

# ***Woman, Teacher, Entrepreneur: On Identity Construction in Female Entrepreneurs of Swedish Independent Schools***

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*Keywords:* female entrepreneurship identity construction gender profession independent schools

## **Abstract**

Life can be seen as an ongoing process of identity construction, where individuals try to understand herself from the various identity bases to which she is exposed. Here, we focus on the identity construction of women who have started independent schools in Sweden. The independent school sector emerged after a political reform in 1992, allowing privately owned schools to operate with public funding. The women are subject to gendered expectations on how they are supposed to behave, and they are teachers, part of a profession with strong traditions. They have also become entrepreneurs through starting new independent schools. From a narrative analysis of their individual identity construction, we identify four different narrative strategies used to combine identity bases with differing norms and expectations.

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the EIASM workshop on Female managers, entrepreneurs and the social capital of the firm, Nov 17-19, 2004, Brussels, Belgium. It is now published as follows:

Lindgren, M. & Packendorff, J. (2008) "Woman, teacher, entrepreneur: On identity construction in female entrepreneurs of Swedish independent schools." In: I. Aaltio, P. Kyrö & E. Sundin (eds.) *Women Entrepreneurship and Social Capital: A Dialogue and Construction*: pp. 193-223. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The concept of identity is widely used on a daily basis in both texts and conversations, and during the last decade it has also entered into the public debate in society. Identity is usually seen in a static fashion, implying that human beings “are something” (e.g. a teacher or a doctor) and that their identity construction process is more or less over. In this article, we treat life can thus be seen as an ongoing process of identity construction, where the individual tries to understand and define her/himself from the various social situations to which he is exposed. From a social constructionist perspective, we treat identity as something that is constructed and re-constructed in daily social interaction throughout life. When exposed to discontinuities in life, the identity of an individual is thereby open to change through a process of reflection upon both the past and the future (cf Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001).

Identity construction can be analyzed in terms of what we can call “institutionalised identities”, i.e. concepts such as professional identity, gender identity, ethnic identity etc. When using profession, gender or entrepreneurship, the institutional level/ established collectives are seen as central in order to be able to define and understand identity construction. On an aggregate level (society, organisation, clan etc) these socially defined identities are valid and homogeneous to a certain extent, but on the individual level they are expressed in a multitude of ways depending on how different individuals describe themselves. Different individuals tend to compose their identity from different institutional sources, and they also vary to the extent to which they use established categories in constructing it.

In an earlier study (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001) it appeared that individuals can connect their identity construction to cultural values (history, art och literature), but also to religious beliefs, political ideology or just a lifelong rejection of tradition and collectives. In one of these cases – a female manager working with media and culture – profession was not an issue, but instead her gender was woven into her narrative in different ways. She had been harassed in previous workplaces, and she had also an obvious ambition to integrate her professional career with caring for her daughter (which in Sweden is quite a “feminine way” of expressing gender). Another person in the study – an external relations executive with a background in European diplomacy – expressed “civil servant values”, according to which he was not important as an individual, just as the prolonged arm of his principals. In that case, identity construction was tied to profession, but in a special way in the sense that the individual saw himself as uninteresting (at least as a professional, he refused to discuss his identity as a private person). In both these and other cases in the study, it was obvious that gender identification was more important to the women than to the men (cf also Sahlin-Andersson, 1994). But at the same time, it was also obvious that institutionalised social identity categories interacted in a complex way in each individual.

The view of people as e.g. entrepreneurs, teachers or women can therefore be combined with an ambition to understand how these identity bases interact with each other. Every individual is a unique combination of influences, which deserves to be put forward to refine the view of individuals in identity theory. Men and women vary in terms of class, personality, values, interests and social networks, and as a result of that they also exhibit differences in their relations to structures (e.g. gender structures). This is also a view that is supported in gender research (cf Alvesson and Billing, 1997, Bird and Brush, 2002, Nicholson, 1995, Scott, 1988,

Sundin and Holmquist, 1989) that seeks to identify distinctions within each gender category. Gender is expressed in different ways depending on the life history and current patterns of interaction, and the same goes for other institutionalised bases of identity.

In this paper, we will focus on the identity construction of a category of people exposed to several such institutionalised identity bases; women who have started independent schools in Sweden (the independent school sector is described in section 3.2 below). They are women, which means that they are subject to gendered expectations on what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to behave. The women are also teachers, which implies that they are a part of a profession with a long history and strong internal loyalty and values. They have also become entrepreneurs through their entrepreneurial acts in new independent schools. The aim of the paper is thus to investigate how identity is constructed in relation to institutional identity categories (in this case, focus is on gender, professions and entrepreneurship categories) and to develop a complementary view on identity construction that emphasises the complexity.

## ***2. THE IDENTITY CONCEPT – DEFINITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES***

Modern identity theory within the field of organisation studies departs from a social constructionist view of reality (cf Berger and Luckmann, 1966, Gergen, 1985); suggesting that the interaction between the individual and her/his social context is in focus of identity construction and that each individual has a unique pattern of interaction. This does not mean that there are not similarities between individuals on an aggregate level, e.g. concerning structural conditions for the actions of women. Women can be described as both similar and

different to each other in various dimensions simultaneously, and that is naturally valid also for men.

The research on identity within organisation studies (cf Giddens, 1991, Knights and Willmott, 1999, Nord and Fox, 1996, Nkomo and Cox, 1996) is basically different as compared to traditional psychological research in the field. Organisational theorists place the identity concept in an organisational context, while psychologists confine their analysis to the individual as such, using personality types and traits such as 'flegmatic' or 'introvert'. Moreover, organisational theorists collect empirical data through detailed case studies, while psychologists place their subjects in experimental situations. These differences rest upon basically different ontological views on the human being. In psychology, the individual is a product of her/his imitations of social context (the so called "mirror theory"), while organisation studies rest upon the theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), in which the individual is an active part of the ongoing construction of her/himself (cfr also Berger and Luckmann, 1967, Giddens, 1991, Knights and Willmott, 1999).

Collective bases for identity construction such as profession, ethnicity or gender can be defined by using the concept of social identity as follows;

"the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him or the group membership" (Tajfel, 1982, s 31).

