at the Market. Doing so increased trust with the vendors and enabled the author to understand more fully the processes observed.

The author was in the field (at the Market most every Sunday) for a period of forty-one months: March 1989 through July 1992. About twenty-seven of these months were spent on formal data collection. The others, particularly in the beginning, were spent observing and interacting with the merchants. In this time period, the author spent twenty months vending. Of the eighty-six Sundays in the twenty-month time period, the author missed only three Sundays, thus vending a total of eighty-three Sundays. The Market is in operation twelve months out of the year, thus vending took place for a contiguous twenty-month period. The author sold used items for eight months and new bathroom accessories for the remaining twelve months.

Structured and Unstructured Interviews

The author developed a structured interview protocol. The instrument was developed after the author spent some time at the Market, both observing and vending. The validity of the questions was verified and pretested in preliminary interviews. The questions were translated into Spanish and backtranslated into English. The author is bilingual and was able to conduct interviews with Spanish-speaking vendors. About half of the formal interviews were conducted in Spanish.

The instrument was organized into several broad sections: (1) basic demographics; (2) prior business experience; (3) labor market experience; (4) household composition and circumstances; (5) vending business, including start-up, income, business organization, labor force, use of professional services, supply chain management, business changes, tax compliance, business problems, growth and change, and aspirations for business. The interviews were conducted at the Market, the merchant's residence, restaurants, or other public places convenient to the merchant. Members of the household were interviewed regarding their various roles in the business. Follow-up interviews were scheduled to check the initial interviews and to provide additional details as needed.

Data

Extensive field notes were collected, including the vendor's business data from sales of merchandise or services provided. Informal interviews at the Market supplemented the formal interviews and helped maintain rapport with the merchants. The author also estimated the number of merchants, businesses, and demographic composition of merchants. Table 1 provides a description of the number of vendors and business by ethnicity during 1990.
As illustrated in table 1, most of the businesses had more than one vendor, with Latinos having more vendors per business. Vending operations owned by Whites were more likely to be a one-to-one operation (that is, one person per business), whereas businesses operated by Latinos were more likely to be three-to-one. Table 1 also shows that half of all vendors in 1990 were Latino. Latinos were also more likely than Whites and Blacks to employ children, mostly their own, but sometimes children of their kin. Finally, Latinos were also more likely to vend than their White or Black female counterparts.

While in the field, the author interviewed members of fifty-six households. This included formal interviews with more than one hundred people. The sample includes variation in vendor ethnicity, gender, age, household composition, type of items sold, and net sales. Of the households interviewed, nineteen households were Latino (fifteen Mexican American), twenty-four were Black, eleven were White, and two were Asian. The research reported here is based on this larger study of White, Mexican American, Black, and Asian men and women entrepreneurs in the Maxwell Street Market. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on three Mexican American families. The estimates of women in each category (CC, CE, and CT) were developed by snowball sampling from these households to other women in the Market. Therefore, the three Mexican American families that provide the data for this analysis are representative, or ideal types, of the larger sample from which they are drawn. Not all women will fit so neatly into these categories, but the categories will prove useful in assessing where women fit in the process of developing entrepreneurial attitudes.

### Chicago's Maxwell Street Market in Sociohistorical Context

**Historical, Social, and Economic Context**

Chicago is a city built on immigration. In the early twentieth century, Chicago experienced massive immigration, mostly European, but with regional variations depending on the decade (Holli and Jones 1977). The Near West Side neighborhoods were densely populated, ethnically homogeneous islands in a heterogeneous city. From the residents' perspective, the neighborhoods surrounding Maxwell Street each had an ethnic character: the Irish established Bridgeport; the Bohemians, Poles, and Czechs, Pilsen. Surrounding neighborhoods were also ethnic: North of Maxwell Street, Greek Town; North and West, the Italians, Taylor Street. Newer immigrants congregated in less desirable, lower rent neighborhoods, and all these ethnic groups were located in close proximity to street vending operations on Maxwell Street.

