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# Proactive and reactive plots: Narratives in entrepreneurial identity construction

## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to offer a new perspective on entrepreneurial identity as a narrative construction, emerging in stories about entering the family business.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The qualitative methodological approach involves an interpretative analysis of transcribed interviews, conducted in narrative style with 12 women from Swedish family businesses.

**Findings:** By presenting entrepreneurial identity as a combination of two distinct narratives, the “passive” entrance into the family business is highlighted. The ‘Pippi Longstocking’ narrative illustrates conscious choices, drive and motivation based on an entrepreneurial identification; the proactive plot. The ‘Alice in Wonderland’ narrative on the other hand, illustrates women who happen to become entrepreneurs or business persons because the family business was there: the reactive plot. The contrasting and complementing narratives illustrates ambiguities in the identity process.

**Practical implications:** We identified the following opportunities for women in family business; (1) the family business can offer easy access to a career and on-the-job learning opportunities, (2) education in other areas can be useful when learning how to manage and develop the family business, and (3) the family business offers a generous arena for pursuing a career at different life stages. We also present implications for education as well as for policy makers.

**Originality/value:** The narratives presented are given metaphorical names with the intention to evoke the reader’s reflection and reasoning by analogy, which can lead to new insights. The use of metaphors illustrates multiple layers and ambiguities in identity construction. Metaphors can also create awareness of the researcher as a co-creator of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurial Identity, Family Business, Narrative Construction.

**Paper type:** Research paper

## **Introduction**

Important insights can be made by exploring gender and entrepreneurship in multiple contexts. In this paper, we will address the institutional contexts; gender, business and family in the Swedish setting, using the analytical context of narrative identity formation. There is a growing interest for narrative approaches to entrepreneurship research. To include discursive and narrative aspects can shed light on ambiguities and alternatives in entrepreneurial identity (Smith, 2009; Watson, 2009; Jones, Latham and Betta, 2008). Narrative knowing could contribute with enhanced conceptual, epistemological and methodological reflections as well as offer multi-voiced representations and awareness of the researcher as a co-creator of reality (Johansson, 2004). In this paper, we address identity as a narrative construction responding to calls to pay attention to the social constructionist approach, “the fifth movement in entrepreneurship research” (Fletcher, 2003), and adding knowledge on the dynamic and emergent dimensions of entrepreneurial activities. The basic assumptions of social constructionism can open up possibilities to approach the entrepreneurial process from new angles (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009). Furthermore, we acknowledge that the embeddedness and context-specificity of entrepreneurship frequently is neglected (Brush, de Bruin and Welter, 2009).

In family owned firms, family, business and gender are contexts influencing the construction of meaning and identity among the family members. Based on gendered expectations, women in family business can end up in situations where they are not considered as potential leaders/owners by the older generation in succession processes. Still, more and more women are entering family businesses and taking on leadership positions (Barrett and Moores, 2009a, 2009b; Harveston, Davis and Lyden, 1997). This move from the family context to the business context has an impact on the individual woman’s identity process. Shepherd and Haynie (2009) describe the possible family-business identity conflict, where conflicts arise at the intersection of the family identity and the business identity. When two, or more, different identities are simultaneously occurring in an inconsistent way this is a common source of conflict (ibid, 2009). Identity work covers both the ‘internal’ as well as the ‘external’ aspects (Watson, 2008) and in entrepreneurial contexts, identity work reveals ambiguity in how people use discursive resources (Watson, 2009). To further explore narrative accounts in multiple contexts can add to our understanding of the development of an entrepreneurial identity. In this paper, we aim at understanding the process of identity work

performed by women in a family business context with the following research question in focus:

*How can entrepreneurial identity, as a narrative be understood in stories about entering the family business?*

The paper starts with a description of the theoretical framework and method, followed by a presentation of two narratives illustrating identity work. Then, the paper ends with an analysis of identity work in the context of family, business and gender, and a concluding discussion with possible implications for theory development and for women in family business.