This quote points out that being socialised into some sort of collective grouping can be seen as an important source of identity construction in that the individual identify her/himself with the norms and values of the collective. The most important socialisation is usually considered

to be the primary socialisation beginning at home in early childhood (cf Berger and Luckman, 1967). When we grow up, secondary socialisation takes place when we become part of different collectives and communities, e.g. vegetarian, yuppie, pupil, teacher *et cetera*. These collectives are usually not stable; most individuals leave some and enter others many times during their life. We leave pupilhood to become teachers, we are promoted to managerial ranks and thus forced not to be ordinary employees anymore, we are someone's children and suddenly become parents etc. These different collectives, and the transitions between them, contributes to our identity construction, some for a limited period only, others for the rest of our lives. But to become such long-term influences of identity, they must be produced, confirmed and reproduced in interaction with others.

In literature, this identity construction is described as the link between the individual's subjective perception of self and the intersubjective understanding of "we" in a group to which the individual is attached (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, Hogg and Abrams, 1988, Tajfel, 1972, Turner, 1987). By identifying with others, the individual finds a group identity, based e.g. on gender or occupational category. Homogeneity and continuity are important for the development of social identity, which means that temporary groups of people are usually not seen as influencing identity. Social identity is thereby institutional by nature, i.e. conceptual patterns that are developed over a long time period and – though they are subject to continuous change - takes long time to abandon.

The theory of interactionism is thus based on that social interaction precedes and creates self-consciousness and ability to reflect. Mead (1934) use the concepts "me" and "I," where "me" is the part of the individual that is observed by her/himself and others – a passive object already there. "I" is the active, acting subject, the part of the individual that experiments, acts,

creates and therefore constantly changes. Every new “I” will gradually be incorporated into “me”, since “me” is the total subjective life-story present in the individual’s mind. Since the two concepts are interwoven into each other with some intricacy, they are impractical to use in empirical research, but they have inspired others to pursue the idea of identity construction as an interplay between outer and inner forces (cf Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Thereby, people are being recognized of reflexive abilities, and by acting and interacting with others they can change social structures. One might also see this as a voluntaristic view of people and their relations to structures in social context.

Identity construction can thereby be describes as a process where past, present and future are parts, a process where reflexion is vital to create consciousness of identity (cf Jenkins, 1996, Nord and Fox, 1996, Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001). Identity is thus also open for change over time as the individual pass through different social interactions in time and space (cf Giddens, 1991, Hall, 1992, Knights and Willmott, 1999, Nkomo and Cox, 1996). This is what differs the constructionist perspective on identity from the essentialist, in which the character of individuals are seen as inherited and stable. The essentialist perspective also leads to dubious practical implications in that it supports claims such as that the gender order in society is a biological necessity, a support that is not beneficial to the development of any individual or society.

### ***3. EMPIRICAL INQUIRY ON IDENTITY: A NARRATIVE APPROACH***

An empirical understanding of identity construction should be based on recent developments in narrative analysis (cf Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997, Deetz, 1996, Hatch, 1996, Steyaert and Bouwen, 1997). Narratives can be produced in interviews with individuals, but it is also increasingly common to use literary texts for the analysis of phenomena in organisations and

society (cf Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994, Knights and Willmott, 1999). Philosophically, this methodology can be traced back to the works of Macintyre (1981/96), where the reflexive ability of individuals to develop independent views notwithstanding the overwhelming complexity of influences in society. Put into practice, this can be used in studies on identity construction by letting individuals tell us their own life narratives, which can then be used as a basis for understanding how they have developed over time (cf Mills and Pawson, 2006). By allowing for retrospective construction of meaning, the links between past, present and future in their identity construction can be analysed. Narratives are not only constructions of meanings, though, they are also a way for individuals to organise their life and create order by connecting different parts of life into a coherent whole (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997, Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001).

### **3.1 THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY**

In much modern social science, language is used extensively to analyse individuals, organisations and societies. There are, consequently, many different views on text interpretation, discourse analysis, deconstruction etc (cf Potter and Wetherell, 1987, Gergen, 1985, Calàs and Smircich, 1992). The problem lurking behind is an excessive belief in language and the importance of the information that it conveys (Alvesson and Kärreman, 1998). Language has its limitations, both concerning content and implications of information. There is, e.g., no valid causality between what an individual says and what he actually does (cf Alvesson and Kärreman, 1998). What individuals say in certain situations is partly a product of their own intentions, but partly also a consequence of social interaction in these situations. In an earlier study with a narrative approach it appeared evident that researchers can consciously make people to reflect upon their identity construction (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001).



While maintaining such a critical stance towards language as a source of information, one might also make the opposite claim; people intend something with what they say and what they say should be taken seriously (cf Holmberg, 1993). Speaking is an ongoing construction of reality that yields subjective “truths” open for empirical analysis – speaking is also an act! What individuals say does thus not represent any “objective” account, but rather a situated construct based on the narrator, the discussion partner, the subject and the situation at hand.

There are still power-related problems in society, which means that freedom of identity construction is unequally distributed. A black woman lacking formal education has e.g. not the same freedom of choice as has a white woman with a university degree. But even for individuals possessing such freedom, the vast range of organisational and societal discourses can create feelings of insecurity and fragmentation (Gergen, 1991), especially as the individual often has to assume the risk connected with her/his choices rather than being able to share it with others (Beck, 1992). This overwhelming insecurity might lead to a relativistic attitude, where “anything goes,” which in its turn might lead to an increasing lack of ethics, respect, and solidarity in interpersonal relations. It might also stimulate an increasing number of people to search for identification and security in various strong organisational ideologies in corporations, professions, youth sub-cultures, non-profit organisations or religious sects.

The problems of identity construction for the modern individual is also an important task for social science, which has been claimed e.g. by Taylor (1989) and Giddens (1991). By viewing identity construction as a process of interaction between the individual and her/his social context, emphasis is put upon the interdependence between individuals and the impossibility of straightforward individualistic self-realisation. This is also why we must understand life stories of individuals and how their narrative is kept alive over time – not just only how they

perceive their identity at a certain occasion. Identity is not only “being”, it is also “becoming” (Chia, 1996). By constructing a narrative about who we are, we also describe the life that we desire (Taylor, 1995). Reflexion thus means to relate different events in the narrative to each other and to investigate their meaning.

