

## Leaving the public sector for a new private venture - creating context from a gender perspective

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### Principal Topic

This paper deals with the issue of entrepreneurship and new venture creation. More specifically, it is about women, who have left their jobs in the public sector and started a new venture within the same professional field as their former employment. We perceive leaving a job in the public sector and starting a new venture as an entrepreneurial act in the sense that the norms and values of the public sector do not always support local initiatives. Previous research has shown that the received view of entrepreneurship and gender has a tendency to recreate women's subordination. Even attempts to apply a gender perspective contain the potential hazard of recreating what we want to challenge. The question then arises if it is at all possible to approach entrepreneurship and gender without recreating the received view in the field. Our conclusion is that by acknowledging the fact that there are multiple narratives to be told, there are also several ways to contribute to our knowledge about entrepreneurship and gender. The intention here is to widen the concept of entrepreneurship to also include nuances that otherwise run the risk of being neglected.

The theoretical basis is a discussion about the ways that norms and conceptions of entrepreneurship affect women who are entrepreneurs, how they perceive their roles as entrepreneurs considering that entrepreneurship is a male gendered concept (Ogbor, 2000).

The subordinate position in society of women who are business owners, is recreated by means of various strategies, such as ignoring similarities and exaggerating differences between women and men. Another strategy is to describe women who are entrepreneurs as exceptions; e.g. they are not like women in general. They are different in some way. Yet another practice is to distinguish between 'typical' and 'extraordinary' women who run their own businesses. The typical ones are women with small businesses that make small profits in industries traditionally occupied by women. The extraordinary ones - and hence untypical - direct profitable enterprises in industries traditionally occupied by men, which is what is generally thought of as typical businesses. (Ahl, 2002) However, several studies suggest that there are more similarities than differences between sexes considering personality and psychological factors (e.g. Sexton and Bowman-Upton 1990/2006), or that differences are caused by business and industry choices (Holmquist and Sundin 2002).

### Methodology/Key Propositions

This paper is based on the results from a study that describes the experiences of 15 Swedish entrepreneurs, all women with an occupational background in the public sector. They now operate their own businesses within their professional fields. The interviews were open ended, lasted for 60-180 minutes and were transcribed to word documents. The entrepreneurs were asked about their time as employees in the public sector, their reasons to start a company, the time during the start, their roles in their companies, how they perceive the roles, and influences from external actors. The analysis of the empirical data was conducted by searching for recurrent themes in the text and structuring the themes into more aggregated categories. The categories cover topics like; the early restrictions felt as an employee, the current restrictions felt in the new venture, and creating a context for the new venture.

### Results and Implications

The entrepreneurs have left their jobs in the public sector because they perceived that they were not allowed to develop their ideas. Even if the entrepreneurs now run their own businesses they still feel the need to distance themselves from their former workplaces. The experience from the time as an employee is used to legitimise the current venture. Starting a new venture was not an objective in itself but a way to develop the

professional identity. The entrepreneurs describe the hesitation and struggle that lies in the process of seeing themselves as managers and business owners.

We perceive the entrepreneurs as both anarchists and organizers (Johannisson 2005). A desire to work on their own terms explains the start of a company. Starting a company can be considered as a break against behavioural patterns and the entrepreneurial act includes a destruction of the existing order and realization of new ways to organize their new business.

The entrepreneurs' stories contain both a recreation of classical hierarchical structures and a construction of identities on their own terms. Accepting and striving for a role as a manager is an example of recreation. On the other hand, the entrepreneurs also create their own context of what it means to lead a new venture. The construction of identities on their own terms is illustrated by going in and out of roles and by making their own interpretations of management.

There are signs of resistance against the hierarchical structures that surrounds the roles of an entrepreneur and a manager that reveals the interplay between gender and management (Lindstead et al, 2005). To choose not to call oneself a manager, going in and out of roles and redefining concepts are illustrations of that. Moving in and out of roles is a way to deal with this situation and to control the process of creating a new venture. It is a way to avoid the risk of creating a conflict between being a woman and being an entrepreneur.

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