In the early part of the twentieth century, several processes converged. The local labor market tightened, and food safety, food security, employment, and business regulation became municipal concerns. The Chicago City Council, echoing Progressive-era ideas about employment and the real problems of economic depression and food insecurity, became interested in using public markets as tools of public policy. The City Council formally constituted Maxwell Street as one of three public markets that would foster employment and shorten the supply chain from producer to public (Morales 2000). Street vending predated the Market, which was a public creation of the City of Chicago in 1912, initiated specifically to help incorporate the marginalized into the economy. In short, government played a key role by legitimizing the Market and street vending, thus establishing nonstore retail as an important economic opportunity.

Immigrants used the Market and its environs to produce a number of prominent Chicago area businesses. Berkow (1977) and Eschel and Schatz (2004) describe some of these entrepreneurs and their businesses, among them Gene and Joe Silverberg of Bigsky and Kruthers, Mages Sporting Goods, Cherin's Shoes, Koralil's Men's Clothes, Keeshin Bus Lines, Vienna Beef, Kuppenheimer's, and Meyer Meyesteil's sporting goods. In fact, for more than one hundred years, the Market has provided the opportunity for people of both genders and various ethnicities to initiate business, create wealth, and transfer the benefits of business experience to their children.

For years, the Market remained a popular place to start businesses, especially in this deindustrializing context. Chicago's economy changed radically as deindustrialization (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Piore 1977) gave rise to the dual labor market in which there was sharp competition for low-skilled jobs of limited economic mobility. Lash and Urry (1987, 109-23) documented the historical similarity between early and late twentieth-century relocation of jobs from central cities. They provide evidence for the thesis that turn-of-the-century industrialists decentralized industries to minimize rent costs and labor problems, just as did late twentieth-century corporations. Besides deindustrialization, Blacks and Latinos suffered various forms of personal and institutional discrimination that limited their labor market opportunities. Subordination in secondary labor market occupations was one motivation for entrepreneurship, but does not describe the interpersonal dynamics of busi-
ness formation. The next section details the decision-making and start-up processes Mexican-American women used in becoming entrepreneurs.

**Mexican American Women Starting Street Businesses: 1960-1990**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, immigrants took up street business in response to economic marginalization and in hope of economic mobility. Cities organized public markets to provide economic opportunity and address policy concerns, and immigrant populations exploited the opportunity. The late twentieth-century situation was similar in many ways. Immigration policies and labor market problems limited the mobility of immigrant populations. However, street vending provided an opportunity to realize economic aspirations and hopes for intergenerational mobility. In Chicago, there were few barriers to entry for merchants at the Maxwell Street Market and Mexican immigrants established vending businesses there.

**Decision-Making Processes in Interpersonal and Organizational Contexts**

Like previous immigrant populations, Mexicans were familiar with street markets as sources of employment and consumer goods, and Chicago's Maxwell Street Market provided a venue to practice business. Here I will focus on socioeconomic influences on Mexican American women's decision-making processes with respect to the problems they faced and their emerging aspirations in household, friendship, and employment contexts. By moving from situation to situation, the analysis indicates how social-psychological elements, especially deliberation, is inhibited or produced by interpersonal dynamics and situational characteristics. The three examples described below are similar in that all three women have street vending businesses, and all three sell different types of new clothes. But the women vary in their circumstances, how they perceive their conditions, and how they respond to those situations.

The first example is of a woman who lives in a constrained context (CC) of patriarchy and wage labor expectations. In this household, business at the Market is not perceived as an opportunity to reconstruct or achieve aspirations or to realize new interpersonal dynamics. Instead, the business is embedded in rigid interpersonal dynamics and the economic aspirations are for steady employment in wage labor. The methods described above estimate about 10 percent of Mexican American women at the Market (10-15 businesses) were part of this category. The second example, of CE, is exactly the opposite: it is of a woman who sees opportunity in different situations and fosters—with different experiences and relationships—progressive gender roles and employment expectations. This family and others like them are wealth oriented and desire new roles and expectations toward entrepreneurial and wealth creation activities. The interpersonal dynamics are flexible and reflect gender role equality and seek to foster independence in children. About 35 percent of businesses (40 businesses) fit this category. Finally, the third example, CT, is of a family in the midst of the transition from CC relationships, ideas, and behaviors to expectations and practices associated with CE. These transitional women and their businesses compose about 55 percent (65 businesses) found at the Market.