To sum this up, we use the concept of identity construction for the individual’s ongoing narrative about herself. Identity construction is a pattern in each individual, constructed through self-reflexion and interaction with others (cf Jenkins, 1996). Construction takes place in form of narratives, where individuals reflect over their biographies and important events in those. It is also important to notice that identity construction is not something that is open for strategic manipulation by the individual, since many paths in life is initiated by circumstances beyond our control or by chance. Nor is it something totally unconscious that can be “uncovered” through psychoanalysis; it is an ongoing process of constructing a meaningful pattern that links different life experiences together.

In an earlier study of individuals who frequently crossed organisational boundaries (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001), two different patterns of reflexive identity construction emerged. Some of the individuals in the study had articulated ontological values, upon which they built their life styles, careers and moral values. Other individuals lacked this basis, and handled reality in a flexible and situated manner. The first type we denominated “integrated identity”, which means that the life narrative are linked together by basic values (e.g. by cultural or religious nature) that were used to explain different events and decisions in life. The second way of reasoning we referred to as ”multi-identity”, implying that life experiences were sorted into different ”folders”; each folder representing a separate episode of identity construction that could not be related to any other episode. Individuals with an integrated identity also linked

professional and private life by including both work and family in their lifestyle and moral values, while those with a multi-identity saw work and family as different emotional spheres of life. In the study presented in this paper, similar observations were made concerning the combination of gender, entrepreneurship and professional identities.

### **3.2 INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN SWEDEN**

In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were many private schools started in Sweden as complement to the general public sector school system that was initiated in 1848. After World War II, Sweden started to rapidly expand the welfare state, and the public sector schools were also part of that development. The need for private schools was intended to disappear as the public sector school system grew both in scope and in quality, and there was also an ideological debate concerning if private schools for the privileged few should actually be allowed to exist. At this time, private schools were too expensive for people in general and it was only wealthy people that could afford to send their children there. Private schools were thus seen as an option only for the traditional aristocracy and for a small urban elite, and the sector slowly declined.

In the beginning of the 1980's there were only 35 private schools in Sweden, and few of them were able to get any financial support from municipalities and/or the state. Most of the schools therefore depended on private individual donations and admittance fees. In general, these schools were often seen as an old-fashioned heritage from the past, but sometimes also as arenas for experimenting with alternative pedagogical ideas. During the 1980's the public opinion changed; the public sector school system became increasingly criticized for being inefficient due to a lack of competition, and many right-wing politicians wanted to allow every parent the right to choose school for their children. In this case the liberal ideological argument for freedom of choice was combined with the argument of positive economic effects

for society. The main counter-argument from the socialist side was, of course, the risk of increased social segregation with such a system. Earlier research within this field (mostly U.S.-based) also showed that this was a relevant objection. The number of private schools started to grow, and reached 90 in 1991.

During spring 1992, the newly elected right-wing majority in the Swedish parliament decided that independent schools with a well-documented strategy on how to achieve the main educational goals stated in Swedish law could receive public funding. The schools should have at least 20 pupils and be open for everyone, and they had to reach a financing agreement with their respective municipality. They are also controlled by the National Agency for Education and are under obligation to participate in the regular evaluations that the Agency conduct.

Today, there are in total more than 800 independent schools in Sweden, schools that are neither owned nor operated by the public sector but still conforming to the national curriculum. About 7% of the children in Sweden attend an independent school during their elementary school years, and about 12% on high school level. Most of the schools are located in the southern half of Sweden (about 1/3 in the Stockholm area) and started after 1992 as firms, trusts or cooperatives. Admittance fees are prohibited and the independent schools also receive a lower budget per student than the public sector schools. Most old private schools have been transformed into independent schools in order to be able to continue their operations. During the socialist government 1994-2006, the system was kept due to its popularity, and several leading social democrats are now actively promoting the independent school sector.

The pedagogical methods that are practiced in the independent schools differ from each other. In the study presented here we have some of the most common forms represented (for example Montessori pedagogy). There are also small share of independent schools managed by different religious organizations (about 13%), which have been subject to intense debate and also omitted from this study. Except for these religious independent schools, who are mostly led by men, independent schools in general are started and led by women. An investigation of this showed that almost 70% of the independent schools had female headmasters (Lindgren, 2000). In the next section, we present some narratives from the six women interviewed in this study, describing their relation to institutionalized identity bases (entrepreneurship, gender and profession). They were all interviewed about six to eight years after entering their respective headmaster positions.

<p><b>Alexandra (well-known private school)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pragmatic</li> <li>• strong belief in people</li> <li>• pluralistic</li> <li>• challenges important</li> <li>• competition important</li> <li>• ideas important</li> <li>• faith in female leaders</li> <li>• women and men are different</li> <li>• integrating</li> <li>• strong identity as woman</li> </ul>	<p><b>Nina (Montessori school)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• serious way of viewing world</li> <li>• care is important</li> <li>• philosophically based pedagogical methods</li> <li>• tactical</li> <li>• moral values are important</li> <li>• problems with different roles</li> <li>• strong identity as woman</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ulrica (practical workshop pedagogy)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feelings important</li> <li>• adventures important</li> <li>• freedom important</li> <li>• creating important</li> <li>• down-to-earth</li> <li>• distance to herself</li> <li>• problems with structural limiting environment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Gerda (ecological pedagogy)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• holistic</li> <li>• work intensive</li> <li>• problems with lazy people</li> <li>• no female role-models</li> <li>• identity against traditional female values</li> <li>• integrating</li> </ul>	<p><b>Linda (Applied Scholastics pedagogy)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• goal oriented</li> <li>• total work commitment</li> <li>• integrated her personal values with school</li> <li>• competence most important</li> <li>• more important with profession than gender identity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Leana (Montessori school)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pedagogic important</li> <li>• expressions of insecurity in her relation to parents</li> <li>• afraid of conflicts</li> <li>• want to separate private life from work</li> <li>• regard school as her baby</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Short description of central features of the identity construction of the six women interviewed (modified version of Lindgren, 2000).**

## **4. ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

### **4.1 IDENTITY AS ENTREPRENEURS**

All the women in the study express themselves in a voluntarist way; they view themselves and their environment as full of opportunities. In the cases where they recognize structural barriers they do not handle them as problematic.

