

∞ SUMMARY ∞

GENDERED ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE FINNISH STUDENTS' NARRATIVES –  
A SOCIAL SEMIOTICS APPROACH

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**Principal Topic**

This study focuses on how the meanings linked to the concept of entrepreneurship are “gendered” in our culture. According to Gherardi and Poggio (2002), gender may be viewed as a social practice, or rather as a set of practices which jointly help define to the relations between men and women. Here the meanings related to gender are analysed by using the social semiotics and narrativity approach and employing the theoretical concepts “*interpretative repertoire*” (Potter & Wetherell 1987) and the foucauldian concept of “*subject position*” (Willig 2001). In this study these “gendered” meanings are collected from the Finnish students from local high schools, polytechnics and the University of Vaasa. The research question is: How female and male students construct the gender in their narratives related to entrepreneurship?

In this study the theoretical construct “*interpretative repertoire*” is defined as a system of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events, and other phenomena (Potter & Wetherell 1987). The main interest here is how gender is constructed with words out of various, possible resources (some are included, some omitted) related to entrepreneurship and how these constructs might have practical consequences in our daily lives, for instance, in the orientation towards entrepreneurship as a possible career option. The concept of *subject position* means that every discourse offers a subject a limited amount of positions of which he/she has to take his/her position. Positioning is not a matter of subject choosing his/her position but a way of “seeing the world” or “at being in the world” what the discourse offers as reality” (Willig 2001: 107).

**Methodology**

Data collection (narratives) was done by using the *role-playing -method* (Eskola 1991; Eskola & Suoranta 1998; Hytti & Kuopusjärvi 2004) during the autumn 2004 and the spring 2005. The underlying assumption considering the method is that individuals are able to imagine, observe, analyse, and interpret different situations and realities although they do not have any direct experience of them. One main advantage of this method is that it brings up stereotypic ways of thinking and “cultural images” about certain topic (Alasuutari 1996: 65) in the situation where the story-tellers do not have experiences about the topic (here entrepreneurship). In the role-play -method the students were provided a short frame story: “*It is the year 2008 and you have been building up a new business. Imagine yourself in the future and write a 3-4 page story about how your business started, what happened next, and how the story continued until the present situation. Describe what kind of action and actors were involved in the events along the story*”.

A total of 180 narratives were gathered. The actual data for the study consisted of 162 stories (2-4 A 4 -pages); 18 stories did not meet the criteria of a narrative (i.e. they were too short or

did not include the three parts according the definition of narrative). 96 stories were written by female students and 66 by male students.

### Results and Implications

The results indicated that there are certain similarities and differences between female and male narratives linked to entrepreneurship. In the major part of the both female and male stories financial difficulties or insecurity about the profitability of the business were in a central position. The possibility of failure and risk were associated with business activities. The basic storyline was that with hard work and help from the close friends one can survive. The stories were mainly traditional “small business stories” without considerable successes or growth-orientation. In both male and female stories the “cooperative repertoire”, doing business with close friends as a team, was favoured on every study level.

When it comes to differences between the male and female narratives, most of the female students described traditional “female businesses” such as shops (especially clothing) or traditional service company (restaurants and cafes) as their typical businesses. The main difference in the stories was that female students tended to see themselves in assisting roles with their husbands in the family business (family repertoire) in local area. Active and autonomous subject positions linked to independent business planning and management were rare. In the male students’ stories the female was mentioned as having a role in the business only in two stories (out of 66). Male businesses were also more growth oriented in typical “male business areas” such as ICT – sector. In sum, one can state that these narratives did reproduce culturally deeply rooted images of female and male doing their entrepreneurial career.

Based on this study, we suggest that social semiotics tools could be valuable when identifying these gender-linked (usually hidden) meanings. In practice, gender as social phenomenon should also be brought into question in entrepreneurship education and training. The first objective would be to arouse discussion about these meanings related to gender and reflect on these meanings with the students. For the entrepreneurship education this “*reflective pedagogy*” would mean supervision-type of, long-term processes by which one might have access to these meanings related to “gendered entrepreneurship”.

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