

Changing identities in changing societies: A narrative for empirical research on entrepreneurial identity construction

Annika Åkerberg

ABSTRACT

The starting point for this article is the notion that changing societies imply re-definitions of social identities. A framework concerning the process of identity construction is presented as a basis for empirical studies on identity transformations in changing societies. The suggested narrative is exemplified with people moving from unemployment to entrepreneurship, i.e. situations where identities are assumed to be questioned and consequently re-defined. Notions on identities in different settings, such as gendered entrepreneurial identities, are thus also being proposed. The article puts forward the suggestion that identities can be empirically studied through narration. In order to carry out empirical research on identity transformations, it is proposed that there are some particularly significant focal points to consider. Hence, the article concludes with a proposal for how to carry out empirical research on changing identities.

Key words: identity, translation, gender, entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

The deep economic crisis in Finland in the beginning of the 1990s was followed by a social and psychological crisis, apparent both on macro- and micro-levels. Mass unemployment, which is expected to be persistent (Drèze & Malinvaud, 1994; Kiander & Widgren, 1996; Malinvaud, 1996), is in this article proposed to require re-constructions of social identities. Common beliefs of what single individuals can expect from their lives in terms of employment have changed. It is not considered that a single individual can expect to be employed by external employers for his/her whole life and consequently gain a living (Uusitalo, 1995).

However, even though low education and unemployment are related, that was not the case in the Finnish recession in the early 1990s (Vähätalo, 1994). During that period also well-educated people were hit by the recession and the following high unemployment situation. One reaction towards the high unemployment rate was an increased interest in supporting the unemployed by offering short-term courses in order to make it possible to return to employment. Another way of responding to the unemployment situation in Finland was to support people to become self-employed, i.e. an increased focus on entrepreneurship as an alternative to paid employment (Petäjaniemi, 1995). A consequence of the recession seems, thus, to be the growing number of people who have turned into self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Similarly, the conditions and principles of the labour market, such as the prejudices for long-term and stable contracts, have changed. At a time when it has become more frequent to move between different forms of employment, unemployment, temporary projects, entrepreneurship, educational projects, parental leave, and so forth, demands to re-define our conceptions of work are evoked. The conception of life-long employment seems to have been replaced by the conception of temporary projects. Boundaries between working life, private life, and societal life are loosened, thus allowing for new meanings of work in our lives. Furthermore, the changes outlined occur in economies that to an increasing extent are proposed to be economies of signs (such as information, symbols, images, desire) and of space, where both signs and social subjects are mobile over ever greater distances (Lash & Urry, 1994). In such economies, in a time of late modernity, phenomena such as globalisation and changed patterns of consumption have encouraged the development of 'reflexivity'

(Giddens, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994). The growing reflexivity of subjects, which is argued to accompany the modernisation and post-modernisation of contemporary political economies, opens up for reflections also of the self. Thus, in modernity, the self becomes a 'reflexive project' and "consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives" (Giddens, 1991:72).

As argued by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), individuals' definitions of self are important because they help situate individuals in their social contexts and, thereby, suggest what to do, think and even feel. What has been indisputable in the relationships between people, organisations and society seem now to be disputed, or even endowed with different meaning. Crossing boundaries, for example the boundaries between working and private life or employment versus entrepreneurship, activates processes of translation that have to be dealt with at many levels (both individual and collective) (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). On an individual level, changing societies seem to imply that people have to reconsider perceptions of personal and social identities as well as of future identities.

The process of identity construction can thus be seen as one grounded upon understandings of meaningful knowledge within different local settings. It is argued that changes in people's life-situations imply changes within localities, and this also changes the relevant and meaningful knowledge required within different contexts (e.g. Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Hence, a basic proposition in this article is that changes on a societal level, for example of a kind that allow, or even require, for new meanings of work and employment, also imply re-definitions of identities. This argument is based on the notion that individuals construct understandings of meaningful knowledge needed in the realm of locally situated relationships. Accordingly, identity is argued to be narration created through individuals' interactions with their environment. It is within a realm of relationships (cf. Gergen, 1994) that narratives of identities are translated as well as recognised. As pointed out by Czarniawska-Joerges in her case examination of public sector organisations in Sweden during the years 1985 to 1990, actors (both individuals and collectives) are co-authors of their own narratives of identities, as well as subjects to larger social forces such as

transformations of the welfare state. However, every society and the individuals constituting that society jointly define the boundaries for thinkable life projects and the projects people perceive they can act on. As expressed by Czarniawska & Joerges (1996:28) "we cannot translate what is wholly unrecognisable", i.e. the initial requirement of translation is a degree of perception.

The aim of the present article is to suggest a framework in which re-definitions of social identities in contemporary and changing societies can be empirically studied. Thus, the contribution of the article is basically methodological. As a basis for empirical studies on changing identities, the narrative suggested is throughout the article exemplified by the situation of people moving from a situation of unemployment to self-employment and entrepreneurship, a situation where identities are assumed to be questioned and consequently re-constructed. Thus, the article also includes some aspects significant for research on entrepreneurship as such.