”I am a human being seeing possibilities and not problems, I see blue sky even if there are many clouds. But, sometimes I try to convince myself of seeing clouds because I think that is important.” (Alexandra)

Some of them also explicitly refer to themselves as entrepreneurs and maintain that they want movement, change and development:

”I am sure that I can find solutions, I can find ways to make it all work. I am deeply convinced about that. Hence, I don not worry much about anything.” (Ulrica)

”What I have said to them is that if you choose me, you do not choose an administrator. I can’t handle paperwork well, what I am good at is being an entrepreneur – I am an entrepreneur! I would have been an entrepreneur if I had been a man also. I like challenges, exciting things, competition.” (Alexandra)

”But, I always move on and I do not see barriers, it will be fixed during the way. I suppose I am real driving and want everything to move forward.” (Gerda)

All the women give the impression of being action oriented driving forces in their respective schools. It is one thing to formulate a vision about a new school, but making it real is something else. For most of them, starting the school has meant hard work and economic precariousness – just like the established image of entrepreneurs. All of these women have also had children and husbands who have spent a lot of time on demanding jobs. They have been forced to reorganize home work in order to cope with all the demands from the schools:

”Sometimes, I wonder if my job is worth all this and how I can change my attitude towards time. I have tried to pace down several times, but then I am back there again. I find something else that seems exciting, there are so many things that are funny and that I just must do. It is not that I find family and children unimportant. Then there are of course people that find most things boring; children that cannot do anything by their own is one of the worst things I know. So I am glad to have this energy of mine, the ability to find things funny and exciting, and I use that as comfort. I have learnt the hard way that I must go to bed before midnight, otherwise I do not make it in the long run.”  
(Gerda)

Beside working hard themselves, they also organize others. Some of them explicitly say that they can not work with easy-going people, and they tell stories from their early life – e.g. about extra work, international studies and cultural projects – that support their identity as ambitious and hard working:

”As a fresh graduate from teachers college, it was hard for me to adapt to the system and work in a way that went against everything I wanted. It was not funny, and I started to do other things, I made films, for example. After my years in the U.S., I took a practical

workshop course, and it got me going again as a teacher. It was a fantastic way to work, and I wanted to bring that into the ordinary school. The whole thing started to grow from there.” (Ulrica)

As women, they break double barriers in the sense that they have gone from a traditionally feminine teacher occupation to a traditionally masculine oriented life as owner/manager of small businesses. It has meant putting their ideals in front of their need for safety and comfort, and make all sorts of sacrifices in order to make their new schools work.

”I had to take on all administrative tasks, but I found it very stimulating. We have all been forced to re-define our way of working. All teachers clean their class rooms themselves, for example; we do not want a cleaning firm to mix up all the material and we also need to save money. The children also help keeping the school in order, which is actually a part of their upbringing. We produce a lot of our study material ourselves, and we do not purchase books to every single pupil.” (Nina)

While being entrepreneurial, they do not see independent schools as an absolute value. Most of them enjoyed their previous years in public sector schools, and they do not express any ideological commitment to the idea of starting schools outside the established system (contrary to the vivid political debate preceding the independent school reform in 1992). What they wanted was to make their pedagogic vision real, and if they had been able to do that in the public sector they would have stayed there:



”...it did not really matter to me if the school was private or not. If I had found like-minded people in the local authorities, it would have ended up a public sector school.”

(Gerda)

Where women as entrepreneurs are concerned, there are research indicating that entrepreneurship is a way for women to escape traditional ”gender regimes” and work more independently (cf Billing, 1995). While the women of this study did not voice any intentions to escape the gender structures of the public sector school system, their possibilities to implement their ideas became better when they started their own schools. This is similar to the results presented by Goffee and Scase (1985), who claims that highly educated women get more freedom to use and develop their competence if they run their own businesses (as compared to being employees of large corporations).

In their stories about entrepreneurship, they deviated from the traditional images of entrepreneurs in that they viewed a lot of the work as a collective effort (cf Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003, 2006). It was important to them to have a united group of colleagues working towards the same goal, and in several cases they were not the single owner/manager behind the school – although they had been the driving force themselves. It also appeared that they had a dual leadership in some of the schools, which seemed to work very well.

”It is all about knowing yourself when you work together. I know exactly how I want things to be, but I do not want to run over people. You really have to adjust and be generous if you want results. I always try to have an eye on myself in different situations, I want to know that we have genuine feelings for each other. I must trust

myself completely, which means that I must prepare very well for everything. I dare things because I am always well prepared.” (Nina)

In all the women, there is a willingness to dare and a firm belief in their own capacities (traditional entrepreneurial characteristics, according to Chell, 1991). Some say that their work situation has been difficult and pressing at times, but they have never lost faith in their visions. What differences them from many other entrepreneurs is that they lack role models in their immediate context; only one of them has a close relative who has been owner/manager of a small firm.

The basis of their entrepreneurship is pedagogic visions and ideas. They tell long and detailed stories about these ideas and the importance of these for the children. All of them put the child in the centre of everything, refer to basic philosophies about children’s rights and the relation between child and nature. Some of them are heavily inspired by Maria Montessori because she had a holistic view of nature and how children develop, and one also referred to Montessori’s profession (medical doctor) as a basis of trust in her pedagogy.

The traditional masculine notions of the entrepreneur are the inventor, the idea generator and the lone hero; men who live for their vision. Do female entrepreneurs live up to this notion, or do they live entrepreneurship in another way? Women are generally not expected to live for their vision, and they are not raised to put their career and professional development at the centre of their lives. In these cases, however, the women have had both the self-confidence and the possibilities to pursue their professional projects, even though it has meant a constant balance act between work, family life and home work. Several of the women in this study express humble gratitude; they are privileged, they have the possibilities to make their visions

come true, they have some sort of support from their husbands. They are aware of the structural limitations to which female entrepreneurs are exposed, and they are also aware that they have been able to supersede them in their own lives.

The entrepreneurial identities of the women in the study rest heavily upon idealistic values; they make sacrifices and live quite unglamorous lives. Usually there are no public acknowledgement for what they do, neither for their ‘innovations’ nor for their hard work. There are no economic rewards to expect, even in the long run, and during the first years they have lived on savings and their husbands’ income. It is basically about the child’s right to get a good start in life.

