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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Contribution of Psychological Entrepreneurial Support to the Strengthening of Female Entrepreneurial Intention in a Women-Only Incubator

Pascale Bueno Merino[1]* and Marie-Hélène Duchemin[2]

[1]Department of Strategy, Entrepreneurship & Innovation, TBS Business School, Toulouse, France
[2]Department of Strategy & Entrepreneurship, EM Normandie Business School, Métis Lab, Caen, France

Abstract

This article explores the contribution of psychological entrepreneurial support, based on same-gender group mentoring, to the strengthening of female entrepreneurial intention in the specific context of a women-only incubator. In other words, it examines the combined effect of gender-based differentiation and group dynamics on the process of incubating women entrepreneurs. Indeed, according to the literature on female entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurs are faced with specific challenges that influence their entrepreneurial intention such as a lack of self-confidence, caused by gender stereotypes, and conflict between family life and entrepreneurial career. More precisely, our research aims to determine how psychological entrepreneurial support is implemented in the incubation process to overcome these specific challenges, and the mechanisms for strengthening female entrepreneurial intention analyzed at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Thanks to a qualitative methodology, our findings suggest that psychological entrepreneurial support delivered via same-gender group mentoring, at the beginning of the incubation process, reinforces female entrepreneurial intention, thanks to a mechanism of external approval and a process of deconstruction of gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship. Role modeling provided by same-gender group mentoring facilitates the identity work of women entrepreneurs in search of entrepreneurial legitimacy and enables them to overcome various psychological barriers related to a lack of self-confidence or pressure stemming from the family environment. We discuss the implications of our findings on related research into business incubators and the design of mentoring programs adapted to the needs of women entrepreneurs.

Keywords: *Female entrepreneurship; Women-only incubator; Psychological entrepreneurial support; Entrepreneurial intention; Same-gender group mentoring*

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Although research into gender and entrepreneurship has increased since the beginning of the 90s (Fischer et al., 1993; Sullivan & Meek, 2012), little attention has been paid to the influence of women-specific training programs, despite the development of structures dedicated to women who become entrepreneurs (Bullough et al., 2015; Byrne & Fayolle, 2010; Orser & Riding, 2006). The literature, however, insists on the specific challenges women entrepreneurs are faced with, and that influence their entrepreneurial intention, such as a lack of self-confidence (Fielden et al., 2003; Kirkwood, 2009; Kourilsky & Walstad, 1998; Wilson et al., 2007) and conflict between family life and entrepreneurial career (Gudmunson et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2003; Petridou & Glaveli, 2008; Schindehutte et al., 2003). These challenges relate to psychological barriers which can be overcome thanks to psychological support, rather than by the acquisition of techniques (Kirkwood, 2009; St-Jean & Jacquemin, 2012). Some women with a potential for business creation would opt more for same-gender entrepreneurial support because it could be easier for them to ask other women questions related to the balance between an entrepreneurial project and family life (Petridou & Glaveli, 2008). Indeed, this balance may be the central component of a business owner's well-being (Gudmunson et al., 2009). Programs specifically designed for women can reinforce their entrepreneurial intention and self-confidence, by improving their perceptions of the

***Corresponding author:** Pascale Bueno Merino, Email: p.bueno-merino@tbs-education.fr

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desirability and feasibility of starting a new business (Bullough et al., 2015). In 2010, Byrne and Fayolle were already insisting on the need to produce knowledge about the design, delivery, and outcomes of gender-based training. For these scholars, some women shape their experience of entrepreneurship in relation to their environment, and encounter disadvantages originating from the gender system in society.

Many studies have been devoted to the benefits of business incubation in the entrepreneurial process (Albort-Morant & Oghazi, 2016; Allen & McCluskey, 1991; Bøllingtoft & Ulhøi, 2005; Ebbers, 2013; Hackett & Dilts, 2004; Hansen et al., 2000; Patton, 2014; Van Rijnsoever, 2020). These benefits are presented both in terms of providing tailored technical support services (legal advice, access to venture capital, etc.) and physical proximity effects that generate social capital. By way of illustration, Hackett and Dilts (2004, p. 57) define a business incubator as 'a shared office-space facility that seeks to provide its incubates with a strategic, value-adding intervention system of monitoring and business assistance. This system controls and links resources with the objective of facilitating successful venture development, while simultaneously containing the cost of their potential failure'. For Brush et al. (2019), incubators are essential for creating a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem in which gender matters at institutional, organizational, and individual levels. According to Marlow and McAdam (2015), the majority of the studies dedicated to business incubators remain almost entirely gender-blind. These researchers invite us to consider the incubator as a 'social arena which is specifically gendered as masculine, and as such, requires female tenants to undertake particular forms of identity work if they are to be recognized as legitimate within this environment' (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 796). They also demonstrate the negative impact of belonging to a reference group which encourages women to reproduce masculinized representations of the normative entrepreneur. Some other scholars warn about the risk of replication of gender inequality in certain incubators (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018).

Through the analysis of same-gender group mentoring implemented in a women-only incubator, we wish to extend the work of Marlow and McAdam (2015) on the process of gendered entrepreneurial legitimation. Indeed, these authors suggest examining this process in the context of 'women-only incubators', in order to enhance the results of their observations carried out in a masculinized environment. The study of a mentoring program, delivered by a women-only incubator, reveals the benefits of a benevolent and empathetic environment on the entrepreneurial intention of women who perceive a mixed environment as threatening, competitive (Gneezy et al., 2003) and mainly dominated by men (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018). According to Eby et al. (2013), mentoring provides a safe environment for self-exploration, reflection, and self-expression. The psychological dimension of the incubation process thus takes on its full significance, as does the need to set up support adapted to the identity work undertaken by women to gain legitimacy as credible entrepreneurs. The importance of adapting the training program to the needs of the participants, in order to increase its effectiveness, was highlighted by Petridou and Glaveli (2008). For these two authors, the consideration of the barriers that women entrepreneurs face in terms of work-family balance is an example of the adaptation of the training program to the needs of women entrepreneurs. The literature also observes that success in both the family environment and society is another driving force behind women's entrepreneurship (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013).

Research into women's entrepreneurial intentions shows that both women and men are more likely to associate entrepreneurship with male characteristics (Gupta et al., 2009; Lee & James, 2007; Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019). This masculine identification is related negatively to women's entrepreneurial intentions; the latter are different from men's and are weaker (Boissin et al., 2009). This may explain the lesser presence of women in entrepreneurship (Gupta et al., 2009; Kirkwood, 2009) and encourages studies devoted to female entrepreneurial intention as a psychological process which can be supported by the implementation of psychological mechanisms. Research into business incubation has neglected the importance of psychological entrepreneurial support through gender similarity in the strengthening of women's entrepreneurial intention. Yet, women entrepreneurs may face various psychological barriers related to a lack of self-confidence or pressure stemming from the family environment. These barriers can be overcome thanks to the support delivered by women-only training programs (Roomi & Harrison, 2010).