## **Identity work**

### *Three contexts in identity work*

The understanding of specific processes of identity construction in and around organizations is poor (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The topic of identity can be addressed on a multitude of levels, such as organizational, professional, social and individual (ibid) and the organization literature emphasize that identities are contradictory, shifting and ambiguous (Essers and Benschop, 2007, Kondo, 1990). On a self-identity level, there has been interest for how to manage multiple identities (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009a) and in the family business, incongruent family identity and business identity can cause conflicts that hamper the entrepreneurial process (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009b). Down and Reveley (2004) suggest that if the younger generation owner-managers juxtapose the older generation, this can be a way to construct ones entrepreneurial identity. In this text, we use business identity and entrepreneurial identity synonymously to talk about identity connected to work contexts of family business leaders/owners. The reason is that entrepreneurship is not unitary and it is negotiated among multiple discourses and identities (Fenwick, 2002) and furthermore, it represents the male norm (Ahl, 2002) which brings us to a third context: gender. Here, gender connotes understandings and practices of masculinity and femininity (Ahl and Nelson, 2010) and the restrictions of a gender-biased discourse becomes of special interest for women developing an entrepreneurial identity. The gender context further adds to the complexity and possible arising conflicts as entrepreneurship is equated with the masculine (Ahl, 2002,

Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004) and women are thought of as “something else [than an entrepreneur]” and rather assumed to be responsible for the family sphere (Ahl, 2002). There is a need for a framework for women’s entrepreneurship that shows awareness to gender, and the motherhood metaphor can be a way to include the household and family context (Brush, de Bruin and Welter, 2009). At the same time as we are inspired by this framework, we see the need to separate between gender and family as two separate contexts in identity work. To include institutional and professional pressures (Beech, 2008) we will come back to the three contexts of family, business and gender and discuss their interplay in identity work. In figure 1, we have illustrated the three contexts.

### **"Take in Figure No. 1"**

When speaking about the gender context, there might be differences depending on the national setting. Earlier studies have addressed gender in different national contexts, such as for example Germany (Ettl and Welter, 2010), Ireland (Humbert and Drew, 2010; Treanor and Henry, 2010), USA (Nelson, Maxfield and Kolb, 2009) and Pakistan (Azam Roomi and Harrison, 2010), and text books are presenting case studies from around the globe (Fielden and Davidson, 2010). In Sweden, gender equality is an important societal value, and a strong public sector provides women with work opportunities as well as child care. This has been called the “Swedish effect” (Sapleton, 2009): equality is based on work segregation as employment in for example child care and domestic services are almost exclusively for women (Bourne, 2010). In addition, when privatization of the public sector occurs, there are processes of “masculinisation” (Sundin and Tillmar, 2010). Thus, there are at the same time opportunities and support on an ideological level, while there are still structural hindrances, not the least in traditional family businesses, in the Swedish setting.

#### *The narrative construction of entrepreneurial identity*

Sarasvathy (2003) observes that entrepreneurs do not behave in a linear causal fashion but rather appear to invert the principles and processes through effectuation, which involve a negotiation between the inner and the outer environment and it is hinted at that identity plays a part in this development process (ibid, p. 217). We argue that not only does identity play a part in this process, but that identity work can be understood as effectuation. To understand identity work as a process of effectuation bring out dynamic, non-linear and interactional

aspects of identity. Identity is describing who we are, but based on a social constructionist approach, identity is not static; identity is an evolving process throughout an individual's life course and through social interaction with others. According to the interactionist school (e.g. Blumer, 1998) people influence and are being influenced by individuals and language, in the constantly emerging understandings and meanings that are created in social interaction. At the core of interaction is discursive activity, as meaning is socially constructed through language (Fletcher, 2003), and to study narrative accounts as expressions of personal experiences and meaning provide diversity of representation (Riessman, 1993). Narrative processes amongst entrepreneurs have been identified as important to understand individual and social identities, but has been a neglected area of study (Downing, 2005).

Identity work as a social process, can show how a leader identity is being claimed or granted in workplace interaction (DeRue and Ashford, 2010) and it holds the potential to recognize both the self-identity and the discourse-related social identities (Watson, 2008, 2009). To incorporate the dialogic process in identity work, could be one way to understand change in the meaning of an identity and how tensions can allow for shifts in self-meaning (Beech, 2008). In the intersection of, and tension between gender and entrepreneurship, as well as ethnicity, it was underlined that gender identities shift situationally in organizations (Essers and Benschop, 2007). Entrepreneurship is an ambiguous concept (Warren, 2004), and is today being claimed from manifold discursive standpoints where the traditional story of the heroic entrepreneur is being disputed. Thus, this traditional image of identity as represented by an established and lasting story, a narrative self-identity as stabilizer, represents a somewhat romantic view of the individual which neglects ambiguities (Alvesson, 2010). As the entrepreneurial self is dynamic, multi-faceted and continue to evolve (Foss, 2004), and identity aspects are activated in different social settings at different times (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010), narrative constructions of identity can provide glimpses of this process and complement conceptualizations of inner entrepreneurial dialogues (Karp, 2006). Hytti (2005) shows how dualities, such as push and pull factors involved when becoming an entrepreneur, are useful in the analysis of narrative accounts of individual's past, present and future. Somers (1994) describe four dimensions of narrativity: ontological, public, conceptual and metanarratives. Out of these four, ontological narratives represents the interview material that this paper is based upon; it concerns the stories that individuals use to make sense of their lives and these stories are not fixed which makes identity something that becomes.