”I am just a little component in this, for a short while. You get older and I hope that the school will continue without me. This is a school for children and that will never change.” (Nina)

”The local politicians said neither ‘yes’ or ‘no’, while the school inspection said ‘go for it’. If it had gone wrong, the politicians would thus have ensured that they had no responsibility. Quite childish, I must say, but our relation improved over time. We are doing just fine in economic terms, and we have one woman who takes care of the economic stuff. We are not allowed to make a profit, and we are not allowed to save money for investments, so it is quite tricky. We have all been on full speed here for several years, and we try to calm down now.” (Leana)

Another important value that they put into their identity as entrepreneurs is caring (see also Friberg, 1995). Instead of masculine notions on ‘need for achievement’, the women in this

study express their entrepreneurship in terms of caretaking – for children, for nature, for colleagues and for the school system. Entrepreneurship is thus a relational practice of caring, partly due to themselves bringing their own personal feminine identities into daily practices and partly due to the teacher profession as characterized by femininities.

#### **4.2 IDENTIFICATION WITH THE TEACHER PROFESSION**

The women in this study maintain that the public sector school system has not given them the freedom to develop their pedagogical ideas, which has implied that they have actively searched for alternative ways of exercising their profession. They have always appreciated their years in the public sector, however, and it has always been important for them to identify as teachers. Education, development and knowledge have always been the most important things to them.

”I had a new boy from Finland in my class, and I still remember how angry I was when nobody wanted to help him. I went to the dean and said that the boy needed extra lessons in Swedish, and the dean said that there were no resources available. So I said that I would give him extra lessons anyway. I spent 80 hours with that boy during that semester, and then I went back to the dean and said that I wanted some kind of certificate that I had done all this. Which I got. After that, I have never been afraid of doing new things.” (Alexandra)

Most of them refer to teachers college as their pedagogical basis, and they say that it is important both for themselves and for society that there exist a certified university education for teachers. They have a clear professional discourse, they speak about themselves as teachers, they claim that their professionalism has been advantageous in all political contacts, and they are proud of their occupation.

”We do not want the parents to govern the school, there are so many failing parent-led co-operative schools out there. What often happens is that the Montessori philosophy becomes blurred over time because the parents don’t have the necessary insights. We are governed by an association where all parents and staff are members, and the board consist of three teachers and two parents. In the end, we teachers make the decisions, we build this up, we are the pedagogical experts. That’s how we want it and it is based in our knowledge and expertise. Of course it is not easy always, we are a small school and we are dependent on the parents.” (Leana)

All the women are focused on their respective pedagogical ideas, and their commitment to these were often what led to them starting their schools. Still, more than six years after the starts, they still talk a lot about the way of teaching, the ideas behind and the various projects they initiate. Among the schools in this study we find pedagogical philosophies inspired by Maria Montessori, Ron Hubbard, The Outdoor Association and Creative Workshop. All the women are most interested in different philosophies and many of them have tested and evaluated different philosophies before deciding which one to use. They use different kinds of arguments for their choices, but what unites them is a dissatisfaction with the inability of traditional schools to see and develop the inner capacity of the individual child.

”I tried for years to get permission to start a small school based on the Creative Workhop philosophy, but the politicians had never heard about it. In the end, I was actually prepared to say that we were inspired by Rudolf Steiner and the Waldorf pedagogy just to set the wheels in motion. But in the midst of all this the independent

school reform came in 1992, and we sent in our papers at once and got permission. We are now in our sixth year, up and running.(Ulrica)

”Maria Montessori was the only one who had this enormous professionalism and followed the child from the womb onwards. She was also a medical doctor, she had great knowledge and left no loose ends anywhere. She compared man against nature and nature against man and she linked them together. This opened my eyes, she gave words to my feelings. I used the pedagogy in my previous job with mentally retarded children, and they made all sorts of progress. This freedom I gave them, organized freedom under responsibility, made them much more independent.” (Nina)

Their commitment to the ideas often means that they seem themselves as indispensable and irreplaceable carriers of these ideas. They often use expressions like “the spider in the web” and create a life situation where their responsibilities for school and family become interwoven.

”In retrospect, it was a big experiment moving to Belgium with the kids. After a couple of months, my son had problems with his stomach every morning and did not want to go to school. One day, he came home with his math exercise book; he did not understand it and the teacher had put big red stamps on every calculation that was not correct. He tried to make his best, and the teacher just tried to prove that he failed and needed to work more. If someone is struggling with school, you must help them develop a sense of self-esteem, you must develop their desire to learn. So when my boy came home with that book, I just said that I had had it with that school. ” (Alexandra)

As stated earlier, the teacher profession is a gendered one, and caring for children has been described by our interviewees as 'womens' work'. This also goes for independent schools in Sweden in general (Lindgren, 2000); most people that work in these schools are women, and some women in this study means that this is a problem. Some of them think that they need more men for the sake of team dynamics in the staff, while others point at the need to find role models for the small boys. On the other hand, the female dominance at the workplace has implies that they have almost never encountered discrimination, harassment, power struggles or any other gender-related problem.

"I liked Maria Montessori because she saw the individual child, I think. She was a catholic and a fighter. I have never heard of a man that have started a Montessori school, its funny. I know some male Montessori teachers, though." (Leana)

Several women in this study think that a lot of the debate on equal opportunities has gone wrong. They claim that feminists often achieve things at the expense of men and they think that both sexes are needed and should work together. They do not acknowledge any structural barriers for women, and they tend to see themselves more as teachers than women in a workplace context, i.e. that the identification as professionals become more important than their identification as women.

All the women experience a high workload – their pedagogical ideas and commitment to their schools often imply work in evenings and weekends. Their reward is seeing that the children feel happy and develop as human beings. Some of them point at the danger of burnout, which is consistent with earlier research on the stress risks for women with both professional careers and responsibility for home work (Jick & Mitz, 1985). Their husbands support them both in

their work and at home, but they have never relived them from responsibility through lowering their own workload.