Gender effects are still an emerging field of research (Malmström et al., 2017), in particular with regard to the functioning of entrepreneurial ecosystems, in which incubators are key players (Brush et al., 2019). In this article, we study the contribution of psychological entrepreneurial support provided by a women-only incubator to the strengthening of women's entrepreneurial intention. Our purpose is thus to answer the following research question: *How does psychological entrepreneurial support contribute to the strengthening of female entrepreneurial intention in a women-only incubator?* This question of a processual nature allows us to consider two lines of research dedicated to psychological entrepreneurial support:

1. The first line is dedicated to how psychological entrepreneurial support is implemented (characteristics of the psychological support program and its integration into the different stages of the incubation process, particularly in relation to the technical support phase);

2. The second line is dedicated to mechanisms for strengthening entrepreneurial intention at work in the psychological support phase and analyzed at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

This study makes several contributions to the literature exploring the incubation process and, more generally, entrepreneurial support for women. First, we demonstrate how psychological entrepreneurial support implemented through same-gender group mentoring, at the beginning of the incubation process, reinforces the entrepreneurial intention of women, thanks to a mechanism of external approval and a process of deconstruction of gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship. Moreover, little empirical work has investigated the topic of women-only incubators. Second, we contribute to the research into the entrepreneurial support given to women, by showing the importance of designing adapted programs so as to overcome various psychological barriers related to a lack of self-confidence or pressure stemming from the family environment. Indeed, and to our knowledge, existing studies do not look at the combined effect of group dynamics and gender-based differentiation.

This article is divided into three parts. We will first present our literature review on entrepreneurial support in business incubators, same-gender group mentoring, and psychological barriers affecting female entrepreneurial intention. We will then describe our research methodology based on an abductive approach and conducted in the context of a French women-only incubator. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our findings on related research into business incubators and the design of mentoring programs adapted to the needs of women entrepreneurs.

Literature review

The implementation of entrepreneurial support in business incubators: The primacy of a technical and relational approach

Some studies have reported on the technical or relational benefits of the entrepreneurial support provided by business incubators (Albort-Morant & Oghazi, 2016; Allen & McCluskey, 1991; Bøllingtoft & Ulhøi, 2005; Ebbers, 2013; Hackett & Dilts, 2004; Hansen et al., 2000; Patton, 2014; Van Rijnsoever, 2020), on developing the business concept (Hackett & Dilts, 2004) or connecting startups with other stakeholders (Van Rijnsoever, 2020), for example. Having said that, no study has thoroughly investigated the role of psychological entrepreneurial support implemented in this type of structure, the support of which seems to be evaluated more positively by men according to certain studies (Albort-Morant & Oghazi, 2016). Marlow and McAdam (2015) encourage the consideration of the process of entrepreneurial identity building in the context of 'women-only incubators', so as to extend the results of their observations conducted in a masculinized environment. In this perspective, the unit of analysis within the incubator is no longer just the business envisaged by the project leader or its contribution in terms of innovation. This unit of analysis is then supplemented by that of the budding woman entrepreneur who is doing entrepreneurial identity work within a reference group. For these scholars, 'identity work is enacted within situated contexts and shaped by the characteristics of those involved' (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 792).

Psychological entrepreneurial support materializes through the consideration of personality variables, such as well-being or self-confidence. This psychological approach to entrepreneurial support was developed notably thanks to the work of Pluchart (2012) dedicated to the psychological biases of the entrepreneur, and to the studies of both Valeau (2006) and St-Jean and Jacquemin (2012) focused on entrepreneurial doubt. Krueger and Brazeal (1994) insist on the importance of emotional and psychological support and credible role models in order to develop self-confidence. Personality variables can be stimulated by a benevolent and empathetic environment, excluding, as far as possible, any form of stereotypical language or rhetoric, characteristic of certain support structures (Malmström et al., 2017). The literature on women's entrepreneurship shows that gender shapes intentions. Female entrepreneurship is conditioned by gender stereotypes which are widely shared beliefs about characteristics attributed to men and women (Gupta et al., 2009). These gender stereotypes help explain why women are less involved in entrepreneurial activities owing to a lack of self-confidence that these beliefs are likely to trigger (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Malmström et al., 2017; Shneor & Jenssen, 2014). For Scharnitzky (2015), a stereotype is a set of information and beliefs associated with the members of any group. According to this author, three categories of stereotype can be distinguished: autostereotype (stereotype applied to members of a group to which we belong: what women think of women and what men think of men), heterostereotype (stereotype applied to members of a group to which we do not belong: what women think of men and what men think of women), and metastereotype (what we imagine others to think of us). Psychological support for women entrepreneurs, based on the deconstruction of these stereotypes, therefore has its place within an incubator. Its objective is to remove psychological barriers caused by gender stereotypes so as to facilitate the identity work of women entrepreneurs in search of legitimacy (Marlow & McAdam, 2015).

The role of same-gender group mentoring in the deconstruction of gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship

Despite the emergence of tools enabling female entrepreneurial support (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013), little work has addressed the topic. This void has led researchers to encourage the creation of new entrepreneurial programs better adapted to the needs of female entrepreneurship applicants, including both educational programs for female entrepreneurship and female mentoring support (Bullough et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2009). The benefits of mentoring for women entrepreneurs have been highlighted by many scholars (Eby et al., 2013; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Ncube & Wasburn, 2010; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). Group mentoring is not only a source of support, friendship, and information, but also helps women to actively seek solutions to obstacles together (Ncube & Wasburn, 2010). Sosik and Godshalk (2000) looked at the role of gender in mentoring in the workplace. They demonstrate that mentoring relationships involving female mentors provide more role modeling and more psychosocial support than mentoring relationships involving male mentors.

The mentor, a confirmed female entrepreneur (Radu Lefebvre & Redien-Collot, 2013), acts as a role model, helping deconstruct the stereotypes that associate entrepreneurship with masculine activity (Kirkwood, 2009). Exposure to role models has a positive effect on entrepreneurial career intention and affects women's entrepreneurial self-confidence more than it does that of men (BarNir et al., 2011). 'Since men are less likely to face negative career stereotypes, it may be less important for them than for women to have a same-gender mentor' (Radu Lefebvre & Redien-Collot, 2013, p. 377). For Brush et al. (2019), role models are essential in the support delivered by entrepreneurial ecosystems: 'In areas where the role models are male or have only masculine qualities, women may not perceive that venture creation is possible, and they may have a greater fear of failure or less confidence in their abilities to start a business (GEM Global Report 2016/2017)' (Brush et al., 2019, pp. 400–401). Moreover, by facilitating observation and imitation thanks to a mirror effect (Radu Lefebvre & Redien-Collot, 2013), same-gender mentoring contributes to the personal development of mentees through a process of personal and social learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Ncube & Wasburn, 2010; Ragins & Scandura, 1994).