## Method

In our study, we explore the development of entrepreneurial identities in the family business context. To collect empirical material, we interviewed 12 women in different Swedish family businesses, and the firms vary by industry. The interviewed women had different roles in the family business: part-time workers, middle managers, project leaders, CEOs and owners. In addition, there is a variation of firm size and representation of people from the first-generation family business owner/manager to the fifth-generation owner/manager. The variation should not be interpreted as an attempt to create a representative selection for generalization. Rather, it is a way to present different individuals' actions in order to learn about the general from the particular (Riessman, 1993).

The interviews were performed in a narrative style (Søderberg and Vaara, 2003, Hytti, 2005) where our aim was to get the informants to tell their story about how they entered the family firm; We simply asked the women to tell us how they had been involved in the family business during their upbringing and to describe their relation to the business at various ages and then they led the story telling. In line with our social constructionist approach, we recognize that the stories told in the interviews might be affected by the audience, in this case by the researcher. This means that the interviewed individuals might have a desire to produce a coherent, interesting and personally favorable tale, and they may rely on rhetorical strategies such as *flattening*, to condense parts, *sharpening*, to exaggerate parts, and *rationalization*, to make parts more consistent (Polkinghorne, 1996). At the same time, a narrative is a co-construction and we do not consider the stories presented as an object of knowledge captured in a distant way. Recognizing that narratives explicate complex and inconsistent truths, with the researcher as visible in the constructions, provides interesting 'situated knowledge' (Essers, 2009).

The interviews were tape-recorded and before starting the interviews, we assured all participants of confidentiality and anonymity. The names of people, places, and companies have been disguised. The interviews in this study are part of a larger research project on women's enterprising and family business. The interviews have been transcribed and then we performed a close reading and analysis of the texts. Smith (2009) used the Diva construct to understand female entrepreneurship and to find other avenues for women to become

entrepreneurs. We have continued interest for alternative ways to study women's entrepreneurial identity, but rather than starting with a construct, we started with the stories told. In the transcribed interview material, we found an interesting tension between two contrasting approaches: a proactive and a reactive way to do things. This tension was not between subjects but within the stories told. "*What is considered a vice in science – openness to competing interpretations – is a virtue in narrative*" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 7). The findings are reported as two main plots to illustrate the two parallel processes described in the women's identity work. The narratives presented are based on the interpretation of the interviews. As a heuristic device, the narratives have been constructed as two separate stories and given metaphorical names, and in this paper they are illustrated by quotes from the interviews.

It is possible, and sometimes even necessary, to use rhetorical methods to mediate the message (Clifford, 1986). The use of metaphors in social science can be a means of exploration, for building theories and for empirical analysis, and the metaphor can provide an understanding for ambiguities and tensions (Alvesson, 2001). The reflective use of metaphors can be an indispensable aid for thinking and providing a generative way towards comprehension (Asplund, 2002). The purpose of creating a story is not to present "the truth" but to highlight perspectives found in the material. Similar to Brännback and Carsrud (2008), we are looking for stories which hopefully will resonate with the reader through reasoning by analogy and perhaps lead to new insights. To challenge traditional notions of the man as the main character/hero (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994), we have chosen two stories with a girl as the main character as metaphors. The two quite ambiguous and not fully coherent approaches found when reading the stories, are here illustrated as two completely separate plots with the metaphorical names:

- The 'Pippi Longstocking' narrative
- The 'Alice in Wonderland' narrative

These narratives represent two ways for women to enter the family firm; either as an active choice or as a more incremental and not fully deliberate process as a consequence to an individual adaptation to the environment. Each narrative brings out learning's about aspects of identity work when entering a family business, and when comparing the two, identity work is highlighted as interplay between contrasting narratives. We want to emphasize that the

narratives are on a discursive level. Thus, they are not referring to single individuals, even though one narrative could be dominant in one individual's identity work. Our interest lies in how individuals use "Pippi" and "Alice" to make sense of why they are in business.