”I work a lot, perhaps because I am the boss and the leader and because this school is my baby. In a sense, it would not work without me. It is important to share work with the other teachers, and it must always be funny. I do not think I will be burned out because I create all the time, it is like a hobby or a calling. It never stops and you can always develop new material and new ways of working. It’s important for me to never stand still. I think all this came over me when I became a teacher.” (Linda)

The notions of professionalism that these women have developed over time make them somewhat different to their colleagues in the public sector school system. While most teachers exercise their professionalism within the system, these women claim that if you should handle your pedagogical ideals in a responsible way, you must strive for total freedom to do so. Traditional schools have not been created out from a number of people sharing the same pedagogical vision, and children are not placed there as a result of an active choice by dedicated parents. In that sense, they are able to unite their professionalism as teachers with their entrepreneurial act of partly cutting loose from the established school system.

”We do not teach environmentalism, we just want the children to feel as a part of nature, of the forest. If you like to be outdoors, your concern for the environment will come by itself. There is no point in setting up a lot of rules, because children are much more affected by their experiences than by rules. I think that the most important job in the world is to work with the next generation, and after that comes working with the



environment, cultural history, work environment. We work with software, and you can never put an economic value on this.” (Gerda)

Having a degree from teachers college is of big importance, not least in those schools that are different and controversial. Local politicians and other citizens seem to be less sceptical about independent schools of those starting them has previous job experience in the public school system (where a degree is a mandatory prerequisite for full-time employment). The same pattern can be seen in the relations to the parents, and it is important to them to keep some sort of professional distance to the parents to preserve the long-term pedagogical visions. The distance to the parents is also important in the sense that they need to feel like ‘private persons’ with a life outside the school. One of the women (Leana) actually moved to a nearby town in order to find a private space where she never met her pupils and their parents in the streets in evenings and weekends. It is much harder moving away from their own thoughts and commitment, not least because they have made their schools a major part of their life.

”I have been into serious conflict with some parents, felt bad about it, felt insufficient. I became vulnerable, I cried and felt hurt. Some people think they can say anything to a teacher. It is ridiculous, you are always there to help and you always have to take a lot of shit. At such occasions you just feel like sitting in an office with some simple paperwork.” (Leana)

There are also different structural conditions for the teacher profession in the public sector and in the independent school sector, hence different ways of identifying as teacher.

”Now I must settle down a bit so that they can all start to work with all the new projects that I have initiated. I want every teacher to be both experts in their subjects and have the ability to serve as mentor and understand the other subjects in the same study programme. That goes for me as well, and my job is also to create a whole of all this – I cannot allow people to do anything they want. I have learnt to evaluate our operations in both operative and economic terms, I have learnt to forecast. Now I would like to put my energy into leadership and mentorship. (Alexandra)

#### **4.3 GENDER IDENTIFICATION**

The women in this study has all shown that it is possible to break barriers. Where gender is concerned, the school sector in general is dominated by women and feminine values on the lower levels. In addition, the teacher profession is gendered, and these women thus do not break any gender barriers in their 'industry'. Their entrepreneurship is also characterized by values of 'caring' and 'keeping life together'; they see themselves as spiders in the web, indispensable. In that sense they reproduce established notions of gender and gender relations.

”I think of myself as a woman – strong, powerful – but it has been a long way here. I have never felt discriminated against as a woman, I have been met with seriousness and respect. It is important to see opportunities, I am positive and want things to be fun. Even if you run into troubles, you will get through in the end. Troubles usually mean development! I think I do a lot of typical women work, I organize and I care. I always slip into that, but I refuse to do handicraft. I organize everything at home and at work, my husband cannot even organize his own day, he cannot fix anything. This is quite a burden, and sometimes I am furious about it; why should I take care of everything while he could do it just as good?” (Ulrica)

”It is very nice to be a woman, I do not think that I have met any hindrances. Of course I have been subject to some attacks that a man would never have been subject to. As a woman, you are more open and outgoing. It has been hard for me to handle conflicts; I am dependent upon my staff and the parents, but I wish I could be more frank and say exactly what I think at some occasions.” (Leana)

When they tell us their story about their entrepreneurship, it is hard to find any general patterns of hindrances or discrimination. When replying to direct questions about this, they say that they are not used to be treated in a bad way because they are women. The images of being a woman differ, however. Some identify strongly as women and find men necessary as complements and as gatekeepers, while others identify with male role-models and describe themselves as their fathers’ daughters. Another group do not think much about gender issues, and some claim that gender is unimportant since there are universal criteria such as ‘competence’ that should be used instead. If Wahl’s (1992) reasoning on coping strategies is applied to this material, it is thus possible to find different ways of identification despite that they all say that they have never received any negative treatment as women. Some mean that women and men are basically alike, while others focus on the differences and see them as natural results of the historical development of society. All the women studied think that they belong to a privileged group in society; they are well educated, quite normal upbringing conditions, been able to break away from their homes at early age and developed into independent and strong individuals.

”I think all this talk about different roles for men and women make sense, and I try to become more tough and determined. I do have some sort of natural authority, but when I have had to become real angry and go into battle then people have reacted like ‘oops,

why are you so mad, this is nothing'. Men are never met by such reactions. When we work together here at the school we do what we are good at, I do not think of myself as a woman then. But sometimes, when we meet people at the municipality, you start to think if you would have been treated in another way of I had worn a suit and a portfolio. But I never think that it is a limitation being a woman. Women are needed just as men are needed. I do not feel sorry for women; I have been able to do everything that men do, and I do think that men has to fight a lot too. I have never been a feminist.” (Nina)

”The supply of networks for women and courses in female leadership is vast, but there are no networks for men, which is almost a discrimination of them. Even though some surely need it, I think it’s a pity that women must encourage each other on the expense of men. We must be able to encourage and support each other together; a society is built by both sexes and it might not always exist possibilities for total equality.” (Gerda)

Despite their different strategies, the women have similar conditions at the workplace – the gender system does not affect their daily work much. Even though entrepreneurship is mostly a masculine construct, they live in a sphere dominated by feminine values where femininities are rarely confronted with masculinities.”