Support provided by the mentor is not limited to task-related assistance. Eby et al. (2013) speak of 'perceived psychosocial support' and distinguish it from 'perceived instrumental support'. They also insist on the moderating effects of gender: 'psychosocial support behaviors such as encouragement and acceptance are more in line with traditional gender-role expectations for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, it is frequently presumed that psychosocial support provided by female mentors is associated with greater protégé benefits since it may be more readily accepted by protégés' (Eby et al., 2013, p. 466). In the workplace, psychosocial mentoring is positively related to resilience which is an important well-being outcome (Kao et al., 2014). More generally, mentoring makes a significant contribution to the reduction of entrepreneurial doubt, thanks to the psychological support it provides the entrepreneur with (St-Jean & Jacquemin, 2012). It proceeds from 'an attitude of listening and protection oriented more towards the search for meaning rather than the acquisition of techniques' (St-Jean & Jacquemin, 2012, p. 28). For Kirkwood (2009), women may require more self-confidence-building sessions, rather than assistance that offers tangible business skills.

Psychological barriers and female entrepreneurial intention

The concept of entrepreneurial intention (Ajzen, 1991; Bird, 1988; Krueger et al., 2000), through the study of its antecedents, allows us to focus on different psychological states of the entrepreneur: (1) the attractiveness that he/she perceives of creating a business (perceived desirability); (2) the feeling of being able to create it (perceived feasibility); and (3) any surrounding social pressure working against creation (perceived social norms). As a psychological process (Bird, 1988), female entrepreneurial intention can be negatively influenced by intrapersonal barriers, related to a lack of self-confidence and affecting the desire to create a business, or by interpersonal barriers explained by the family environment and notably by the role of the spouse. These psychological barriers with which women entrepreneurs are faced constitute gender differences which have to be taken into account when investigating the antecedents of female entrepreneurial intention. They result in the reduction of 'psychological capital' which can be conceptualized 'as the desire or intent to participate, self-efficacy, confidence, outcome expectations, and motivation' (Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019, p. 318).

Perceived feasibility is a psychological state which reflects an individual's perception of self-confidence while performing a task (Mueller & Dato-On, 2008). According to Minniti and Nardone (2007) and Kirkwood (2009), self-confidence is based on perceptions of skills and abilities, rather than actual or objective ability. It constitutes a gender difference in entrepreneurship (Tsyganova & Shirokova, 2010). For Wilson et al. (2009), it is influenced by gender and society from an early age. Entrepreneurial activity tends to be culturally dominated by men (Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Robledo et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2005), and the entrepreneur's role is stereotypically portrayed as masculine (Malmström et al., 2017). As such, the weight of societal representations, such as the perception of a difficult or less rewarding work environment, would explain

lower self-confidence for women than men, even becoming an obstacle to entrepreneurship, preventing women from taking action (Shneor & Jenssen, 2014). Some authors suggest reinforcing the self-confidence of entrepreneurial applicants, by working on their belief in their entrepreneurial abilities, role modeling, social persuasion, and the problem of anxiety encountered during the phase of the emergence of the idea (Zhao et al., 2005).

Social norms correspond to perceived social pressure (the influence of others) determining whether a particular behavior is adopted or not (Ajzen, 1991; Robledo et al., 2015). The literature relies on close relationships with family and friends to measure the impact of social norms on entrepreneurial intention (Zhao et al., 2005). Social norms can be a barrier to the entrepreneurial act. The literature shows the importance, for women, of obtaining support from their reference group, as they like to please others (Morris & Schindehutte, 2005). Societal representations negatively impact the intention of some women by affecting perceived entrepreneurial desirability, and by interaction, the feeling of entrepreneurial feasibility (Fitzsimmons & Douglas, 2011). The lack of external approval and support could imply greater difficulty in engaging in the entrepreneurial process (Robledo et al., 2015). These factors help explain lower entrepreneurial intention for a woman with an entrepreneurial project (Shneor & Jenssen, 2014). The studies of Jianakoplos and Bernasek (2008) and Winkler and Ireland (2009) emphasize that the support given by the spouse is important in the entrepreneurial approach, notably in terms of emotional support for entrepreneurial risk-taking (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). 'Spousal support refers to emotional support for the business owner in his or her work role', that implies 'an awareness of the challenges of the business' and 'a commitment to the well-being of the business owner' (Gudmunson et al., 2009, p. 1108). The role of the spouse can therefore be a facilitator or a hindrance in the implementation of the entrepreneurial project (Davidsson & Honig, 2003). Societal representations attribute distinct roles to each member of the couple (Minnotte et al., 2010). The spouse's 'traditional' or 'egalitarian' conception of the role of women in society will negatively or positively influence the entrepreneurial experience of women (Le Loarne-Lemaire, 2013). According to Nikina et al. (2012), the quality of the couple's relationship has a clear impact on spousal support of female entrepreneurship, and the latter can either improve or deteriorate such a relationship. Women who perceive more support from those around them therefore have a greater sense of capacity, which positively impacts their entrepreneurial intention (Yordanova & Tarrazon, 2010). Conversely, the lack of support from the family can lead the female entrepreneur to seek approval within other external reference groups.

Research method

An abductive approach

Our research is based on an abductive approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Kennedy & Thornburg, 2018) owing to the frequent back-and-forth between data and theories. In the context of our research, abduction is justified in particular by the absence of an integrative conceptual framework dedicated to entrepreneurial psychological support. This approach consisted in turning to existing literature, in the broader fields of female entrepreneurial support and the incubation process, to give meaning to our empirical observations and ultimately propose a structured perspective of psychological entrepreneurial support. The collection of new and numerous data, pertaining to a field of research which has barely been studied, also required going back-and-forth regularly to the theory, to classify and categorize raw data. Our empirical approach is built on a qualitative methodology in order to explore the topic of research in depth. Indeed, and to our knowledge, existing studies dedicated to business incubators have neglected the importance of psychological support for some women entrepreneurs. In this respect, abduction makes it possible to lead to new theoretical articulations, such as the link between gender-based differentiation and group dynamics in the incubation process. We also rely on authors' recommendations which encourage the development of qualitative research to better understand women entrepreneurs and their entrepreneurial identity building (Ahl, 2004; Hamilton, 2014). Cusin and Maymo (2016) insist, more generally, on the lack of qualitative research in entrepreneurship. According to them, the qualitative approach is particularly justified by the objective of a detailed understanding of the mechanisms and processes at work at both individual and interpersonal levels.