### **The Pippi Longstocking narrative**

Created by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, Pippi Longstocking is a story about a girl living by herself in Villa Villekulla, a fun and colorful house. Nine-year-old Pippi is described as having "the strength of ten policemen" and being odd and unusual and lacking respect for authorities. Pippi is experienced and uses common sense but lacks formal education. She is a girl who does whatever comes to mind, by acts of will gets her way and ends up on top of things. Pippi is an active, independent, smart and innovative girl and here she is used to metaphorically represent the narrative dimension of identity work that resembles a traditional description of the heroic entrepreneur.

#### *An independent character*

Among the women interviewed, some have been the founders of a family business, together with their husband or starting up alone. They identify themselves as the entrepreneur and have a strong desire to be in business.

"It's so fun to do business and I have always heard that I'm like my father; I like to do business."

To stay active and creative is a way to continuous development of the business.

"I've always been an entrepreneur. Working hard, wanting more. I dreamed about something bigger. Started with what the previous owner had done, take care of the customers and then I started with marketing and expanded in that way."

An important motivational force is to be able to control one's (working) life.

- "We just had to be entrepreneurs. We wanted to be in control."

It is not only first generation entrepreneurs that express the need for independence, and this will and drive could explain why some women leave the family business.

“I never worked at the firm. I worked at other places and I guess it was important for me to show that I could take care of myself, find my own employments. It’s much more fun if you can find your own thing compared to if the parents find something for you. Then I moved to another city to study at the university and I had no plans what so ever to return. When I had my education I worked at a bank for many years.”

To leave the family business can be a way to try their wings and to find their own path in life.

### *The dark side of independence*

A Pippi Longstocking takes care of herself. The strength is that she knows the business and she is in control over operations.

“I can read a financial statement, up and down, back to front, so if we are thinking about buying another company I don’t have to rely on somebody else and I can do much analyzing myself.”

To be active and visible in the organization is often perceived as positive by others, but the downside is that it can be a sign of an exaggerated need for control.

“I work with sales, I work nights, I’m involved in every ad and marketing campaign we do. I have a hard time delegating work. If you ask what has been the most difficult I would say to let go of controlling things.”

The need for control can make other people in the organization passive as it limits their efforts and it can put much strain on Pippi Longstocking if she is always expected to be in charge of everything.

### *Access to capital creates opportunities*

A prerequisite for acting independently and to realize ones ideas is to have access to capital. The women interviewed recognize that they may be in an advantageous financial situation

when the family business is profitable, but they also see capital as a means to be able to act with a long-term perspective.

“My sister and I think that we are in a very interesting business, and we think that it’s good for the firm to have long-term ownership. For us this has meant that we have had a fantastic opportunity to do something important and useful and something that we really enjoy doing.”

Capital and ownership are tools that enable these women to act in a way that they think are fulfilling and that represents their beliefs in how business should be run. Ownership brings with it the opportunity to restructure a business in a way that makes sense.

“The organization was a mess. The companies owned each other and they had purchased and bought each other. So as typical women, we started cleaning and structuring the business and took away the things that didn’t bring any profit. We decided on a focus for the business, what should be our babies, and we clarified the family thing to create togetherness among employees.”

The quote above shows an innovative way to describe reorganization of the business group, using words connected to the household context. Finding your own way to do things is crucial and maybe inevitable for a ‘Pippi’ character.

### *Not wanting to conform*

The Pippi Longstocking character expresses that she never wants to grow up. In this case, staying a child means to keep to common sense and fairness and not grow into socially expected manners upholding the rigidity of adulthood. To not accept the (grown ups) norms can make these individuals uncomfortable. At the same time, a critical stance towards industry norms may be healthy for the business.

“In the car industry it’s all about being dazzled. Last week we went to Barcelona and looked at the new Audi A8. Then they have a big fancy presentation where the cars are driving in patterns, honk, honk. And everybody is applauding and I’m sitting there thinking about who can I sell these cars to and what will they cost and can they fit into our show room. They actually had a ‘green car’ and I was interested in that, and as a

mother I'm thinking 'trunk space', so I asked them to open it but they said they couldn't do it since it was a concept car. So things are looking pretty on the outside, that's all."

This unruliness is one of Pippi's strengths as an entrepreneur, as it may inspire to find other solutions and new ways forward, and to keep a down-to-earth attitude.