Therefore, it seems motivated to shortly reflect on how the concepts of 'entrepreneurship' and 'entrepreneurial' are understood in this article. In the English language these concepts are often conceived of as qualitative statements of people who take care of their businesses in specific ways, or are inclined to behave in specific ways. However, as Huuskonen (1992) points out, the Finnish terms 'yrittäjä' (noun) and 'yrittäjyys' (adverb) refer plainly to being in business, and consequently do not have any connotations of being oriented towards growth, being successful, admirable or the like. In other words, the Finnish 'yrittäjä' is more clearly the owner-manager of a business than an entrepreneur (ibid.). Another commonly used concept for entrepreneurship is 'self-employment', which reflects the aspect of many entrepreneurs having started businesses in order to support a living. The reasoning in this article is based on arguments that entrepreneurship and the processes of becoming an entrepreneur cannot be explained from the outside. In other words, entrepreneurial behaviours and/or inclinations to behave in specific ways as an entrepreneur (i.e. entrepreneurship defined functionally, Mosakowski, 1998) cannot be concluded on a principal level, but will rather emerge on an empirical or practical, level. Consequently, in this article the concepts of 'entrepreneur' and 'entrepreneurship' are used without qualitative connotations, i.e. they describe

a group of people who have started businesses from a situation of unemployment (i.e. they are self-employed).

The process of identity construction is presented within the realm of constructivism, where identity is understood as something that is created by individuals interacting with their environment, by and in practices of narration (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Gergen, 1994; Weick, 1995; Blomquist, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Czarniawska, 1998). The focus is therefore on the presentation of performative definitions (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Sevón, 1996; Åkerberg, 1998), i.e. practical descriptions based on processes of translation which build connections between actions, actors, times and places (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Czarniawska, 1999). Some notions on identities within different settings, such as gendered entrepreneurial identities, will thus be proposed in the present article. The article concludes with practical implications and a proposal for how to carry out empirical studies on identity transformations.

ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL ORDER AND IDENTITIES

Constructivism emphasizes the process of identity construction as a base for action (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). Gergen (1994:214), among others, has underlined the relational and interactional aspects of identity construction by stating that "relatedness precedes individuality". By this it is suggested that identity as such does not exist as a fixed property or state (such as the essentialist concept stemming from a personality psychological perspective, Albert & Whetten, 1985), but rather that it is negotiated, accepted and rejected by actors who present themselves and react to others' presentations (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Czarniawska, 1998). In this process not only individual identities are changed, but also society is reproduced and changed.

The process of identity construction is understood to be based on a process of translation, which builds connections between actions, actors, times and places (Latour, 1986; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Czarniawska, 1999). Translations can thus be understood as the mechanism by

which the social and natural world progressively takes shape. Different patterns of conduct are open to multiple interpretations, and they can be questioned and changed. Accordingly, the act of translation changes not only what is translated but also those who do the translating (Latour, 1986; Callon, 1986; Sevón, 1996; Åkerberg, 1998; Czarniawska, 1999).

The concept of translation describes a process, and it is introduced by Callon and Latour (1981) and further developed by Latour (1986) and Callon (1986). Latour (1993:5) uses translation to indicate "displacement, drift, invention, mediation, creation of a new link that did not exist before and which modifies in part the two agents". Agents are those translating (the subject) as well as the object for this translation. Translation as a relation between two agents (the subject and the object) is a mutual process, deconstructing the agents. Translations are not isolated, implying that also 'small' translations are tied together to form bigger ones.

The translation model differs from the diffusion model in that in a translation model the initial force of the first actor in the chain is no more important than that of the one hundredth (Latour, 1986; Sevón, 1996). It is not possible to know when or where the process ends; indeed, relationships of any kind that are spread in time and space may arise in quite new circumstances. 'Everything' is present and under process within the translations, so there is no static situation *a priori*, no truth that will last forever. Definitions are, according to this view, always historically relative. Language in relation to reality forms the focus for analysis. The model of translation has its strength in that it strives to understand complexity. It focuses on processes rather than the effects of processes, thus being the mechanism by which the social and natural world progressively take shape (Callon, 1986). The concept of translation emanates from a perception that only one world exists, but this existing world can be interpreted and described in many different ways.

Translations can imply rather big shifts of meaning, almost like a change of paradigm (Latour, 1993, 1996). For example, the building of speed bumps in roads (Latour's example 1996) can refer to a change in the comprehension of the context from 'slowing down in order to drive more carefully and save lives' to 'slowing down in order to save one's car' (being a selfish reason). Thus translations are contextual, but they are not

necessarily only slight changes of interpretation, rather they can be purely different interpretations. Meaning is displaced by another, and action thus shifts to another type of expression.