Context of the research

Our study was conducted in the context of a French women-only incubator, called 'Normandie Pionnières', created in 2007. In 2015, this incubator partnered with an agglomeration community (government structure in France based on intercommunality). It is the only incubator in Normandy dedicated to the creation and takeover of businesses by women.[1] The support provided by the incubator is characterized by two phases with a total duration of 4 months: a psychological support phase centered on the decision to start a business (or not), and a technical support phase centered on the different components of the business plan (definition of the offer, market research, legal aspects, financial forecasts, etc.). The

[1] https://actu.fr/societe/nouveau-a-caen-une-structure-pour-les-femmes-creatrices-dentreprises_560043.html

Table 1. Description of the 27 interviews

Interview number	Marital status	In a relationship	Number of children	Age	Topic of business creation	Date of interview	Length of interview
1	Married	Yes	2	35	Equality training	02/04/2015	1:05
2	Married	Yes	2	38	Audit and quality	03/09/2015	1:33
3	Single	No	0	28	Delicatessen Mexican products for restaurant	03/12/2015	1:26
4	Single	No	1	33	Drafting of childminder contracts	03/12/2015	1:07
5	Divorced	No	2	53	Social network and personal development	03/16/2015	1:17
6	Divorced	Yes	2	45	Arts training	03/16/2015	1:16
7	Married	Yes	0	33	Nomadic library Literature around the imaginary	03/19/2015	1:35
8	Married	Yes	2	42	Publishing for children	03/23/2015	1:07
9	Divorced	No	1	35	Cultural restaurant barge	03/23/2015	1:03
10	Married	Yes	2	48	Manufacture of handmade decorative items	03/31/2015	0:55
11	Married	Yes	2	48	Tea room	03/31/2015	0:58
12	Married	Yes	2	40	Tea room	04/01/2015	1:09
13	Single	No	0	54	Cosmetics for hoteliers	04/01/2015	0:55
14	Widow	No	2	46	English training	04/07/2015	1:02
15	Married	Yes	1	48	Tools and maps to achieve one's full potential and live with more happiness	04/08/2015	1:01
16	Married	Yes	0	37	West Indies and Trinidad food truck	04/14/2015	1:10
17	Married	Yes	2	48	Entrepreneurs' coaching	03/16/2015	1:11
18	Married	Yes	2	48	Literacy training	04/20/2015	1:07
19	Married	Yes	1	50	Recording studio	04/21/2015	1:21
20	Single	Yes	0	35	Cameraman	05/07/2015	0:55
21	Divorced	No	0	30	Electronic toys for children	05/11/2015	0:46
22	Married	Yes	0	30	Publishing	05/12/2015	0:58
23	Divorced	No	0	25	Publishing	05/27/2015	0:55
24	Divorced	No	1	51	American grocery store	04/30/2015	0:59
25	Single	No	1	45	Tea room	04/16/2015	0:57
26	Married	Yes	1	33	Reflexology	04/17/2015	0:42
27	Divorced	No	0	35	Washable underwear protectors	04/17/2015	0:41
							Total: 29 h 11 min

psychological support phase, carried out in a women-only group, must precede the technical support phase. It constitutes the '*gateway to the incubator through which all female applicants pass*'.[2] Two 'Go / No Go' (i.e., I start my business / I give up the idea of starting my business) workshops structured around a collective game for decision making are organized. Inspired by the Taoist philosophy, this game encourages female applicants to question their strengths, weaknesses, support system and resources, in a benevolent environment. Each player is invited to share her feelings about each project.

[2] https://www.ouest-france.fr/normandie/caen-14000/un-nouveau-service-pour-patronnes-en-puissance-3511678
(article in a specialized publication, presenting the objectives of the incubator)

Data collection, coding, and analysis

Data collection was organized in 2015 through semi-structured interviews conducted with 27 women entrepreneurs who had participated in some 'Go – No Go' workshops. These 27 women entrepreneurs were identified through a directory created and maintained by the incubator, listing all of the women supported since its creation. This directory is made up of 138 women whom we contacted by email. Two-thirds of the 27 women have children, and 16 of them are in a relationship. Our semi-structured interviews enabled us to collect 29 h and 11 min of sound recording (see Table 1 above). The interview grid was structured mainly around the following topics: motivations for business creation, expectations regarding the incubation process and motivations for a

women-only incubator, gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship, and contributions of the women's group to the antecedents of entrepreneurial intention (desire to create a business, self-confidence, and social norms with a focus on family environment).

The main objective of the researcher is to understand the interpretations given by the interviewees of their own world and behavior (De Saussure, 1983; Delattre et al., 2015; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourse analysis is particularly relevant to capture social constructions of gender (Malmström et al., 2017). In this study, we use a dual method of discourse analysis: manual analysis and computer-assisted analysis. The first method refers to the work of Miles et al. (2013). Using a meticulous transcription, it is necessary to resort to the theoretical coding method in order to transform the raw data and to organize these data into matrices to explain the phenomena. This type of coding is particularly recommended as part of an abductive approach to promote back-and-forth between raw data and the construction of theoretical responses. It facilitates the conceptualization of a barely studied phenomenon, in a context of increasing theorizing (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016). It is made up of predefined categories from the literature review ('group mentoring', 'role modeling', 'gender stereotypes', 'lack of self-confidence', 'family environment', 'entrepreneurial intention', etc.), and emerging categories from the empirical data collection phase ('gendered and collective approach', 'benevolent listening', 'introspection', 'mutual observation', 'social comparison', 'external approval', etc.). This hybrid coding process, both deductive and inductive (Essig & Soparnot, 2019), was based on an analytical triangulation for which each researcher came up with a proposal for a coding scheme after having looked for recurring regularities in the data. All proposals were compared and discussed, so as to identify similarities and differences (Patton, 2015).

The second method we used is a computer-aided analysis using the IRaMuTeQ software (Ratinaud & Déjean, 2009), in order to classify and establish links between the forms of vocabularies used in discourse. This open-source software enables statistical analyses of textual data. In pursuance of the work developed by Reinert (1983, 1990), it uses the ALCESTE (*Analyse des Lexèmes Cooccurrents dans un Ensemble de Segments de TExtes*) method, identifies the co-occurrences of the active forms, and groups them in classes. It thus offers an exploratory analysis without a priori (Marghobi, 2019). Descending hierarchical classifications (Cristofini, 2021) and factorial correspondence analyses contribute to the study of the contrast between classes (Delattre et al., 2015). Our corpus composed of the 27 interviews was formatted in order to be read by IRaMuTeQ version 0.7 alpha 2 developed by the LERASS laboratory (Ratinaud & Déjean, 2009; Ratinaud & Marchand, 2012). The analysis allows the closest forms to be grouped together. Classes are then identified with the dendrogram showing the size of the classes and the percentage of the corpus classified. In our case, four classes of forms were identified and 95.96% of the text segments were classified (see Figure 1 below). They relate respectively to women's group