### *Summary of Pippi: A proactive character*

The Pippi Longstocking narrative represents independence, control and an outsider position in terms of not accepting the dominant norms. A Pippi character sees herself as an entrepreneur and seeks out situations where she can exercise her common sense and use her strong will to create something she believe in. The Pippi Longstocking narrative represents the women in family businesses who consciously take actions that will bring them closer to a leadership position of successful leadership in the firm. These women identify with being a business person and they actively seek out a career in the family business.

### **The Alice in Wonderland narrative**

Alice is a character created by the English author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. The Alice in Wonderland story describes a girl who falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world ruled by alternative logics. The plot can be described as representing the experiences of a child in a confusing world and Alice encounters several odd creatures, situations and discussions. On her journey, Alice struggles with being big or small, mad or sane, and following rules or not. The Alice metaphor is used to highlight the muddling through that represents an alternative narrative on how to enter the family business.

### *Falling down the rabbit hole*

As a child in a family firm, you are born into the business. Thus, many children do not decide to enter the firm. Rather, they have been involved from early years.

“I practically grew up in the factory. My parents bought a business in the 1970s and I was born at the same time so I’ve been here since the beginning. My mom tried to combine being a mother and working and my dad worked day and night. We got to help out if we wanted to and we could make some extra money by cleaning and things like that. I started working here during summers at a young age.”

For others the situation might be totally different, and as grown ups they get to decide if they should enter the family firm. Sometimes they are forced to enter the firm following decease and death, when they have to take over the business unexpectedly after their parents.

“Dad passed away suddenly, so we were ill prepared for that.”

What is initially intended as a temporary solution can with time turn into a more permanent situation.

“My sister would take a year off and work in the family business. That year has turned into 14 years by now.”

The idea to enter the family firm can come from many directions, for examples the employees can be a driving force for children to enter the business.

“When our financial manager retired, I wanted to hire a new one, but then everybody said no, ‘no, now it’s time you step in and do this’ and I didn’t think I could but I tried and it was kind of fun. Then one got more and more involved and I realized that I might not get away from here.”

It is not only daughters who might end up in a family business. In some cases, people are headhunted and selected as the successor of the firm.

“It was the previous owner that said that I should do it. She had been asking around to find someone who wanted to live in a small city and who had an entrepreneurial background, and my parents had a business. Then she just came one night and said that I would move: ‘I have a ticket for you and you fly down on Wednesday to have a look at the company’. So I went there to have a look and the next day my parents came and we went to the bank and then it was settled. We worked together for two months and then she left.”

This illustrates a combination of the external and internal processes in developing an entrepreneurial identity: When opportunity knocks on the door, the entrepreneur opens.

### *Learning by doing*

It is not only the process of entering the family firm that can be an ambiguous experience. When working in the firm, coincidences can be a way to move the business forward and findings new ways and opportunities.

“There are a lot of things you shouldn’t have done, people you shouldn’t have hired, products you shouldn’t have sold, projects you shouldn’t have done. On the other hand, if I hadn’t done the crazy things, I wouldn’t have done the good things. Some things just happened, like when we moved into a bigger place.”

Finding your way in the business is connected to finding yourself as a business person. Children who enter the board of the family firm might be expected to sit in and learn passively for some time. However, it might be hard to know when it is time to start acting as a board representative.

“I think that this is common in family businesses. You might start being on the board in an early age and they tell you to sit in and listen. You listen and you learn but when is the time to start acting? When are you there for real? No one tells you that now you are done. I have pointed to the fact that I’m 40 years now and Carl-Johan Persson is 35 and he has taken over H&M, a big listed company. I’m old enough but you will never be grown up in your parent’s eyes.”

Insecurities about whether these women are suitable for positions in the business can emerge from people in their surroundings. Even when expressing something supposedly positive, this can be an indication of an underlying assumption of the opposite.

“The customers are used to meeting only men and then they meet a little girl and for them it’s amusing and one said ‘Fun to meet a girl who knows something’ and he just wanted to be nice but it all came out so wrong.”

It is important for these women to find people that encourage their entrance into business, and it is not sure that the family members are the ones they can rely on for support.

“My mentor says that I have done a great work but my mother says that I can’t manage on my own.”

In some cases, it is the women’s inner thoughts that are the most troublesome and create doubts about whether they are suitable or not for the position.

“One thing lead to another and I came here but I don’t think anyone have questioned that. I think the only one that has questioned it is me. I’ve struggled with this thing of getting a job because of your name rather than because of what you can do.”