Translations are always local. Similarly, for an individual, the cognition of identity is argued to be formed by, and dependent on, the context in which an individual (or organisation) is acting (cf. also Garfinkel in Heritage, 1984; Blomquist, 1996). The relationships of actors to other actors are hence significant (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986; Gergen, 1994; Åkerberg, 1998). As processes of identity construction and identification are regarded as consequences of continuous interactions between different actors within locally situated settings, individuals cannot disregard how others construct identities of them. They have to deal with different requirements and expectations by others, considering agendas that may not be primarily theirs. In his case description, Kunda (1992) recognises that a sense of self is formed both by the ways individuals identify with prescribed roles and the ways in which they distance themselves from them. This is based on a belief that individuals are free to interpret and make their situation meaningful and to construct and reconstruct their sense of who they are, within socially defined constraints. Something is emphasised and therefore included, while something else is excluded. As expressed by Gergen (1994:209): "Identities, in this sense, are never individual; each is suspended in an array of precariously situated relationships."

Such a conceptualisation of identity follows the arguments presented, for example, by Czarniawska (1998) considering individual identity as a modern institution, as something that did not always exist and is not even valid in contemporary non-modern cultures (cf. also Giddens, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994). According to this line of thought, identity is something that is being constructed by, and in practices of, narration; it is negotiated, accepted and rejected by actors who present themselves and react to others' presentations. The individual and the collective are thus not separated, but rather contribute jointly to processes of identity construction. In other words, it seems worth noticing that as identities are suspended in an array of precariously situated relationships, created by individuals' interactions with their environment (e.g., Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Gergen, 1994; Weick, 1995; Blomquist, 1996), it is not only the

cognition and presentations of self that are interesting but also the environment's reactions to those presentations.

The process by which identities are created is described in more detail by Callon (1986). He outlines a process where actors, within individually meaningful relationships, mutually strive to control who they are and what they want by trying to lock other actors into proposed roles and by defining and interrelating those roles in order to form powerful and representative actor-networks. During this process of translation "the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited" (ibid. 203). As a part of this process, actors suggest identities for other actors and accordingly define other actors as insiders vs. outsiders. An example of such a representative actor-network would be an entire set of relationships and actors presenting themselves as a single actor, for example, 'we in the Marketing department', 'the Green Movement', etc.

To interest other actors, according to Callon (1986), would include a process where an actor builds devices which can be placed between those actors s/he wants to interest (i.e. 'the insiders') and all other actors who want to define their identities differently (i.e. 'the outsiders') (exemplified in Åkerberg, 1998). This part of the translation process is illustrated in Figure 1 below, and it shows how actor B is a 'result' of the association which links s/he to actor A. Other potentially existing actors, C, D and E, attempt to give B another definition but are disassociated from B by the link between A and B. This elementary relationship that begins to shape and consolidate the social link is by Callon (1986), labelled the triangle of interestement. (see figure 1)

An interesting question seems to be which presentations of self an individual would be inclined to support in different settings – or is it at all possible to deliberately influence or even design, readings of personal identities? Considering arguments put forward by, among others, Shamir (1991), Kramer (1993), Dutton et al. (1994), Ashforth & Kreiner (1999), people seem to be drawn to certain situations rather than other situations. Shamir (1991), for example, argues that individuals' identities are continuously constructed, reconstructed and organised according to a hierarchy of salience (being defined as the importance of an identity for defining one's self,

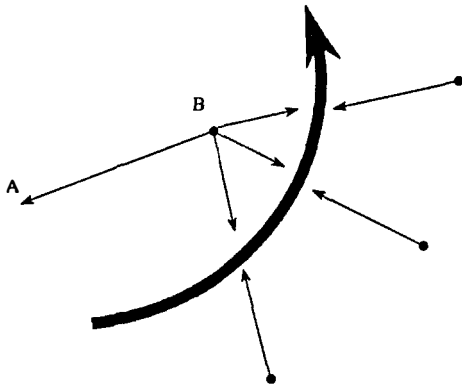


Figure 1. *The triangle of intersement* (Callon, 1986:208).

relative to other identities held by the individual). Important in this process is the argument that people (commonly) strive for positive images and definitions of themselves and are motivated to maintain and increase their self-esteem (based on a sense of competence, power or achievement) and self-worth (based on a sense of morality and moral worth) (ibid.). This is also in line with Ashforth & Kreiner (1999), who argue that people seek esteem-enhancing or positive self-definitions. Dutton et al (1994) suggest that an organisation is more attractive to a person when his/her perception of it matches his/her perception of him/herself. Kramer (1993) notes that people who experience identity-enhancing events often try to claim closer association with those events than to events that are interpreted as negative. According to these arguments, people would be drawn to situations in which they can present more of the characteristics they value about themselves rather than hide or present themselves negatively.

Is it then possible to deliberately design or influence the narration of identities? Considering the notions presented by Czarniawska, that actors are only partly authors of their own narration (i.e. their auto-narrative), and in accordance with Callon's ideas from above, it is suggested that the control of such processes is only partial (Christensen & Cheney, 1994). This is also in line with arguments put forward by Roseneil and Seymour (1999) that identities are fundamentally created and recognised in relations of power; all

identities are not equally available to all of us, nor are they equally culturally valued.