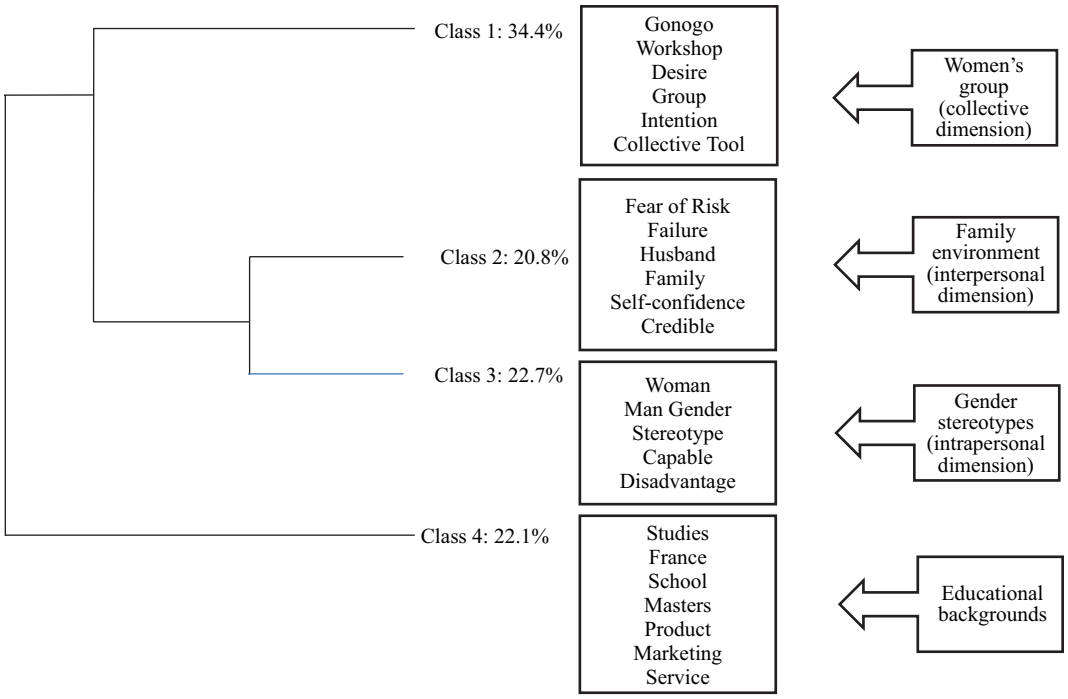

Figure 1. Descending hierarchical classification (extraction from IRaMuTeQ)

(class 1), family environment (class 2), gender stereotypes (class 3), and educational backgrounds (class 4). Classes 2 and 3 are closely related to class 1 through the node (dendrogram).

Empirical findings

The analysis of our findings sheds light on how psychological entrepreneurial support is implemented in a women-only incubator, i.e., the characteristics of the psychological support program and its integration into the different stages of the incubation process, particularly in relation to the technical support phase. Moreover, our results revealed the mechanisms for strengthening entrepreneurial intention at work in the psychological support phase, at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

The implementation of psychological entrepreneurial support in a women-only incubator

The psychological entrepreneurial support that we have analyzed in depth, and which takes place in an incubator, comes from the positive effects of a combination of gender-based differentiation and group dynamics. The establishment of same-gender group mentoring, based on a logic of mutual listening and encouragement, and promoting a female model of entrepreneurial success, generates a circle of trust within which empathy, benevolence, and solidarity are key: 'I found that a group was formed at "Go / No Go," because we all spoke very simply, with such simplicity that nobody tried to hide anything. We were able to confide in each other, and there was a kind of solidarity that came from feeling good. Finally, I would like to add that I continue to keep up with other participants' projects, and I love it, I think it's just great'. Case 23 (25 years old; not in a relationship). This support is intended to deconstruct gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship and to remove the last psychological obstacles of budding entrepreneurs by implementing two 'Go / No Go' (i.e., I start my business / I give up the idea of starting my business) workshops structured around a collective game for decision making. It gives each participant the opportunity to speak about her entrepreneurial project in public. In the design of the incubation program, this is a prerequisite to subsequently benefiting from technical support.

The analysis of our textual data allowed us to characterize the implementation modalities and purposes of the psychological entrepreneurial support delivered in a women-only incubator in more detail. This psychological entrepreneurial support is mainly based on three characteristics: (see Table 2 below) benevolent listening,

Table 2. Characteristics of psychological entrepreneurial support in Normandie Pionnières

Characteristics of psychological entrepreneurial support in Normandie Pionnières	Interview excerpts
Benevolent listening	- '(Speaking of Go / No Go) It was benevolent, extremely benevolent, I think that was the most essential part for my project. After that, well, the rest, I learned a lot. I didn't know anything about market research, I didn't know anything about banks, [...] so it structured the steps for me but it was still very technical, while there, we had something which was completely human and we were encouraged to go deep within ourselves.' Case 1 (35 years old; in a relationship) - 'I think we sometimes need to be among women, to talk. That's what I do with my friends who are female entrepreneurs, I have discussions with them that I don't have with men; it's normal.' Case 21 (30 years old; not in a relationship) - 'The group of women was very important, like a cocoon and we immediately felt very comfortable with each other.' Case 22 (30 years old; in a relationship)
Introspection	- 'For me, it was positive because I realized that I was made for that, but, I mean, it can very well also make you realize that you are not made for that. So you see, this is it, you have to work on yourself and in the end, you're the only one who can do this, nobody else can do it for you.' Case 11 (48 years old; in a relationship) - 'The Go / No Go workshop helps free the mind, think in depth, then I remember the fundamental questions, what motivates you? But why are you doing this?' Case 19 (50 years old; in a relationship)
Mutual observation	- 'This is the psychological aspect which is not bad, the mirror of others too [...]. It allows you to see what you reflect. All alone, you don't know it, you are unable to know it, and the group reflects your image. As far as I'm concerned, it comforts me with respect to support, improvements…' Case 17 (48 years old; in a relationship) - 'When we see the perception of people who don't know us, it's very interesting and it's also very important when we start a business because we're constantly meeting people for the first time and, suddenly, it's important to know what we inspire. It was very interesting because we told each person what we thought of her without knowing her, and it is important to know what we inspire; it's the way others see us, their feedback…' Case 26 (33 years old; in a relationship)

introspection, and mutual observation. Benevolent listening in a women-only group refers to the constitution of an inter-self, or in other words, of a cocoon in which women entrepreneurs are able to confidently express their fears and doubts relating to their entrepreneurial career and to the balance between this career and family life. This inter-self is conducive to a non-competitive and non-threatening environment, so as to prevent the reproduction of masculinized representations of entrepreneurship. Same-gender group mentoring, at the beginning of the incubation process, provides a safe environment for self-expression and makes it possible to focus support for women entrepreneurs on personality variables, such as well-being and self-confidence. Psychological entrepreneurial support also facilitates women entrepreneurs' introspection into their projects, thanks to a process of reflection oriented towards the search for meaning. This self-exploration step stimulates the development of an entrepreneurial identity for women in search of legitimacy and demonstrates the necessity to go beyond an exclusively technical approach to entrepreneurial support. Psychological entrepreneurial support is finally based on a principle of mutual observation generated by group dynamics. It promotes the identification of common issues and the exploration of psychological blockages due to gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship or pressure stemming from the family environment. Our interviewees made special mention of the mirror effect that allows them to take a step back from their entrepreneurial project thanks to the exchange of points of view, the strengthening of self-confidence, and decision-making in front of peers at the end of the workshops.