”When we re-constituted our board we had also added a man to all these cackling hens, we needed a chairman with contacts. Belgium is like that, you can’t work if you haven’t a man with you. You can’t come with your Swedish ideas to a country where 65% of the women are housewives. Your identity comes from the man, and you must use that to your advantage. So we found a man by the name Anders who worked at the Chamber of Commerce. (Alexandra)

The few men actually working in these independent schools are seen as interesting peripheral phenomena, and some of the women want more male colleagues. Unlike most opposite situations – i.e. when the organisation is male-dominated – they want a more equal gender balance in order to enhance professionalism. Their experience of gender issues as unproblematic seem to rest in their reliance on the teacher profession, and they also tend to interpret gendered conflicts (e.g. with men in the municipalities) in terms of professional differences. Notions of gender are more likely to be found at the next level – i.e. through their choice of profession, their choice of pedagogical philosophy or their life form. The teacher profession is traditionally a much more natural vocational alternative for women than for men, and when men start independent schools they usually depart from religious ideas rather than pedagogical ones (Lindgren, 2000). The women in this study also live rather usual women's lives where they take responsibility for both home and work and try to create a whole out of them.

“Anyone can use these pedagogical methods, it has not been important that I am a woman. I am a teachers college graduate with ten years of experience from the public sector school, so even though these methods were new to me, everybody understood that I knew what I was doing. I gained a lot of respect, but I also had a male colleague without university education, and they did not listen to him that much. So my education has been very important.” (Linda)

Some of the women view the debate on equal opportunities as harmful, that women sometimes advance their positions at the expense of men. They also think that both men and

women are needed and should work together. Since they mostly work with other women and have only a few men in the staff, gender structures do not become visible.

”I do not think that I have much of a female identity, it is more a male identity. My dad has been my role model since I was a kid, I do have a relation to my mum but it is not the way it should be. I do not know if that is why I do not feel any need to dress up or be feminine. I like wearing skirts, dresses and long nails, but I am not afraid go get my hands dirty. I have not met many women in leading positions that I can use as role models, I have not met many women that have impressed me at all. I have met more men with an ability to explain and articulate what they want, men with authority and position but also not afraid to discuss soft issues.” (Gerda)

”I had to take a lot in the beginning, but I do not want to think it was because it was easy for them to come down on a woman. I rather think it was because we started an independent school in the midst of an old school culture – the political ideology has always been that every child should have the same opportunities, and that was achieved through a system of public sector schools. At that time, independent schools was something for a small elite, so I can understand their reactions.” (Nina)

On a more general level, the above analysis leads us to question if it is always the best ambition to make all workplaces equal in the sense that there is a numerical balance between men and women. Is it even so that there could be advantages in re-creating separate schools for boys and girls in order to relieve people from experiencing clashes between femininities and masculinities? Or is it so that these clashes are inevitable later on in life, which points at the current order with mixed schools?

Our view is that a separation strategy – though it would be comfortable for many in the short run – would make all current gender differences even clearer and also contribute to the construction of different professions and industries as masculine and feminine. On the individual level, it is also most limiting to be forced into a clear-cut role system and dichotomous gender identities. Despite the established gender structures in society, based in the principles of hierarchisation and segregation, there are always possibilities of re-constructing what is masculine and feminine. When we change our way(s) of re-constructing established femininities and masculinities, we open possibilities for constructing new living conditions for men and women. Time in itself will not result in such changes, only actions aimed at challenging and breaking established patterns.

”I would presume that I am quite a cheerful character, enthusiastic about new ideas. I don not see the problems in the relations between men and women, I had rather focus on what is good and bad in any relation. Competence development is more important to me than if you are a man or a woman. I would wish for more male teachers, there are so many kids that need male role models – and in that sense I do care about gender. I do not think that I live a traditional women’s life, and I am a bit stressed over homework and caring for the family. On the other hand, my relatives are quite impressed that I started a school and became a dean.” (Linda)

	<b>Identity as entrepreneur</b>	<b>Identity as teacher</b>	<b>Gender identification</b>
<b>Alexandra</b>	View herself as entrepreneur	Strong feelings for childrens' right and pluralism	Strong identification, men are different
<b>Nina</b>	Do not in first hand view herself as entrepreneur	Strong feelings for children and pedagogy	Strong identification, men are different
<b>Ulrica</b>	View herself in entrepreneurial terms	Strong feelings for children and pedagogy	Strong identification, distinction male and female
<b>Gerda</b>	View herself in entrepreneurial terms	Strong feelings for children and ecological values	Rejects female identity
<b>Linda</b>	Do not in first hand view herself as entrepreneur	Strong feelings for children, religion and pedagogy	Competence is more important than gender
<b>Leana</b>	Do not in first hand view herself as entrepreneur	Strong feelings for children and pedagogy	Identification as a woman, men are different

**Table 2. Short description of how the six women relate to central features of identity construction.**

## **5. COMPLEXITY OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: NON-CONFLICTING VALUES GOES HAND IN HAND WITH CONFLICTING VALUES**

Out from the narratives we recognize a complexity within the combination of different identity construction bases. We will start this discussion by showing the different categorisations of entrepreneurship, profession and gender as we have interpreted our empirical subjects.



<b>Entrepreneurship construction</b>	<b>Profession construction</b>	<b>Gender construction</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possibilities and not obstacles</li> <li>• Idealistically oriented</li> <li>• Action oriented</li> <li>• Strong visions</li> <li>• Adventures</li> <li>• Belief in themselves and others</li> <li>• "Spider in the web"</li> <li>• Sacrificed their own economy and safeness</li> <li>• Do not identify themselves as business people</li> <li>• Some identify themselves as entrepreneurs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge important</li> <li>• Education important</li> <li>• Development important</li> <li>• Pedagogical focus</li> <li>• Legitimacy as graduated teacher is important</li> <li>• Strong identification with pedagogical philosophy and schools as organisations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional female sector</li> <li>• Care oriented ideology</li> <li>• Holistic view on life</li> <li>• Pedagogical methods to most extent - female by character</li> <li>• Organised women</li> <li>• Do not experience themselves as marginalised neither earlier nor at present</li> <li>• Nobody has a husband responsible for children and housekeeping</li> <li>• Different ways of coping with gender issues and problems</li> </ul>

**Table 3. Short description of patterns of identity construction.**

This shows some of the connotations that express their identification processes. As we can interpret the women there are some non-conflicting values within these patterns. Their strong identification with their profession goes hand in hand with gender identification. They are committed to education and development and have deep values concerning the importance of taking responsibility for children. Most of the women also thought that if they could work according to these values in the public sector, they would have done so. Consequently, they look upon independent schools as a better ground for practising different pedagogical methods in total. They can hand-pick their staff and allow themselves a degree of freedom that is well-related to their professional educational ideals on the teacher as a trusted and independent expert. Here we can see that entrepreneurship in that sense fits well with their ambitions in their profession.