On gendered entrepreneurial identities

It seems that studies on identities cannot ignore the significant issue of identities as gendered. As noted above, people seem to be drawn to situations in which they can present themselves positively, i.e. they tend to put themselves in positive contexts. When the contexts change, identities need to be re-negotiated. Nevertheless, we are not always able to influence time and space. This seems to be particularly important to notice when considering unemployed people and entrepreneurs, areas in which a lot of stereotypes and fixed thought-structures seem to prevail. Placed in a role of being unemployed or an entrepreneur need not, on an individual level, be regarded as positive. Furthermore, one could argue that interpretations of positive vs. negative contexts are different also due to gender-related issues. Accordingly, for both unemployed individuals (considering e.g. the domestic and caring sphere) and in the field of entrepreneurship (where whole industries often are perceived of in terms of male or female), the gendered aspect of identity seems to be crucial. For example, when female entrepreneurs are placed in roles that commonly are regarded as male, how does this affect the definitions of them as insiders or outsiders by those who already are insiders, as parts of representative actor-networks? Similarly, taking care of the domestic sphere may be regarded differently by unemployed males and females.

The idea of identity as gendered is put forward, among others, by Kanter (1977), Lindgren, (1985), Sundin & Holmquist (1989), Cockburn (1991), Sundin (1995 & 1998), Wahl et al. (1998). Thoughts, structures and processes, both in societies and organisations, can be seen as gendered (Wahl et al., 1998). For an individual, gender seems to create different mental spaces to act within, spaces which conceivably are structured, practiced, reproduced and recognised differently. Differences in mental spaces are conceivably grounded within the two logics, segregation and hierarchy (Hirdman, 1990) that constitute the gender system. Segregation indicates that men and women are not expected

to be in the same places, nor are they expected to do the same things. The logic of hierarchy, on the other hand, implies that what men do and are is more valued than the things women do and are. However, such logics are to a great extent hidden, based on institutional and cultural factors (Cockburn, 1991), which implies that people tend to consider such dissimilarities as normal and self-evident (Wahl et al., 1998).

Consequently, as recognised by empirical observations, also entrepreneurial identities seem to be gendered (e.g. Mulholland, 1996; Petäjänie-mi, 1997). Female entrepreneurs often operate in different industrial fields than male entrepreneurs, which suggests that entrepreneurial identities relate to both business ideas and the size of new companies (e.g. Hajba, 1985; Kovalainen et al., 1996). Moore & Buttner (1997) argue that earlier women entrepreneurs ('the traditional') used to be sole proprietors who extended domestic services and skills into the marketplace. However, in a second generation women entrepreneurs ('the modern') tend to consider business ownership in terms of a career rather than as supplementary family income and have, therefore, started businesses in traditionally male-dominated industries. Moore & Buttner (1997) present the reasons for why women leave corporate life as a complex mix of personal aspirations and organisational factors rather than the often-assumed reason of family demands. Accordingly, they describe how women network to build a support system. They also describe how women entrepreneurs define success as they move outside organisational boundaries and constraints. These definitions of success extend beyond the traditional external measures of profit and business growth to include internal measures, such as personal growth, professional development and skill development.

Hence, this article suggests that practical research on identities, in accordance with the notion of identities as gendered, should recognise individuals' dominant thoughts concerning the actual empirical phenomenon studied, e.g. entrepreneurship. Within different mental spaces the possibilities to act are different, both because the reactions from the environment are different and because the dominant thought structures within that specific setting are different. One suggested implication of this is that the way in which people conceive of e.g. entrepreneurship

can be as consequential for the entrepreneurial conditions as the material infrastructure (cf. De Geer, 1994; Wahl et al., 1998).

For practical research, this suggests that individually meaningful role-models and governing stereotypes are of interest to grasp when studying identities. Such role-models and stereotypes could be expected to be consequential when the mental spaces in which narration takes place are structured, practiced, reproduced and recognised. In the area of entrepreneurship, for example, a lot of stereotypes and institutionalised thought-structures prevail.

Examples of institutionalised conceptions (stereotypes) of entrepreneurship can be drawn from the literature. Entrepreneurial behaviours would include: opportunity seeking, opportunity grasping, 'intuitive' decision-making, effective networking, taking initiatives, doing things in innovative ways, putting 'deals' together imaginatively (harnessing combinations of resources), managing autonomously, convincing others, taking moderate (not speculative) risks, making things happen and seeing things through (Gibb, 1999). Another current way of describing entrepreneurship is a functional way, as the process generating entrepreneurial outcomes (Mosakowski, 1998). Functionally defined entrepreneurship focuses on behavioural inclinations rather than on aptitudes, abilities and skills. As proposed by Mosakowski (1998), creativity, foresight, intuition and alertness possessed by an individual constitute entrepreneurial resources. Such entrepreneurial resources are suggested to influence how an individual is likely to behave but do not necessarily predict how an individual will behave in a specific situation or what will be the result of that behaviour. This challenges the research on direct relationships, e.g. between personality and entrepreneurship, which has indeed demonstrated no consistent results (Low & MacMillan, 1989; Busenitz and Barney, 1996).