Most of our interviewees explain the importance of the female mentor who leads the women's group and her role in their decision to start a business. As a mentor, she represents a model to follow, inspiring admiration and participating positively in decision-making while deconstructing gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship. The way she leads the workshop, and the benevolence she allows, builds up trust and confidence to give birth to the decision. The personality of the female facilitator or the *intuitu personae* is very important for many of the women interviewed. Besides her qualities as a group facilitator, she is a company owner. This allows women supported by the incubator to project themselves as company owners and to take action more easily. Her practice as a mentor and her skills as an experienced company owner gives her the legitimacy that is much appreciated by the applicants:

> 'She's a company owner and I think having women in front of you who have created their own company confirms that it is possible.' Case 9 (35 years old; not in a relationship)

> 'The relevance of her interventions is linked to her experience.' Case 2 (38 years old; in a relationship)

> 'The facilitator is a model of tenacity; I adore her and her attitude.' Case 19 (50 years old; in a relationship)

In addition, thanks to the regional media, she shows the participants that being both a woman and a company owner is quite conceivable. It encourages women to move in the same direction and helps reduce the importance given to negative social norms: 'Thanks to the facilitator, we will further enhance our efforts and our courage to move in the direction of entrepreneurship' Case 3 (28 years old; not in a relationship). To sum up, exposure to a role model has a positive effect on the deconstruction of gender stereotypes which associate entrepreneurship with male characteristics. It makes it easier for the mentees to project themselves into the entrepreneurial activity and stimulates their desire to become an entrepreneur. Role modeling facilitates the identity work of women entrepreneurs in search of entrepreneurial legitimacy, by encouraging self-exploration and self-expression within a benevolent and empathetic group: 'She (the female facilitator) managed to get us to share our inner feelings and eventually many questions, where our projects came from, why, what was holding us back, the things that pushed us. The idea was therefore no longer to have things in common with regard to the companies we were creating but to focus on the desire to create Case 1 (35 years old; in a relationship). It reinforces the mentees' entrepreneurial self-confidence by enabling them to overcome psychological barriers caused by gender stereotypes. This finding demonstrates the importance for incubators to design training sessions dedicated to the process of entrepreneurial legitimation and personal development, before building sessions dedicated to the acquisition of techniques and the development of business skills.

Strengthening female entrepreneurial intention through psychological support

Two types of mechanisms that strengthen female entrepreneurial intention were identified: intrapersonal strengthening mechanisms, acting on the desirability of the entrepreneurial act and self-confidence, and interpersonal strengthening mechanisms linked to external approval provided by the women's group when support from the family is lacking. Lack of self-confidence, caused by gender stereotypes, and conflict between family life and entrepreneurial career are specific challenges women entrepreneurs are faced with, and that influence their entrepreneurial intention. Our findings demonstrate that these challenges can be tackled during the incubation process thanks to psychological support delivered via same-gender group mentoring and implemented before the acquisition of

techniques. In other words, programs specifically designed for women at the beginning of the incubation process can reinforce their entrepreneurial intention, by acting on its antecedents. Gender similarity has a role to play during the incubation process for women who face psychological barriers created by gender stereotypes or pressure stemming from the family environment. Our study reveals the importance of designing adapted programs so as to overcome these barriers and reduce the entrepreneurial doubt and anxiety which may prevent some women from taking action.

Intrapersonal strengthening mechanisms

In our sample, most of the women describe their desire to create a business as strong initially, when the idea is still in its infancy. They show great desire for creating their own business, which, for some, is deeply anchored. For others, entrepreneurial desire has been instilled because of training, a specific opportunity, or the need to create a job. According to the majority of our interviewees, participation in a women's group helps strengthen the desire to create a business. It encourages applicants to think about themselves and their project, strengthening the desire to create and to take action:

> 'The others, the group, seeing that everyone had this desire to create a business, everyone wanted to succeed.' Case 11 (48 years old; in a relationship)

> 'The act of setting yourself the goal to trigger a positive or negative answer, I think that if you're ready, you come out of this stronger and want to go ahead. The Go / No Go workshop reinforced my desire to create a business.' Case 8 (42 years old; in a relationship)

> 'I had a desire that was repressed and the Go / No Go workshop triggered everything. [...] It made me say things that I would not have told myself in fact.' Case 10 (48 years old; in a relationship)

While an all-female environment can foster gentleness and benevolence, it contributes, above all, to overcoming isolation and showing applicants that other participants ask themselves similar questions related to the reality of being a woman entrepreneur. This psychological entrepreneurial support implemented at the beginning of the incubation process allows them to strengthen their desire to take action by listening to and observing other women describe their difficulties. Seeing the inhibitions of others actually strengthens the will to move ahead. Participation in a women's group helps them to ask the right questions in order to remove any gray areas and make it easier for the project to come to fruition: 'I think the Go / No Go workshop is the way to ask the right questions, to ask ourselves about the real purpose of our project, why we want to do it and what we are willing to make as a sacrifice, because we must be aware that when we make choices, including embarking on this adventure, it implies making sacrifices and concretely it is important for women to ask these questions' Case 3 (28 years old; not in a relationship).

Two-thirds of the interviewed women reveal a lack of self-confidence which they explain by societal representations, culture, or education; this may lead them to constantly compare themselves to men and devalue themselves:

> 'Originally, for me, it is really the education, the education one receives when one has been an overprotected little girl: "Be careful you will be hurt, you will dirty your dress, be nice…." They don't say: "Be a super woman and conquer the world." [...] It induces a lack of confidence in our capacity to become an entrepreneur.' Case 1 (35 years old; in a relationship)

> 'Yes, I have a lack of self-confidence. Well, it is linked to the harassment that I suffered from in the company where I was told that, as I had become a mom, I was worth nothing. Hearing this regularly every week, I ended up believing it.' Case 2 (38 years old; in a relationship)

While launching the process of business creation may be exhilarating, attractive, and challenging for these women, their lack of self-confidence may, in parallel, slow down their move to action. Questions about legitimacy as a business leader toward partners also reinforce the phenomenon. A feeling of self-devaluation is experienced especially with respect to business partners or future clients, in the form of the fear of not being credible or legitimate in the role of entrepreneur: 'That was the key word at the time when I was at Normandie Pionnières. Many people did not feel credible as women, myself included. [...] It felt like I was bluffing' Case 16 (37 years old; in a relationship). Participation in a women's group at the beginning of the incubation process helps reduce this feeling of devaluation through discussions conducted exclusively with women. The reasons mentioned relate both to cooperative games and proximity to other women. Thanks to this proximity, they improve their self-confidence:

> 'The group reminded me that I was capable of creating a business.' Case 21 (30 years old; not in a relationship)

> 'It reinforced my self-confidence. Maybe I realized that my personal abilities were real, although I do not feel like I devaluated myself so much, I realized that I devaluated myself anyway. The exchanges between us in the women's group help, we support each other.' Case 7 (33 years old; in a relationship)

> 'My self-confidence has been reinforced simply by being listened to by people who believe in me. The gentleness and listening that were brought in at the time relieved me and allowed me to say: "Yes, it is possible!"' Case 9 (35 years old; not in a relationship)

> 'It allowed me to compare myself to the others and to say that I have all my chances. If they can create a business, I can create one too.' Case 17 (48 years old; in a relationship)

Interpersonal strengthening mechanisms

Half of the group in our sample encountered criticism and disapproval from the family circle. This lack of support and of external approval, which can come from the entrepreneurs themselves, negatively influences female entrepreneurial intention and can discourage entrepreneurial risk-taking. It affects women entrepreneurs' self-confidence and well-being by generating conflict between family life and entrepreneurial career.

