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IDENTITY WORK AND THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING ENTREPRENEURIAL IDENTITY (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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≈ INTERACTIVE PAPER ≈

IDENTITY WORK AND THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING ENTREPRENEURIAL IDENTITY

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Principal Topic

Identity research in entrepreneurship has focussed on personal identity as one's sense of self, on identity as in some sense the fixed reference point around which individuals engage in entrepreneurial activities and roles, and on identity as a covariant of outcomes and processes of interest. Here we argue for three shifts of emphasis. First, we focus on identity as a social as well as a personal construct. Second, we consider identity as dynamic and fluid rather than as a (relatively) fixed and unchanging feature. Third, on the basis of this, we concentrate on the process through which entrepreneurial identities are formed and shaped, through identity work, and argue that only by understanding the dynamics of identity formation is it possible to relate identity to entrepreneurial outcomes.

Method

We adopt a qualitative single case study research design, in an early-stage, owner-led company. Data were collected from a woman-led venture in multiple episodes over approximately an 18-month period (2010-2012) by overt observation of seven leadership programme residential workshops, participation in inter-company visits and action-learning sets, semi-structured and informal interviews, and post-program interviews focused on her experiences of the leadership development programme and exploring key elements in her life history. Data are being analysed using a grounded theory framework.

Results and Implications

In discussing entrepreneurial identity there is a disjoint between the generic socially-accepted view and the entrepreneur's self-image. Identity work in this case is something implicit, not deliberately, systematically and explicitly engaged in. Third, the development of self-identity is based on pulling together several social identities in an ongoing process of discourse between self and other. The development of entrepreneurial identity is driven at least in part by a desire for social legitimacy and acceptance. In considering entrepreneurial identity and identity work we should focus less on states (things as they are) and more on process (by which things come into being), and shifting from the static analysis of identity to the process of identity formation, from analyzing social identity to understanding self-identity as a social construction, and from identity per se to the discourse of identity work.

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