As a preliminary categoriation for the analysis of narrative data on entrepreneurial identities and behavior, Stanworth and Curran (1981) classification seems to be workable. Stanworth & Curran (*ibid.*) identify three typical entrepreneurial identities and life styles, which they outlined as:

(1) Artisan Identity: Entrepreneurs with artisan identities consider work satisfaction more important than financial compensation. They recruit new

personnel to their business among peers but want to keep managerial responsibilities for themselves. They have an urge to be independent and self-sufficient. Their businesses are often small and they do not strive for growth.

(2) **Classical Entrepreneur Identity:** Entrepreneurs with classical entrepreneur identities perceive financial compensation and profit as more important than independence and work satisfaction. They recruit based on general principles, and their businesses are larger than those of entrepreneurs with artisan identities. Accordingly they aim at business-growth.

(3) **Manager Identity:** For entrepreneurs with manager identities it is important to get appreciation from subordinates and outsiders for their abilities to perform as business managers. They rarely participate in manufacturing processes, and they tend to consider financial compensation and profit important. Their businesses are commonly larger than those of entrepreneurs with classical entrepreneurial identities and they aim at business-growth.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: GUIDELINES AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Within changing societies, identities become central. This is in line with the social theory approach to the theorising of identity. According to this line of thought, identity really starts to matter when uncertainty increases and tradition loses its hold, i.e. identity becomes a problem as modernity unfolds and less and less seems to be determined by tradition and social structure (Giddens, 1991; Rosehill & Seymour, 1999). This implies that when empirical studies of changing societies are developed, re-definitions of identities are the most important point of focus. Attempting to make sense of, and create security in, a rapidly changing world, individuals face the task of constructing for themselves their biographical narratives (Rosehill & Seymour, 1999). Efforts, at a societal level, to support unemployed people to turn into entrepreneurs thus imply that studies on the construction of entrepreneurial identities are required. For that reason, this article puts forward some practical implications and guidelines for such a study.

Studies of individual accounts, as carriers of the

contextual conditions, have been suggested as a general method to capture translations within specific settings (Czarniawska, 1999; Wåhlin, 1999). A study of narration may be a way to avoid the inclinations by interviewees to answer questions by presenting existing stereotypes, especially as the areas of unemployment and entrepreneurship seem to be full of stereotypes. However, as such stereotypes can be expected to affect translations and transformations of identities, the stereotypes themselves must be dealt with, for example presented as general (i.e. not personal) success stories and/or role-models.

The aspect of time is suggested to be present in individuals' narration. Guidelines for our behaviour in the future cannot be separated from reflective action and history. How an individual remembers a situation and makes sense of it retrospectively influences how s/he makes sense of present activities. Compare this question with e.g. Weick (1995:25-26): "The creation of meaning is an attentional process, but it is attention to that which has already occurred." History is thus regarded as reflections of, and included in, narration that is based on translations and interpretations made by the actors over time. Actors' accounts therefore also include a processual description, however, translated and interpreted by the actors themselves, not by the researcher.

The idea to produce empirical studies on identity transformation through narration is also based on the notion put forward by Bateson (1972) that people tend to focus on issues which are important and unstable. This does not necessarily mean that issues not focused on for the moment should be regarded as unimportant. On the contrary, such issues may be as important, although, stable. This implies that when transformations of identities are focused on, self-narration as a method is motivated.

The presented framework also includes the idea that individual and collective jointly contribute to processes of identity construction. Thus, in empirical studies on identity transformation, it is not only the individuals' cognition and presentations of self that are interesting, but also the environment's reactions to those presentations. Family, friends, former colleagues, neighbours, politicians, the media and the social security system are a few examples of actors (both social and non-human; cf. Latour, 1986) that could be

expected to react in significant ways to presentations of unemployment and/or entrepreneurship.

It has also been suggested (by e.g. Shamir, 1991, Kramer, 1993, Dutton et al., 1994, Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; see above) that people tend to be drawn to situations in which they can present themselves in positive ways. However, as an example, being unemployed or being an entrepreneur can be experienced both positively and negatively, depending on the setting in which such self-presentations are presented. As people can be assumed to support a collection of readings, and correspondingly of presentations of identities, the contexts in which specific identities are presented are critical – especially from an empirical point of view. Self-presentations from different points in time, and from different settings, recount of both situations in which transformations of identities are confronted, and of critical points in time when identities are transformed into others. Accordingly, it has been proposed that studies on identities should consider identities as gendered (e.g. Kanter, 1977, Lindgren, 1985, Sundin & Holmquist, 1989, Cockburn, 1991, Sundin, 1995 and 1998, Wahl et al., 1998; see above).

Shifts of self-presentations are not necessarily unproblematic processes. As identities are confronted especially during times of crisis (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996), it seems that empirical studies on identities in change should include individual explanations of crisis.

In sum, the presented framework suggests that in empirical studies on identity transformations there seems to be some particularly significant focal points to consider in order to grasp the phenomenon. Narratives on at least the following are requested (the examples are from a situation where an unemployed person has started his/her own business, as an entrepreneur):

Personal setting: Accounts on the individual's own life-situation, describing individual concerns and areas of attention.