On the other hand, their way of reasoning shows some conflicting values when it comes to identification bases as professionals, entrepreneurs and business people. They first and last recognize themselves as school people and not as business people. Doing business with education is not legitimate in teachers' education and practice, where pedagogy and knowledge are "higher values" that goes beyond making money and doing business. They do not view their world in business terms and some find it hard to learn about organisation forms, accounting, fiscal regulations, budgeting and so on. They are reluctant to label their work as 'businesses' where parents and children are customers to whom they 'sell' education. In Sweden there has been a long tradition of education in public sector and almost every school is still tax financed. But on the other hand, they do compete with other schools every year since parents cannot freely choose schools for their children. Children from the same geographical area do not go to the same school anymore, and instead parents drive them to other parts of town. Still, it seems that the women in this study have difficulties to view themselves and their schools as part of business life.

At the same time, they are more inclined to identify themselves as entrepreneurs: some of them did that explicitly, others more implicitly. We can see this in their view of the world as full of opportunities and possibilities rather than obstacles. They have also great visions with their work and work idealistic for ideas in practice. What distinguishes these women from traditional entrepreneurship characteristics is the notion of need for achievement. There were no sign of achievement orientation in their stories, they did not talk about their own work in that kind of way. Even if we could see them as 'spiders in the web' they did not put themselves in focus and they also had some distance to their own role as managers or even CEOs of the schools. They did not talk of what they have done in terms of career or growth, instead they talked about children's development and was pleased with that. It was also

obvious that they did not view themselves as successful entrepreneurs, instead they experienced that they had to develop things in different ways all the time.

If we look closer to what kind of values that has to do with the teacher profession we can see clear cuts between that and being an entrepreneur. First, there is long education to become a teacher and this legitimating process is important for these women. Only people with a degree in pedagogy are possible to recruit, and there are also different kinds of ethical and cultural rules expected in this profession. One example is that you should treat children equally and with responsibility and can therefore not give advantages to children who have parents that can help the school with contacts and financial support. Another example is that there are strong loyal feelings among teachers in this subculture which also lead to problems with people who can be disliked of parents. In an ordinary company you can say to the person that you do not really fit here and maybe it is better that you do something else. But when you deal with professionals they can always rely on their educational legitimacy; They are specialists with exams from teacher education. There is an internal solidarity within this cultural group that can make it hard to criticize teachers. In this sense, a teacher identity is different from entrepreneurship which often means identification with toughness, economic growth, making money and operating at the boundaries of normality.

There are also other conflicting values between teacher profession and entrepreneurship in life form terms. Being a teacher has not, at least not in Sweden, traditionally been linked with working more than 40 hours a week. Many people became teachers because of long holidays, reasonable workload, almost total freedom and the comfort of having a well-paid and respectable occupation. Even though the young generation of teachers work more and have lower relative income than was the case before, they do not become obsessed with their work.

The women interviewed work very hard but also want to combine this with taking care of children and homework which goes hand in hand with their profession but not traditional entrepreneurship life form. There were also sign of this in there description of their situation where some of them talk about the problems with managing all things in life together.

The life-form of an entrepreneur as being free-rider is something that suit many of these women well, but on the other hand the gendered structures in society still implicates women as first and last responsible for taking care of their families and their homes. Results from earlier studies of female entrepreneurs in Sweden also show that women entrepreneurship was characterized by adjustment to family matters (Sundin and Holmquist, 1989). Therefore we can interpret our results as there is a remaining contradiction between women and entrepreneurship. Being a woman is not naturally compatible with being an entrepreneur as it traditional have been described in terms of dedication to work and need for achievement (Lindgren, 2000, Holmquist and Sundin, 2002).

Gender is a central base for identification because you always have to cope with this and there are different strategies for this. One of the women (Gerda) wanted to identify herself against a female way of behaving. She had male role-models guiding her leadership and also expressed negative feelings against her mother. Moreover, she described the relation between men and women as characterised by an expectation of conflict, which she disliked. She thus had a strong ambition to think in terms of non-gender; the institutionalised expectations on how women shall behave were a strait-jacket to her. The conceptual category of gender is present in her narrative, but in her identity construction she tries to free herself from that category.

Some of the other women were proud of being women, for example Alexandra who consciously used her female attributes and way of behaviour to gain what she wanted. She also had a strong belief in women as leaders. Both these cases express what can be described as different gender strategies (Kanter, 1977, Wahl, 1992). It is not unusual for women in business life to show solidarity with men. This can also turn out to be a gate-keeper function for other women to gain leadership positions. To legitimate themselves in the new positions as leaders some women tend to express solidarity to men and promote other men instead of other women. And it is neither unusual for them to see men and women as biologically different with special female traits and special male traits (cf Alvesson and Billing, 1997, Kanter, 1977, Wahl, 1992).

Out of this, we are able to see the following narrative strategies of handling conflicting values in different identity bases:

1. The holistic ambition - getting it all together by living with it all despite the conflicts (they all do in various ways) – integrating identity construction (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001)
2. Defining away from one or more of the identity bases, relying on the remaining ones (“I see myself as not a woman but a teacher/leader”, or “I do not see myself as an entrepreneur but rather teacher and woman”)
3. Re-formulating intruding identity bases using the remaining ones (e.g. talking about school development in terms of pedagogical leadership rather than business management or entrepreneurial venturing)
4. Re-defining practical situations and problems so that they become a natural part of another identity base (e.g. re-defining conflict management from being a task of tough masculine entrepreneurs to become a natural part of everyday life as a female teacher)

What would interesting to see is of course if and how the way(s) for these female entrepreneurs of identifying with different identity bases change over time. In analogy with a constructionist view, this certainly have to do with how researchers, media and significant others interact with these people. So the remaining question is: Could it in the future be usual and natural to identify oneself being woman, teacher and entrepreneur at the same time?

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