**Mexican American Women I: Constraining Contexts (CC), Constrained Vision**

The first example is the Santiago family. For them, income earned by their market business is an extension of "women's work." Carlos Santiago was a seasonal migrant to Chicago since the late 1960s, but settled in 1972 and married a Mexican American woman, Ramona, in 1974. The couple had three children, two older daughters, 15 and 13, and a son, 10. Carlos and Ramona both work in light manufacturing jobs, steady wage employment that Ramona's father helped them both secure. When we met, they had been selling at the Market for three years. As I became familiar with them, the patriarchy in the household became obvious. Carlos rarely went for coffee, he didn't collect money, make sales, or spell a family member if someone needed a break or wanted to take a walk. When we visited, we were catered to by one of the daughters, coffee was offered, perhaps a burrito. To them, I was a maestro, or teacher, due the respect of a licenciate or college graduate.

After establishing a relationship, I inquired about how they organized the business. Carlos emphatically insisted, "This is her job, not mine. I come to protect what is mine, my daughters, my family. This, this is not my work." His gestures emphasized his references, a hand held out against the street or pointing toward the van, or to the tables strewn with merchandise, mostly new sweat pants and socks and other apparel. His expectations for his family were equally clear: they would all one day be involved in wagework for which this business would prepare them, not by learning initiative or developing business sense but by "teaching these kids good work habits, how to get up in the morning, do what they're told, understand the value of the money they earned for the family." As we talked, Carlos was handed the cash from sales, even from his wife. Clearly, this family exemplified what we would call patriarchal gender relations, and despite the declining prospects for manufacturing employment, Carlos expected his children would follow his employment trajectory. So, besides the constraining family dynamics, Carlos revealed how vending would develop some of the expectations for employees that employers have.

Once my role was well defined, it was not difficult to visit with Ramona or her daughters. Occasionally I became the surrogate adult male when Carlos would ask me to stay with his family while he shopped the Market. I noticed the family sold mostly new products, which must have required some entrepreneurial efforts. Ramona told me how she got into business: "I started by..."
and without a perceived opportunity or problem, and her vague disquiet is insufficient to reconstruct existing values or habits.

In sum, the Santiago family exemplifies the relatively few Mexican American women at the Market who we would label self-employed but not entrepreneurs. Content with the constrained context of their lives, the family members went about earning income without serious consideration for developing a business or deriving lessons from business to reconstruct expectations or values in themselves or their children. Relatively few street vendors were in this category, simply because few take the small step the Santianos took to act on a business card given to them. In sharp contrast, the Bustamante family exemplifies entrepreneurial ideas and behaviors (CE), enabled by aspirations for entrepreneurship and flexible gender roles that foster open-ended expectations about their children.

**Mexican American Women II: Enabling Contexts, Enabling Entrepreneurial Values**

Cecilia and Felix Bustamante have four children: Juan, the oldest at 32, married with two children. His law degree was from DePaul and he was in practice in Chicago. His family is proud that their street business and later, their storefront business subsidized his degree from the University of Illinois and the law degree. Elena was 30, married, with two children, a high school education and technical training in real estate, tax preparation, and fashion design from various technical schools or community colleges. The third child, Felix Jr. was also married and also had his parents to thank for subsidizing his bachelor's degree. He was working for the Chicago Housing Authority. The fourth child Rebecca was a 15-year-old sophomore at a local parochial school, one of Chicago's most expensive and rigorous. Juan was not vending when I met the family, but all the rest generated a lively atmosphere around their four distinct businesses.

Felix had no business experience prior to migrating with his young family to the United States in 1962. In Mexico, he was employed in radio advertising, but Cecilia, his wife, came from a business-oriented family, one where gender roles were fluid and family members were not cast into work based on gender. In her relatively gender-neutral environment, Cecilia learned business concepts, autonomy, and perhaps most important, the social exercise of deliberation, in two senses, being both thoughtful and systematic:

I learned about business from my mother at our home. In our home there wasn't any gas for cooking or heating. My father got the idea to have a charcoal selling business. My father would gather firewood and sell it or make charcoal and both were sold from my house. When I was about seven years old, my father called me and started to involve me in the business. He would say, "Well look
In contrast to the Santiago family, Cecilia and Felix shared decision making and Cecilia enjoyed autonomy Ramona would have found unfamiliar. Both would have recognized the family-oriented elements of their lives, but for Cecilia, taking initiative was part and parcel of her day-to-day life; for her, business formation was one option in the exercise of deliberative intelligence, one action plan in the system of ideas and behaviors she had learned and been practicing.

