UNDERSTANDING THE “WOMAN ENTREPRENEUR” IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: EVIDENCE FROM TWO DIFFERENT SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

Beldina Owalla  
*Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden, beldina.owalla@phdstudent.hhs.se*

Carin Holmquist  
*Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden*

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Beldina Owalla, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden
Carin Holmquist, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden

Principal Topic

The concept of identity has been widely researched in the social sciences. More recent focus in the entrepreneurship field is driven by the fact that entrepreneurial identities impact subsequent behavior and decisions (Alsos et al. 2016; Fauchart & Grueber, 2011). Identity construction can be viewed as a combination of self-determination (agency) and determination imposed by others (structure) (Garcia & Welter, 2013), with the “entrepreneur” identity reflecting societal expectations (Brush & Gale, 2015). However, the construction of the “entrepreneur” identity mainly as a masculine identity (Ahl, 2007; Smith, 2010), adds to the complexities that arise for women developing an entrepreneurial identity (Bjursell & Mellin, 2011). Women entrepreneurs are expected to conform to masculine norms in their roles as entrepreneurs and to feminine norms in their social roles as mothers, wives, daughters etc. (Chasserio et al. 2014). A society's gender role ideologies will therefore determine the level of normative support women entrepreneurs receive (Baughn et al. 2006). Nevertheless, few studies view identity as a problematic concept, and those analyzing the importance of the socio-cultural context for the identity construction process are equally scarce (Ashe & Treanor, 2011; Leitch & Harrison, 2016). Drawing on identity theories and the concept of identity work, our study contributes to this limited knowledge by analyzing how the identity construction of women entrepreneurs in Sweden and Tanzania is influenced by the socio-cultural context.

Method

An inductive multiple case study approach was used, with a total of 56 female entrepreneurs being interviewed in Sweden and Tanzania. In order to facilitate the qualitative analysis process, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, before being analyzed using the MaxQDA coding software.

Results and Implications

We identify five types of women entrepreneurial identities namely: born, know how, missionary, transition and solution seeker entrepreneurs. Second, we find that women construct their entrepreneurial identities as either central or salient to their self-identity, which influences their perceptions and behavior. Third, we also find that the level of influence from contextual factors depends on the type of entrepreneurial identity. We highlight the need for practitioners to consider the heterogeneity of women’s entrepreneurial identities when organizing training initiatives.

CONTACT: Beldina Owalla; beldina.owalla@phdstudent.hhs.se; (T): +46-8-736-9577; Stockholm School of Economics, Saltmättargatan 13-17, SE-113 83, Stockholm, Sweden.