The worries connected to if they should be in the business or not, is a big question for family members in a family business. Individuals own expectations and doubts together with the notions of people in the surrounding society make the pendulum swing between feelings of bigness and smallness.

### *Falling down the rabbit hole II*

A second fall into the rabbit hole can occur when these women have children of their own. To combine family and business is desirable but how the combination should work out in practice is not as obvious.

“I was never really away; you have to take care of the papers all along. Then, later on, I have left the children at the kindergarten late and my husband picked them up earlier so that they would not have to be there so many hours. We had to stitch things together.“

During the last decade, it has neither been commonly accepted, nor affordable, to have privately paid help in Sweden. Women in business have had to find other solutions for how to combine a family life with a working life.

“It’s not easy. You have a spouse that works too, so it’s always like a puzzle. And then our parents don’t live nearby or have the time and we don’t have help to bring

the kids to kindergarten. We do it all ourselves. To not accept help, that's the Swedish women's norms.”

Although the women did not comment on this, we would like to add that having kids is not only a practical issue. It might create identity tensions, such as between being a mother and being an entrepreneur.

### *Summary of Alice: A reactive character*

The Alice in Wonderland narrative represents women in family businesses who never planned or thought they would work in the firm in the future but ended up there anyway. They have chosen other careers but somewhere along the way, the family business came into question and they ended up in a family business position. This narrative represents emerging opportunities and the individual woman's possible reactions to these opportunities.

### **Analysis in three contexts**

Among the family, business and gender identities, the business identity was focused in the interviews. One explanation to this could be that we have spoken to these women as family business representatives and that made them focus on the business in the interview. Another interpretation could be that it is rewarding for the women in the study to identify with being an entrepreneur in their family business as this is something that gives a relatively higher status in society compared to being a woman and/or a family member. Regardless the reason, these women value their professional position,. However, the three contexts family, business and gender need to be considered as they are embedded in the stories told about entering the family business.

### *Family context*

The family context have different meaning depending on the two narratives. In the Pippi narrative, the family is absent and there is a focus on the individual entrepreneur. There might be key people connected to Pippi but she is basically alone. A 'Pippi' character acts

independently and is in control but we also highlighted a possible dark side of independence: an inability to trust others. The 'Alice' character on the other hand, illustrates an entrepreneur embedded in the family group, growing up in a family firm and thereby getting into business. Here we see identity struggles because of family members fixed ideas about who people are, or should be, and having a family of their own and how to combine this with having an important role in the business. Since we found that both plots are present in stories told by each woman, although to different extents, this could be an illustration of the processes of separation and belonging that family business members are involved in. These processes show how the family has two important and interrelated but not fully compatible functions; the need to belong to the family group and the need to separate from the family to develop an individual identity (Hall, 2003). Meaning-giving tensions can provide opportunities for both forward and backward shifts in self-meaning (Beech, 2008) and it can be of practical use for these women to recognize this process if they want to influence the direction of change.

#### *Business context*

These women have more or less contact with the family business via their families from an early age, which gives them general knowledge about business as well as specifics about their family business. When it comes to moving into formal positions in the family firm, the Pippi Longstocking narrative displays how ownership is recognized as an important foundation for acting out ideas. The Alice in Wonderland narrative represents a state of confusion when entering the family firm, which needs to be overcome by developing (new) ways of acting. The main difference between the two narratives is that in the The Pippi Longstocking narrative, there is an obvious focus on the entrepreneurial identity and a career in the family business, while in the Alice in Wonderland narrative, career is muddling through and at one point the family business becomes an attractive alternative. Triggers for moving into the family business can be a stagnating career, building a family or crisis on labor market. The Pippi Longstocking narrative shows women acknowledging power as important to carry out their business ideas while the Alice in Wonderland narrative describe a more passive view on leadership: as leaders they are serving the needs of others.

#### *Gender context*

When reading the narratives, these women do not explicitly use gender as an explanatory device to illustrate their identity work. Previous studies have shown that entrepreneur is a male gendered concept and how this is reconstructed through academic theories and policy initiatives (Cohen and Musson, 2000, Ahl, 2002). When exploring how women owner/managers identify and make sense of the term ‘entrepreneur’, they create similar stereotypes, based on gender and class, and their identification with being entrepreneur or not depend on their value judgments of the stereotype (Cohen and Musson, 2000). In our study, we did not use the entrepreneur concept and let the women talk freely about how they entered the business, which resulted in the two narratives presented. Connected to the gender context we would like to take the discussion a step further here, by proposing that we can understand the narratives as illustrating the feminine and the masculine. Using Bem’s scale of masculinity and femininity (Ahl, 2002), we would equal “Pippi” to the masculine and “Alice” to the feminine (see table 1).