1. 'My close entourage advised me not to create a business, my parents, my family, not all of them but many, especially those who knew the world of entrepreneurship, who had been heads of companies.' Case 3 (28 years old; not in a relationship)
2. 'There are people around me who advised me not to create a business, my parents in particular, because they knew very well what I was venturing into. [...] It was the same for my family-in-law who never understood. [...] We come from completely different backgrounds, they are all civil servants, so from the beginning, they did not understand what it means to become an entrepreneur and the reason for taking all these risks when we could have a job with a very good salary.' Case 21 (30 years old; not in a relationship)

The spouse plays an important role in the entrepreneurial process if, of course, approval is given and emotional support provided to encourage entrepreneurial risk-taking and to nourish the feeling of being capable of setting up a company. This role is paramount for female entrepreneurial applicants, especially when the decision to start a business is made together with their spouse. Female entrepreneurship can be perceived as a threat to the couple's relationship and generates anxiety at the start of the entrepreneurial adventure: 'I had fears and hesitations relating to my husband. I think that the last 3 years before I started, I was afraid to destabilize everything by taking this decision. In any case, I did not want to take it alone, I could not take it alone, I did not want to impose the decision on him, he also had to find his way, and decide whether he wanted and accepted it' Case 27 (35 years old; not in a relationship). It thus seems that when the spouse accepts his wife's plan and shares family responsibilities, it makes it easier to take action. Participation in a women's group helps women empower themselves by reducing the feeling of guilt toward the spouse. The sharing of experiences within the group concerning the need to obtain the partner's approval helps reduce this feeling. In case of reluctance from the spouse or more generally from the family, this approval is given by the women's group instead. The decision to start a business, taken within the women's group at the end of the Go/No Go workshops, leads to commitment in front of peers and facilitates the move to action: 'The consequence is that the decision was made with no possibility of turning back. An official and caring place was needed to stop procrastinating' Case 1 (35 years old; in a relationship).

Discussion

The role of gender similarity in the incubation process

Our findings suggest that psychological entrepreneurial support implemented in a women's group, at the beginning of the incubation process, strengthens their entrepreneurial intention, thanks to a mechanism of external approval and a process of deconstruction of gender stereotypes which associate entrepreneurship with male characteristics (Gupta et al., 2009; Lee & James, 2007; Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019) and may explain the lesser presence of women in entrepreneurship (Gupta et al., 2009; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Kirkwood, 2009; Malmström et al., 2017). These findings allow us to enhance the literature dedicated to business incubators which, according to Marlow and McAdam (2015), remains almost entirely gender-blind. By focusing our research on the role of psychological entrepreneurial support provided in a women-only incubator, we invite scholars to not consider the business incubator as a social arena which encourages women to reproduce masculinized representations of the normative entrepreneur (Marlow & McAdam, 2015), with the risk of replication of gender inequality (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018). While some scholars recommend studying how gender stereotyping develops in groups (Malmström et al., 2017), our research demonstrates how a gendered and collective approach to the incubation process may help deconstruct gender stereotypes and overcome some of the psychological barriers women entrepreneurs may have. This gendered approach is encouraged by literature to develop a more comprehensive and holistic view of ways to remove obstacles to female entrepreneurship within entrepreneurial ecosystems (Brush et al., 2019). Our research also supplements work devoted to the influence of women-specific training programs for which few systematic studies exist, despite the development of ad hoc structures (Bullough et al., 2015; Byrne & Fayolle, 2010; Orser & Riding, 2006).

Research into business incubation has neglected the importance of psychological entrepreneurial support in the strengthening of women's entrepreneurial intention. The female role model and group dynamics, characterized by benevolence, empathy, and solidarity, lessen the importance given by women entrepreneurs to negative social norms (Ajzen, 1991) or surrounding social pressure (Robledo et al., 2015). It is within a circle of trust that women can talk about their doubts (St-Jean & Jacquemin, 2012; Valeau,

2006) and fears relating, for example, to the balance between family life and time spent on implementing the entrepreneurial project. This search for balance, which contributes to the business owner's well-being (Gudmunson et al., 2009), must be taken into account when designing entrepreneurial support, so as to better adapt the training program to the needs of the women entrepreneurs and increase its effectiveness, as recommended by Petridou and Glaveli (2008). A collective approach encourages decision-making through both group cohesion and mutual aid, in the context of a benevolent all-female environment which reassures women who perceive a mixed environment as threatening, competitive (Gneezy et al., 2003), and mainly dominated by men (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018). Participation in a women's group led by a female role model facilitates the identity work of women entrepreneurs in search of entrepreneurial legitimacy and enables them to overcome various psychological barriers related mainly to a lack of self-confidence or pressure stemming from the family environment. Identity work is enacted within situated contexts and shaped by the characteristics of those involved (Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Our findings confirm the work of Roomi and Harrison (2010), according to whom psychological barriers of women entrepreneurs can be overcome thanks to the support delivered by women-only training programs.

Implementing psychological entrepreneurial support at the beginning of the incubation process: The effects of same-gender group mentoring on female entrepreneurial intention

Helping women deconstruct gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship so as to overcome a lack of self-confidence

The same-gender group mentoring set up by the women-only incubator and led by a female role model has an effect on the deconstruction of gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship. This is shown via the projection of women envisaging themselves having an entrepreneurial activity, thanks to a phenomenon of mutual observation and social comparison which stimulates the desire to become an entrepreneur and improves self-confidence thanks to a mirror effect (Radu Lefebvre & Redien-Collot, 2013). A lack of self-confidence, which can be reduced by emotional and psychological support and credible role models (Krueger & Brazeal, 1994), is then explicitly recognized as a gender difference to be addressed at the beginning of the incubation process, due to its negative influence on female entrepreneurial intention (Fielden et al., 2003; Kirkwood, 2009; Kourilsky & Walstad, 1998; Tsyganova & Shirokova, 2010; Wilson et al., 2007). Same-gender group mentoring contributes to the reduction of negative autostereotypes and metastereotypes (Scharnitzky, 2015) about female entrepreneurship. It is all the more justified that women entrepreneurs are more likely to face negative stereotypes in their career than men (Radu Lefebvre & Redien-Collot, 2013). Our research allows us to insist on the benefits of group mentoring for women entrepreneurs highlighted by the literature in terms of role modeling and psychological support (Eby et al., 2013; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Ncube & Wasburn, 2010; Ragins & Scandura, 1994; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). The gendered approach to group mentoring we studied confirms the conclusions of Eby et al. (2013) on the psychosocial support provided by female mentors, which must be distinguished from the instrumental support based on task-related assistance. By providing a safe environment for self-exploration, reflection, and self-expression, psychosocial support contributes to the personal development of the protégé. During the phase of the emergence of the idea, self-confidence can be reinforced by role modeling and social persuasion, as suggested by Zhao et al. (2005). This finding is therefore in line with the literature dedicated to entrepreneurial ecosystems, in which female role modeling stimulates self-confidence and reduces fear of failure (Brush et al., 2019). Psychological entrepreneurial support, specifically designed for women, reinforces their entrepreneurial intention and self-confidence, by improving their perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of starting a new business (Bullough et al., 2015). It facilitates the development of psychological capital which is conducive to strengthening the desire or intent to participate, self-efficacy, confidence, outcome expectations, and motivation (Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019).