Cecilia's initiative is exemplified in how she acquired her initial merchandise in 1967 with the help of her eldest son, Juan. When purchasing some winter clothes for him, she noticed his hand was in a barrel of plastic figures: "I knew little boys at the Market would want those figures and I was told that I could purchase them for fifty-cents a handful." She compared her hand to Juan's and found her hand was much smaller than his. "I told him to grab big handfuls because I needed a lot of figures and he put six handfuls in a bag. When we went to pay, they just asked us, 'how many handfuls did you put in there?' and Juanito said 'six' and that was my first merchandise."

Initially Cecilia did not know how to acquire merchandise, quite a problem. But when she spent her son reaching for the plastic figures, her quick thinking told her the potential profit if she selected the figures or if he did. In effect, her exercise of deliberation anticipated what economists would call the marginal benefits of having him supply her with the merchandise. Her various actions stemming from this self-awareness was intelligence in action. By 1969, seven years after migrating, Cecilia had quit her wage labor job and was full-time at the Market. Despite wage employment, she chose self-employment, and her business-enabling context prompted her vending business. It was also important to her to transmit business ideas, experience, and income-earning opportunities to her children. Before long she helped each create his or her own vending business and that experience enabled self-employment for two of the children in adult life. Perhaps Cecilia's most significant investment was in higher education for her four children, all of whom earned postsecondary credentials, one a PhD and another a JD.

Cecilia's relationship to her husband contrasts Ramona's in its equality. Both women revere the idea of respect, but they act on the notion in different ways. As a result, Cecilia and her children each had a business and enjoyed encouragement in business. Further, their experience disposed them to a general problem-solving attitude and a deliberative approach to life situations.

Cecilia's experience and the Bustamante family's life differs from Ramona's life and that of the Santiago family. The two women exemplify distinct sociocontextual situations and decision-making processes. We see that although Cecilia's perspective is entrepreneurial, it is manifested and rooted in family life, it comes alive in family situations, and it is oriented to family aspirations. Unlike Ramona, she never saw vending as a stopgap or secondary source of income. Cecilia left wage labor as soon as she established a
profitable line of merchandise, and her husband followed shortly after with the storefront business. Shame never entered Cecilia's calculations, as it did Ramona's. Instead, income, useful experience, and economic mobility were the consequences of becoming a street vendor. Cecilia's entrepreneurial spirit is evidenced in her problem solving and deliberative perspective, not simply her ability to scan the environment for opportunities. That spirit and its associated practices separate Cecilia from Ramona.

But can Ramona become Cecilia? Yes, hence Lupe's story, which follows and illustrates the clashing expectations, at home and work, from discovering the impulse to business. In fact, some women begin with expectations similar to Ramona, but become more like Cecilia; that is to say, they become part of the context in transformation (CT).

**Mexican American Women III: Transforming Institutional Values and Relationships**

Lupe sought factory employment, but vending was her only stable employment since migrating from Mexico to the United States. Like those of Ramona and Cecilia, her economic opportunities were limited by her education and language skills. Like Ramona, she aspired to steady employment in a factory job as soon as her family obligations permitted. In the late 1970s, manufacturing employment was in decline, but she found a job in a light fixture factory. Un fortunately, the work was irregular and she was periodically laid-off. She was happy as her family grew and her husband enjoyed success in his w orkage, but she was dismayed by her irregular employment.

Lupe felt her future was in factory work, and she made efforts at language and workforce training, but she grew bitter about her prospects and critical of the lack of support from her husband at home. Slowly her aspirations eroded, driven by the hopelessness and frustrations of the triple workload she faced—namely, education, employed work, and housework. This economic problem had a household component as well. Lupe felt marginalized in her home, like a second-class parent. Thought she was proud of her children, she was not the role model she wanted to be for them, particularly her daughter. She explains, "I want my daughter and my sons to see that women can be important at work, and at home, that they can work with spouses to further the family situation and to improve themselves." But unlike Barón's entrepreneur who scans the environment and compares prototypical experiences, Lupe had no experience to draw upon, no models to emulate, and only a heart felt interest in a more prominent role in the household.