### **"Take in Figure No. 2"**

In the table, we present the five first words connected to masculinity and femininity. As metaphors, ‘Pippi’ and ‘Alice’, could be said to represent these key words. At the same time as we realize that a literary analysis would probably find other key words and that the metaphors should not be taken to far, we see that the use of the two stories as metaphors can emphasize an interesting dimension of the two narratives: entrepreneurial identity work as a combination of masculine and feminine dimensions within an individual rather than between individuals. Another interesting thought from an entrepreneurial point of view is that the Bem scale is lacking words that describe curiosity, creativity and learning. These are words that we easily could see connected to the enterprising women in our study, and words that maybe are neither masculine nor feminine but shared. This adds to our proposal to broaden the understanding of entrepreneurial identity work as a dual, seemingly ambiguous process.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper have been to contribute to the understanding of the narrative construction of entrepreneurial identity, as representing an interplay between self and story. The practical focus have been how women in Swedish family firms narrate about entering the business and thus, becoming entrepreneurs. The overall contribution to this special issue is

the work on entrepreneurship stories, as a way to explore identity spaces, and the analysis within a combination of practical and theoretical contexts. The two narratives described in this text are interesting as they represent two quite different notions of how women can enter the family business. The Pippi Longstocking narrative is about being an entrepreneur in a more traditional sense, either as a woman who started her own family business or as a woman that actively chose the family business as an arena for her enterprising ideas, while the Alice in Wonderland narrative shows women that deliberately don't choose the family business but might end up in the family business anyway. Apart from the two plots, the analysis of the family context showed the tension between separation and belonging, the analysis of the business context showed the tension between 'career' as a outcome of cause – and – effect or an effectuation process, and the analysis of gender contrasted entrepreneurial identity as a combination of the masculine and the feminine. In addition, we have two more specific contributions: (1) Entrepreneurship as a combination of the proactive, the reactive and the creative and, (2) Metaphors add identity to the plots and emphasize authorship.

*Entrepreneurship as a combination of the proactive, the reactive and the creative aspects in identity work*

Identity work, as we propose in this paper, is a process where two, or more, narratives can be helpful to bring out different and contrasting processes and broaden the notion of entrepreneurial identity. Dualities can be useful to portrait paradoxes and contradictions in identity stories (Hytti, 2005) and identity shifts situationally in organizations (Essers and Benschop, 2007). Our proposal to see identity as effectuation, here presented as a proactive and a reactive plot, is not a far stretch. There is a close link between how entrepreneurs tell stories about their life and how they run their businesses (Johansson, 2004). We have also argued for a shift of focus from the entrepreneur as a male gendered concept, towards understanding entrepreneurship as a combination of the masculine and the feminine. A balanced combination would require entrepreneurial identity work to be regarded as an ambiguous process comprising multiple orientations. One interesting area of study would be to test this idea to see to what extent efforts to educate entrepreneurs supports or rejects ambiguity.

*Metaphors add identity to the plots presented and emphasize authorship*

Studies of entrepreneurial identity as narrative constructions has paid attention to how individual life stories facilitate the construction of entrepreneurial identity and how the narrators reflections can help in understanding the self related to a cultural context (Foss, 2004). Watson (2009) discussed how identity work consisted of the interplay between inward self-reflection and outward engagement in discursively constructed social identities. We have taken this into consideration in this paper, and added the role of the researcher in the construction of “results”. Foss (2004) applied metaphors when reading the narrative identity formation, and in this paper we have continued using metaphors to further separate and illustrate the parallel stories we found. Although “Pippi Longstocking” and “Alice in Wonderland” might have similarities, we have strengthened the differences to distinguish the stories and accentuate the interplay between two narratives involved in identity work. The choice of girl story characters as metaphors might also challenge the notion of entrepreneurship as the “performance of masculine practices” (Bruni et. al., 2004, p. 426). The metaphors as furthermore intended to be bridges to new insights and separate the narrative plots to illustrate ambiguity. Still, there is one similarity that we would like to bring up as relevant for identity work, and that is that the original stories of “Pippi” and “Alice” can be interpreted as metaphors for the process of growing up, something that in itself corresponds well to the development aspects of identity work. In future studies, it would be interesting to share the ‘Pippi’ and ‘Alice’ narratives with our respondents, or other entrepreneurs/business owners, to see how these narratives resonate with them.