Critical points in time and space: Recapitulate critical points in time and space; inquiring stories describing shifts of self-presentation, both in specific settings and at specific points in time (e.g. "I'm taking care of the home for the moment."; "I'm unemployed."; "I'm considering to start a new life."; "I'm an entrepreneur.").

Environment's reactions: Recapitulate descriptions of the environment's reactions to

different self-presentations (e.g. "To apply for some economic help while I was unemployed, really made me feel like a second class person."; "My family and friends have been a great support – never letting me down"; "I started to avoid telling people that I was unemployed.").

The gendered identity: Considering stories where gender as such has been meaningful and/or consequential (e.g. "Being the father and the head of the family I had the responsibility for the economic side in our household and did not have much of a choice."; "Being a woman, it seems to be easier to handle such new situations in a flexible way.").

Dominant thought-structures in relation to the actual empirical phenomenon: Considering individually meaningful and consequential stories on unemployment and entrepreneurship (e.g. "Becoming unemployed was actually a relief, I got the time needed to reconsider important preferences in my life."; "Becoming an entrepreneur is less demanding than I thought – now I can do what I want, and especially when I want to do it.").

Governing stereotypes: Considering accounts of success and role models and how they are perceived to have affected own experiences (e.g. "I have always admired N.N.'s work."; "Being unemployed is usually considered as something not really OK, but actually I got a healthy break to think over my life, which I needed anyway."; "Entrepreneurs are told to be so creative, but I admit I copied my business idea from a journal."; "I am very risk averse, not a real entrepreneur in that sense at all.").

Individual interpretation of crisis: Considering stories of individually important and unstable situations, interpreted as crisis.

CONCLUSIONS

This article suggests that identities, viewed as modern institutions, can be empirically studied through narration. This notion is based on the idea that people do not possess one identity or a 'portfolio' of identities from which s/he chooses suitable ones. It seems rather that different aspects of how an individual perceives him/herself and others, depending on time and space and the meaningful associations and relationships the individual is involved in, become visible in and

through narration. Accordingly s/he presents him/herself within that specific pattern of relationships. When time, space or the patterns of relationships change, other aspects of individual identities are recognised and/or exposed, both for oneself and for others. Identity as narration includes the always important individual life-history and corresponding interpretations, put in the individually meaningful context. History is regarded as in narration, implying that self-presentation and other accounts are based on the actor's translations and interpretations rather than the researcher's. Thus, it seems that narration is particularly good as a method to get glimpses of, and to understand, actor-networks from the inside.

This approach is, in a sense, an answer to a quest raised by e.g. Alvesson and Deetz (1996) and Law (1997a); much could be gained for research by conducting empirical studies and by allowing organisational participants 'to say something'. Individual identities are created and recognised within diverse settings, in the realm of distinct patterns of relationships, based on processes of translation by and in particular practices of narration, thus ending up with different interpretations. Hence, the relationships in which people are embedded influence how they define themselves and others, a process in which the relationships are defined, reproduced and changed accordingly. Following a logic of appropriateness, people are regarded as acting based on such translations.

Identities are confronted especially during times of crisis (Sahlén-Andersson, 1996). However, the concept of crisis is always dependent on time (e.g. life-situation) and space (e.g. dominant and meaningful patterns of relationships). The crisis outlined in this article is the deep economic crisis in Finland in the beginning of the 1990s, which it is argued, has resulted in a social and psychological crisis at both macro- and micro-levels. On the macro-level the recession as a crisis can not be questioned. However, on the micro-level individual interpretations of the recession as a crisis may vary. Unemployment as such is not always considered a personal crisis, nor is employment always considered the best alternative. For example, for young parents the domestic sphere may dominate during specific periods in life, implying that a temporary period of unemployment may not be a crisis, but rather a suitable way to handle temporary priorities. Accordingly, to start

one's own business as an entrepreneur is certainly also dependent on more individual considerations than the often assumed 'independent way to earn one's living'.

In this sense, empirical studies of identities as narration are not expected to produce explanations of an *a priori* nature and/or principle character but practical explanations, constructed on 'the inside' by the actors themselves. Such studies also produce a manifold of, rather than unique, explanations. This relates to the question of complexity, discussed e.g. by Law (1997). In a process of labelling phenomena, complexities are lost. Labelling pushes towards simplicity as it tends to make relative fixity. A pressure to enact, to gain knowledge by classification, to turn diversity into singularity and to explicate also the tacit is indeed a dilemma for academic production. Every explanation should, naturally, be well founded. However, a reduction of singular explanations would not necessarily result in what is ultimately sought: a description of the diversity and complexity inherent in the social world. Complexity and diversity are more likely reached by a variety of explanations than by attempts to reduce them. Hence, although every understanding of a phenomenon may imply that other explanations are excluded, the idea of seeing additional explanations as an increase of knowledge, rather than ultimate knowledge, makes academic production valid.