In short, Lupe and Ramona shared similar contexts, both aspired to factory work, and both lacked business experience. Neither had role models or experience perceiving business opportunities, and neither had supportive husbands. But Lupe's heartfelt need to support her children drove her to explore a path in business. The first step she took in that exploration was to view the strange as the familiar, that is, to see the Market not as a consumer would see it, but as a businessperson would see it.

Lupe, like Ramona and Cecilia, used the Market to make her retail dollars stretch further. Lupe began to look past the merchandise to the people selling it. As she made purchases, she also made conversation with women who encouraged her interest. However, when she confided to her friends at work, they dismissed her ambition as shameful and wishful thinking—in light of the work in the "clean" factory as well as the expectations children and husbands had for them at home. Initially, Lupe, like her colleagues, associated desperation with street vending. Thus, she found herself with contradictory interpersonal dynamics: new friends encouraging her interest and old friends discouraging it. The habitual relationships were stronger, at least initially. In retrospect, she put it this way: "There are some people who have a great need to be vendors or perhaps they would benefit from business, but they are ashamed to do or to be seen doing it. They just take what they make at their factory work and are satisfied with it because they are ashamed to be seen selling stuff."

This shame contrasts the belief Cecilia had about street sales—as a business opportunity, a rung up in the ladder or a lily pad to land on, not as something below her or unsuited to her interest. The two women represent distinct modalities; initially, Lupe can only cling to her hope for self-efficacy, limited as she is by intersecting expectations of self, home, and work environment. Her hope preserves a space in her consciousness for further deliberation. But absent hope, opportunities go unrecognized and deliberation is extinguished. Cecilia, by contrast, realizes her hopes through interaction granted in experience and context, each new interaction producing elements that will assemble into a new business.

The hopeful camaraderie developed by her interactions with Market merchants was in sharp contrast to the dearth of support from her husband, Flavio. Lupe's irregular employment made no difference to Flavio, who was the primary income earner. Though wage work provided a solid quality of life. In Mexico, he was a marginal businessman, selling from their home or from a panel van, but in the United States, he had advanced to a lower rung supervisory job at a factory. He was proud of the home they had purchased and of their children who were graduating high school and pursuing technical training and employment. From his view, life was grand and without problems.

Over time, Lupe began to transform her interpersonal dynamics: she listened less to her work colleagues and more to her new friends at the Market. Emboldened by their advice and longing to be a good example, Lupe abandoned her wage work aspirations and committed herself mentally to becoming a merchant. However, her absence of business knowledge, her and her unsupportive husband loomed large. A long process ensued in which,
like a conductor, she began to orchestrate elements of her environment. Once committed to the idea of business, she needed to solve the problem of merchandise. She had no idea about wholesale warehouses or trade shows so her first thought was to sell used goods, but she wanted more merchandise than she could drum up from her family. Furthermore, she was afraid Flavio would learn of her stockpile and discourage her interest. Again, she transformed an element of her physical environment, a church bazaar, from a source of consumption to a source of merchandise. She was given the unsold merchandise and she recruited her oldest son to drive and help her transport and store the boxes in the basement. Solving the merchandise problem increased her belief in herself and developed her capacity for solving other problems.

Convincing her husband was another matter. Logic alone would not sway a man comfortable with his job and happy that his former efforts at business were far behind him. Lupe considered this and developed a plan that used a married couple in business at the market. Over a few months, the husband helped convince Flavio to start a business. During this time, Lupe was not idle, dropping subtle hints about business and extra income. Finally, Flavio was persuaded and agreed to try, but he was not completely convinced, asking, “What will I sell?”