### **Practical implications**

- For family business members: Career opportunities in the family firm

By presenting two distinct narratives, the “passive” entrance into the family business is highlighted. The ‘Pippi Longstocking’ narrative illustrates conscious choices, drive and motivation based on an entrepreneurial identification. The ‘Alice in Wonderland’ narrative on the other hand, illustrates women who happen to become entrepreneurs or business persons because the family business was there. We see some risks for women that “stumble” into the family business; (1) they might miss out on a career because they do not treat the family business as an interesting alternative, or (2) taking an education in other areas than business

might hide that they have suitable skills for the family business. These risks can be converted into opportunities for women in family business as well; (1) the family business can offer easy access to a career and on-the-job learning opportunities, (2) education in other areas can be useful when learning how to manage and develop the family business, and (3) the family business offers a generous arena for pursuing a career at different developmental stages. To make conscious choices can be a way to turn risks into opportunities.

- For educational activities: Address the gender and ownership lenses

Among researchers there might be an agreement that entrepreneurship is gendered but women entrepreneurs themselves do not often draw upon this principle to understand their situation (Lewis, 2006). We agree with Brush, de Bruin and Welter (2009) that female owner-managers who recognize the relevance of gender can add to their understanding of business experiences. Apart from focusing the gender dimension and arguing for a need to do so, another implication of the discussion in this paper could be to strengthen the ownership discourse when it comes to how to promote women's enterprising. This is especially crucial for women not recognizing their entrepreneurial potential: who they are, what they know and whom they know. To address gender and ownership perspectives in educational activities can be one way to reflect on entrepreneurial identities in practice.

- For policy makers: People are becoming, not being, entrepreneurs

There might be useful personal traits if a person wants to become an entrepreneur, but at the same time, there are so many other factors at work in this process that needs to be recognized. Entrepreneurial identity can for example be implicitly acquired; children growing up in an enterprising family learn about business in early years and create a foundation for identification with being an entrepreneur. Días García and Carter (2009) showed how entrepreneurship is a socially embedded phenomenon and that policy makers should encourage and facilitate networking for business owners. In the family business, this could mean to include all children in business development, not only the children that already have an interest or that are considered suitable for the business, can be a way to promote entrepreneurship. To identify oneself as an entrepreneur can act as a catalyst for decisions to embark on new ventures and sustain the individual in the transition from being an employee to becoming a risk-taking creator of a new firm (Down and Reveley, 2004). In the family business context, we argue that new ventures and risk-taking can concern the running of an

existing firm as well as a new venture. Thus, it can be important for women in family business to find support from key persons and to think of themselves as entrepreneurs as it might inspire them to enter the firm and when in the firm, to engage in developing and renewing the existing organization.

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**Figure No. 1**

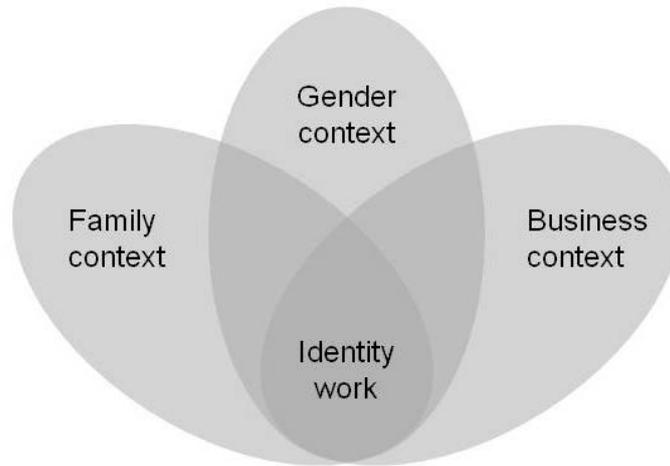


Figure 1. Three contexts framing identity work.

**Figure No. 2**

<b>Character</b>	<b>Words from the Bem scale of masculinity and femininity</b>
Pippi Longstocking	self-reliant, defends own beliefs, assertive, strong personality and forceful
Alice in Wonderland	affectionate, loyal, sympathetic, sensitive to the needs of others and understanding

Table 1. “Pippi” as representing the masculine and “Alice” representing the feminine.