Helping women manage the conflict between family life and entrepreneurial career

The conflict between family life and entrepreneurial career is another specific challenge that some women may face, and which may negatively influence their entrepreneurial intention (Gudmunson et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2003; Petridou & Glaveli, 2008; Schindehutte et al., 2003). It can generate a psychological obstacle that hinders entrepreneurial decision-making. Our work has highlighted the importance of the role played by the spouse of a woman who is creating her new business. It is important to remember that, when the couple is living with a modern view of human society, the impact on the new business venture developed by the woman is positive. The spouse's 'traditional' or 'egalitarian' conception of the role of women in society will negatively or positively influence the entrepreneurial experience of women (Le Loarne-Lemaire, 2013). The applicant needs her spouse to engage in the business creation while blossoming in her role as a mother (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013). According to Nikina et al. (2012), female

entrepreneurship can either improve or deteriorate the quality of the couple's relationship, which may explain the feeling of guilt toward the spouse expressed during some of our interviews. Our research shows that the family often does not support or disagree with the creator. This situation deprives women entrepreneurs of the emotional support necessary for risk-taking (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003) or for the well-being of the business owner (Gudmunson et al., 2009). The lack of external approval and support helps explain lower entrepreneurial intention for a woman with an entrepreneurial project (Robledo et al., 2015; Shneor & Jenssen, 2014). In case of reluctance from the spouse or more generally from the family, this approval may be obtained within the women's group instead. In this context, psychological entrepreneurial support provided by the women's group stimulates the decision to start a business. It leads to a commitment in front of peers and therefore facilitates the move to action.

Conclusion

Theoretical contributions

At a theoretical level, our research allows us to broaden the traditional definition of a business incubator centered on technical support and some physical proximity effects that generate social capital. We propose to extend this definition by adding a psychological component centered on the personality of the female entrepreneur and deployed in addition to technical support focused on the specific features of the entrepreneurial project. More precisely, our study supplements the work of Marlow and McAdam (2015) on the process of gendered entrepreneurial legitimation. Indeed, our research reveals the necessity to provide, for some women, entrepreneurial support adapted to the work undertaken to envisage themselves having an entrepreneurial activity. It also confirms the interest given by the literature to female role models and group mentoring in the process of entrepreneurial identity building. To sum up, our main theoretical contribution, therefore, lies in demonstrating the importance of psychological entrepreneurial support for women entrepreneurs faced with family reluctance or sensitive to gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship. Thanks to the study of a same-gender mentoring program implemented in a women-only incubator, we contribute to the literature on gender effects which are still an emerging field of research according to Malmström et al. (2017) and to Brush et al. (2019). More precisely, we offer an integrated conceptual framework dedicated to psychological entrepreneurial support which can generate and guide future research on this research topic. We are also enriching research dedicated to group mentoring, the literature being particularly focused on entrepreneurial mentoring dyads. Finally, at a methodological level and unlike the majority of works carried out using a sample of female students, we analyzed the mechanisms that strengthen female entrepreneurial intention using a sample of 27 women entrepreneurs facing specific issues, such as looking for a balance between their entrepreneurial project and family life.

Practical implications

Our research findings have several implications for business incubators and practitioners who design entrepreneurial support programs and who notably resort to mentoring. Our study demonstrates the need to take into account the psychological obstacles that some women entrepreneurs may experience at the start of their entrepreneurial adventure, and which can lead to them abandoning their project if they are not effectively supported when constructing these programs. A gendered and collective approach to entrepreneurial support can be particularly suitable for removing obstacles linked to family pressure or to excessive sensitivity to gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship. This adaptation of the program, therefore, requires incubators to deploy tools centered on the personality of female entrepreneurs and based on social interaction. Such tools are particularly useful at the beginning of the incubation process, in order to strengthen the entrepreneurial intention of women entrepreneurs who can then fully devote themselves to the development of their technical skills. The importance of role modeling for women entrepreneurs also pleads in favor of a gendered approach to the incubation process through same-gender mentoring. The adaptation of the incubator program to the needs of certain women entrepreneurs could, in our view, help attract more women to mixed incubators, the support of which seems to be evaluated more positively by men according to certain studies. This necessary increase in the number of women in incubators occurs in a context where the definition of innovation now extends to the low-tech and service sectors and is no longer limited to technology and patents (Alsos et al., 2013). The consideration of the barriers that women entrepreneurs face in terms of work-family balance is an example of the adaptation of the training program to their needs. Sensitivity to gender stereotypes about female entrepreneurship is another psychological barrier that can be overcome by a gendered and collective approach to the incubation process. The integration of gender similarity in this process could constitute a driver of differentiation within an entrepreneurial support ecosystem for some incubators (Theodoraki, 2020).

Limitations and extensions

Some limitations to our research need to be indicated. The first limitation is related to our research methodology. The use of the qualitative methodology is explained by the exploratory

nature of our research, since little empirical work has investigated the topic of women-only incubators and, more precisely, the role of psychological entrepreneurial support for women entrepreneurs during the incubation process. In addition, to our knowledge, existing studies do not look at the combined effect of group dynamics and gender-based differentiation in this process. However, the external validity of our findings could be improved by an analytical generalization (Yin, 2013), that means through the identification of new case studies of incubators which would include psychological entrepreneurial support for women entrepreneurs in their program. The second limitation relates to the context of gender-based differentiation that we have studied through the example of a women-only incubator. Indeed, our findings cannot be generalized to all women entrepreneurs. It is important to mention that some of them may reject female networks and prefer mixed networks, in order to avoid a potential ghettoization effect (Constantinidis, 2010; Jayawarna et al., 2012; Lewis, 2006). Mixed networks could bring diversity in the sharing of entrepreneurial experiences and complementarity in the ways of seeing things. Some scholars think that such moments of sharing between men and women could also contribute to the mutual deconstruction of gender stereotypes (Scharnitzky, 2015), notably to the deconstruction of heterostereotypes (what women think of men and what men think of women). Finally, the analysis of the reasons that push some women to opt for a 'No Go' decision, at the beginning of the incubation process, would constitute a particularly interesting extension of our research.

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