On a societal level, one consequence of the framework here presented could be to consider the following questions: Which actors will, or should, claim rights or responsibilities to influence the presentations of the self that individuals are inclined to support in different settings? How can various actors within societies intentionally attempt to induce readings of personal identities? Based on this framework actors (both individuals and collectives) are co-authors of their own narratives of identities, as well as subject to larger social forces such as transformations of the welfare state. So the designer is no one in particular, and the responsibility is everybody's, as co-writers. Every society and the individuals constituting that society jointly define the boundaries for thinkable life projects and the projects people perceive they can act on. The initial requirement in such a process of translation is a degree of perception. Thus, in changing societies the actors involved would gain from processes in which the thinkable and the

boundaries for the thinkable are openly questioned and consequently re-defined. Such processes may be self-organising through a collective dialogue supported by significant actors in that specific society (e.g. the media, the church, through politicians, in schools, etc.). In that sense, contemporary efforts in Finland and the rhetoric in the Finnish media, for example to support people to become self-employed, can be regarded as steps in the direction to re-define the thinkable for an increasing group of people. However, in order to understand what entrepreneurship is based on, more research is needed for explaining the processes of identity construction and transformation.

REFERENCES

- Albert, S. & Whetten, D.A. (1985): Organizational Identity. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol.7, 263-295.
- Alvesson, M. & Deetz, S. (1996): Critical Theory and Postmodernism Approaches to Organizational Studies. In Clegg, S.R. & Hardy, C. & Nord, W.R. (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*, SAGE Publications, 191-217.
- Ashforth, B.E. & Kreiner, G.E. (1999): How can you do it?: Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review*, 24:3, 413-434.
- Bateson, G. (1972): *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Blomquist, C. (1996): *I marknadens namn. Mångtydiga reformer i svenska kommuner*. Lunds Universitet: Företagsekonomiska institutionen.
- Busenitz, L.N. & Barney, J.B. (1996): Differences between Entrepreneurs and Managers in Large Organizations: Biases and Heuristics in Strategic Decision-making. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 8, 9-30.
- Callon, M. (1986): Some elements of a sociology of translation: Domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc's Bay. In Law, J. (ed.) *Power, action and belief: A new sociology of knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul, 196-229.
- Callon, M. & Latour, B. (1981): Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How actors macrostructure reality and how sociologists help them to do so. In Knorr-Cetina, K. & Cicourel, A.V. (eds.) *Advances in social theory and methodology. Towards an integration of micro- and macrosociologies*. Boston, London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 277-303.
- Christensen, L.T. & Cheney, G. (1994): Articulating Identity in an Organizational Age. In Deetz, S. (ed.) *Communication Yearbook 17*, Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 222-235.
- Cockburn, C. (1991): *In the Way of Women*. London: Macmillan.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1993): *The Three-Dimensional Organization. A Constructionist View*. Studentlitteratur, Lund.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1994): Narratives of Individual and Organizational Identities. In Deetz, S., ed.) *Communication Yearbook 17*, CA: SAGE, Newbury Park, 193-221.
- Czarniawska, B. (1998): Research interests; <http://hem1.passagen.se/basia/interr.htm>.
- Czarniawska, B. (1999): Organizational Translations: From Worlds to Words and Numbers - and Back. Presented at the 1999 International Conference on Language in Organizational Change and Transformation, Columbus, Ohio, 14-17 May.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. & Joerges, B. (1996): Travels of Ideas. In Czarniawska & Sevón (eds.) *Translating organisational change*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 13-48.
- Czarniawska, B. & Sevón, G. (eds.) (1996): *Translating Organizational Change* (eds.), Berlin: De Gruyter.
- De Geer, H. (ed.) (1994): *Skapare, skojare och skurkar*. Stockholm: Timbro.
- Drèze, J. & Malinvaud, E. (1994): Growth and Employment: The Scope of a European Initiative. *European Economic Review*, 38, 489-504.
- Dutton, J.E. & Dukerich, J.M. & Harquail, C.V. (1994): Organizational Images and Member Identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol.39, 239-263.
- Gergen, K.J. (1994): *Realities and Relationships. Soundings in Social Construction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gibb, A. (1999): Can We Build 'Effective' Entrepreneurship Through Management Development? *Journal of General Management*, 24:4, 1-21.
- Giddens, A. (1991): *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hajba, S. (1985): Mies- ja naisyrittäjien persoonallisuus. Helsinki School of Economics, working papers F-133, 25p.
- Heritage, J. (1984): *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Hirdman, Y. (1990): Genussystemet. In *Demokrati och makt i Sverige* (SOU 1990:44). Stockholm: Carlssons Bokförlag.
- Huuskonen, V. (1992): Yrittäjäksi ryhtyminen: Teoreettinen viitekehys ja sen koettelu. (with English summary: The Process of Becoming and Entrepreneur - A Theoretical Framework with Empirical Experiments). Publications of the Turku School of Economics and Business Administration, series A-2:1992, 267p.
- Kanter, R.M. (1977): *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kiander, J. & Widgren, M. (1996): Introduction: The Finnish Economic Crisis of the 1990's. *Finnish Economic Papers*, Special Issue, Yrjö Jahansson Foundation, 9:1, 3-5.