Lupe had prepared for this possibility. She told him about the carefully stored merchandise that he could use to start his business. Together, they went to work, her one Sunday to earn income for their daughter’s hobby and he the next, for the family. Other merchandise followed Flavio as he recalibrated old routines, almost forgotten, to the new environment. Lupe, emboldened by the success, pushed for her own business. After a few months, he relented and consented, allowing her to sell used goods. Then one Sunday, as they loaded their truck with merchandise, she brought out new socks and women’s apparel she had acquired from a warehouse. Flavio was a bit surprised, but he said nothing. She was fully in business. Though there was no standing ovation, the applause rang in her heart, the conductor had orchestrated a solid success.

Flavio reconstructed her social context and her sense of self. New choices, and indeed a new life, ensued. Here we sketched the entire process, but we know that different women are in different places in this transition. Perhaps a woman secured support from a spouse and then had to tangle with merchandise or problematic friends. The point is that the business formation process has interpersonal as well as biographical components and that assembling those into a new business requires transforming the self as well as social relationships and relationships to the physical environment. Initially, Lupe was little different from Ramona; she embraced her household role and structurally marginal employment, but with time she discovered her irrelevance to the factory and was dismayed by her husband’s lack of interest in her plight and aspirations.

Her transition to entrepreneurial ambition was incremental, prompted in part by her interest in her daughter’s aspirations, in part by her desire for equal standing in the household, and in part from realizing her hoped-for factory employment simply was not to be. Slowly, she developed a business plan, painstakingly reconstructing her economic expectations, familial and interpersonal dynamics, and reassembling elements of her life into irreversible circumstances her husband had to accept. This transition was lengthy, about three years in the making. Over that time, she came to see the market as an economic opportunity, other people’s criticisms as irrelevant, and problems of merchandise, business contacts, and the like as soluble.

Before she became a merchant, Lupe struggled with her expectations of “good” work and “good” friends, and what her appropriate household role should be. In the course of developing new expectations and reconstructing her roles she redefined herself and the various interpersonal dynamics of her life. Each change involved significant risk, starting with changing her self-conception and appropriately challenging or incorporating others into her new sense of self. The path she traversed, her original situation, and her aspirations mirror the situation of many women—making her example poignant, from the many potential pitfalls, but also hopeful, from her success.

Lupe’s story of how and why she became a merchant is also the story of many Mexican women vendors at the market. Her trajectory and indeed the experience of all the vendors was made possible by the City sanctioning the market almost one hundred years ago. Thus, we should acknowledge the role of government supplying the place in which these types of business, with their distinct social trajectories, are realized. The Market played an important historical role for marginalized persons and continues to do so today.

Social Interaction Approaches to Entrepreneurship

The contextual and interactional approach advocated and used here is in contrast to Baron’s individually oriented approach, Mitchell’s social psychological approach, and the sociologists’ emphasis on social structure. Most Mexican American women have aspirations, but are often without a representative pattern to follow. Secure in their habits, even if unsettled in their aspirations, they are adrift. But once they embark on a new path, their thoughts, emerging aspirations, and interactions with other people can produce experimentation with business. Deliberation and a willingness to experiment are developed in this step prior to Baron’s pattern recognition. New aspirations, opportunities, or problems engage deliberation and compel interaction with other people and elements of the environment.

Mexican American women entrepreneurs are bricoleurs who combine experience with imagination, negotiating the gendered circumstances of workplace and home as they assemble businesses. We do not assume that all businesses create wealth and transform values. But by examining different outcomes associated with distinct combinations of interpersonal dynamics and contextual influences, we find a variety of aspirations in the practice of
opportunities, be alert for useful examples, recognize opportunities, and creatively exploit those relationships as she had the chance.

This discussion holds up a mirror to the literature that does not always distinguish among self-employment, entrepreneurship, small business, and other terms. The clearest distinction that can be made among these exemplars is when and how business or business ideas transform social relationships, useful to other parts of life, and oriented to wealth creation. Certainly this does not mean that women in Ramona’s position do not discover high-income opportunities. Perhaps discovering a high-margin product produces enough income to create wealth, but will it then transform values or household relationships? Answering this question has implications for business succession but it is also a question associated with gender relations and Mitchell et al.’s (2002) concern with social values.

Economic opportunity and mobility can be found on the street. But the business literature is focused on bureaucratically organized business. This research questions the transition between street and storefront. Historically, the two coexisted with some movement between them, but the street was not always considered preparation for the store. Today these are open questions. The street provides important income; store and street can supplement each other, but how much and under what structural situations is an open question (Cross and Morales 2007).