- Kovalainen, A., Simonen, L. & Österberg, J. (1996): Sosiaalipalveluyrittäjän muotokuva. Tutkimus sosiaali- ja terveysalan uusyrityksistä ja vaihtoehtoisista palveluntuottajista. Helsinki: STAKES. Raportteja 194.
- Kramer, R.M. (1993): Cooperation and Organizational Identification. In *Social Psychology in Organizations: Advances in Theory and Research*. J.K. Mumighan (ed.), Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 244-268.
- Kunda, G. (1992): *Engineering Culture. Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Lash, S. & Urry, J. (1994): *Economies of Signs and Space*. SAGE Publications: London.
- Latour, B. (1986): The powers of association. In Law, J. (ed.) *Power, action and belief: A new sociology of knowledge?* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 264-280.
- Latour, B. (1993): On Technical Mediation: The Messenger Lectures on the Evolution of Civilization (Cornell University, April 1993). Lund University, School of Economics and Management, Institute of Economic Research, *Working Paper Series*, 1993/9, 48 p.
- Latour, B. (1996): Accounting for Organisations. Public lecture, 4.3.1996, at the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration, Helsinki.
- Law, J. (1997): Topology and the Naming of Complexity (Draft), *Internet Document*, (Centre for Social Theory and Technology (CSTT), Keele University), at <http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/stt/staff/jl/pubs-JL3.htm>, 12 p.
- Lindgren, G. (1985): *Kamrater, kollegor och kvinnor*. Sociologiska Institutionen, Umeå Universitet.
- Low, M.B. & MacMillan, I.C. (1989): Entrepreneurship: Past Research and Future Challenges. *Journal of Management*, 14, 139-161.
- Malinvaud, E. (1996): Growth and Employment in the European Perspective. *Finnish Economic Papers*, Special Issue, Yrjö Jahnsson Foundation, 9:1, 6-17.
- Mosakowski, E. (1998): Entrepreneurial Resources, Organizational Choices, and Competitive Outcomes. *Organization Science*, 9:6, 625-643.
- Mulholland, K. (1996): Entrepreneurialism, Masculinities and the Self-Made Man. In Collinson, D.L. & Hearn, J. (eds.), *Men as Managers, Managers as men: Critical Perspectives on Men, Masculinities and Managements*. SAGE Publications, 123-149.
- Petäjäniemi, T. (1995): Lama osoitti monipuolisuuden osaamisen merkityksen. *Kauppapolitiikka*, 4:5.
- Petäjäniemi, T. (1997): Kvinnoföretagen ökar. *Hufvudsbladet*, 16.9.
- Roseneil, S. & Seymour, J. (1999): Practising Identities: Power and Resistance. In Roseneil & Seymour (eds.), *Practising Identities: Power and Resistance*, Great Britain, MacMillan Press Ltd, 1-10.
- Sahlén-Andersson, K. (1996): Imitating by Editing Success: The Construction of Organization Fields. In Czarniawska & Sevón (eds.), *Translating organisational change*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 69-92.
- Sevón, G. (1996): Organizational Imitation In Identity Transformation. In Czarniawska & Sevón (eds.) *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 49-67.
- Shamir, B. (1991): Meaning, Self and Motivation in Organizations. *Organization Studies*, 12:3, 405-424.
- Stanworth, M.J.K. & Curran, J. (1981): Growth and the Small firm – an alternative view. In Gorb, P., Dowell, P., Wilson, P. (eds.): *Small Business Perspectives*. London.
- Sundin, E. (1995): Inledning. In *Pengama och livet*, Stockholm: Närings- och teknikutvecklingsverket Nutek, B 1995:3.
- Sundin, E. (1998): *Män passar alltid? Nivå- och organisationsspecifika processer med exempel från handeln*. Rapport till utredningen om fördelningen av ekonomisk makt och ekonomiska resurser mellan kvinnor och män. SOU 1998:4.
- Sundin, E. & Holmquist, C. (1989): Kvinnor som företagare - osynlighet, mångfald, anpassning - en studie. Malmö: Bäcklunds Tryckeri Ab.
- Uusitalo, L. (1995): Laman vaikutuksia. *Kotitalous*, 5-6:4.
- Wahl, A. & Holgersson, C. & Höök, P. (1998): *Ironi & sexualitet. Om ledarskap och kön*. Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag.
- Weick, K. E. (1995): *Sensemaking in Organizations*. SAGE Publications, Inc., London.
- Wählin, N. (1999): Organisering av rekryteringsdiskurser och självorganisering genom berättelser. En studie av reflexivt identitetsskapande i arbetslivet. Paper presented at the '15:e Nordiska Företagsekonomiska ämneskonferensen', August 19-21, Helsinki, Finland.
- Vähätalo, K. (1994): Lama ja pitkäaikaistyöttömyyden uhka. *Työpoliittinen aikakauskirja*, Helsinki: Töyministeriö, 37:14-18.
- Åkerberg, A. (1998): Meanings of relationships in knowledge-intensive work contexts. *Doctoral thesis*, 226 p., publications of the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration, no. 70, Helsinki.