There is some interest in whether or not street entrepreneurs will evolve to storefront businesses. Indeed, the micro-entrepreneurship literature presupposes some movement. But this analysis suggests that such an evolution has both tactical and strategic components. A more complete discussion of this problem must be delayed for future work. However, a few comments can be made. First, tactically we must consider whether or not households have the interpersonal and business skills for organizing and administering business operations, for example, supply chain management. Businesses will grow whether or not people have the skills, but longevity and succession depend on people embracing the various administrative tasks related to growing a business. Second, the strategic question has to do with how policy makers foster business opportunities, what opportunities policy makers deem legitimate, how those opportunities are organized, and how participation is encouraged. For instance, Kaufman Foundation-supported initiatives reach entrepreneurship education into colleges and high schools, but how much of the success of these initiatives is among the predisposed? Almost one hundred years ago, policy makers expected immigrants to embrace business and street vending. Will they today, and what efforts can be made to initiate expectations among populations with little or no business experience? It is my belief that street markets can again play an important role in economic development (Morales, Balkin, and Persky 1995).
CONCLUSION

When MAW see themselves as efficacious and their business interests as legitimate, they will create value in two ways: first, in wealth, disposable income, and investment income, and second, perhaps most important, in the transformation of themselves, of what they value, and in how they act on those values. The women described here took advantage of a public market to express their abilities, experiences, and aspirations in creating new businesses and new lives for themselves and their families. By fostering street markets, government can provide the opportunity that immigrants, and others, will perceive as legitimate.

The sociocontextual approach applied here explains MAW-initiated enterprises as the interaction of three elements—biography, interpersonal dynamics, and workplace aspirations—and how opportunities, problems, and situations require the reconstruction of habits using deliberative intelligence. Women are both systematic and interactive as they incrementally transform their lives. The purpose of this study was to understand the decision-making process by which Mexican American women choose entrepreneurship, and we found a variety of paths and outcomes, some more distinctly self-employment, as in Ramona’s case, and some significantly innovative and entrepreneurial, as in the examples of Cecilia and Lupe. By unifying economic history, contemporary behavior, and distinct contexts, we learned how Mexican American women become street vendors. The archival research and ethnographic interviews and observations described how women weave and reweave business and familial aspects of their lives in the course of pursuing business opportunities. We found distinct approaches to family and business life, we discovered distinct values, and we discerned the institutional boundaries they faced in the contours of their gender roles and employment expectations. We understood how ideas about business stimulated behavior that pierced those institutional boundaries and how, over time, those boundaries were transformed.

Disaggregating ethnic entrepreneurship is in its infancy. This effort is a corrective in this regard, especially concerning Mexican Americans, the nation’s largest ethnic minority. Entrepreneurial choices are conditioned by social circumstances and the entrepreneurial imagination. When business is stimulated by aspiration, risked in interaction, and experimented with in different circumstances, it can produce wealth and become a source of ideas for other parts of social life. This analysis was rooted in the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship, which examines institutional opportunities and constraints and how these are translated into the particular circumstances of ethnic group members. The social psychology of entrepreneurship reminds us of the importance of interaction and assessing problematic situations. By reconfiguring this literature in light of social context, we can understand how Mexican American women weave together distinct processes to establish business. The approach comprehended the variation in business outcomes: some street vendors are self-employed, but others are entrepreneurial and extend entrepreneurial lessons to other family members.

Today, just like a century ago, households without business experience, those motivated by poverty and need, people without workplace opportunities, or those unsatisfied with their wage employment or family circumstances can all start or expand businesses in street markets. Scholars should attend explicitly to the situations and processes, and the value and values, that these businesses create.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to David Torres, Zulema Valdez, Elise Gold, Dolores Trevizo, Hanif Nu’Man, and Mary Lopez, who all provided wonderfully helpful comments on this work. I also benefited from the discussion at the conference: An American Story: Mexican American Entrepreneurship and Wealth Creation, cosponsored by the Kauffman Foundation and the IC3 Institute at the University of Texas-Austin.

NOTE


REFERENCES


