

THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF LICENTIATE OF ENGINEERING

**Negotiating Multiple Identities at Work:**  
The Case of Academic Entrepreneurship

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# Negotiating Multiple Identities at Work: The Case of Academic Entrepreneurship

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how individuals negotiate multiple work-related identities with special emphasis on the combination of entrepreneurship and another occupational role. A growing share of the modern workforce is made up by individuals who do not settle for a single-occupation career but instead opt for more flexible and diverse working arrangements, often combining entrepreneurship with an existing work role. When establishing identity, transition points are central since novel situations and experiences challenge the sense of normality by placing new and sometimes conflicting demands on identity. However, while a lot is known about permanent transitions from one occupational role into another, less is known about how individuals make sense of having multiple work-related identities where transitions between the two are frequent. The current thesis explores this under-researched and increasingly common phenomenon through a qualitative empirical study and two systematic reviews of relevant literatures. The empirical work is conducted within the context of academic entrepreneurship, which is arguably a case where the challenges of holding multiple work-related positions is especially salient. Some of the key findings in this thesis show that, counter to existing studies that highlight role segregation as the way to reduce work identity ambiguity, academic entrepreneurs purposefully, and sometimes strategically, enact their two identities of entrepreneur and academic at the same time. Moreover, by selectively identifying with concrete practices and work activities across traditional role boundaries they shift the level of identification from the role, as a unitary entity, to its constitutive parts.

**Keywords:** Work identity, role transitions, multiple identities, academic entrepreneurship

## **List of appended papers**

### **Paper I - Identity work at work: How academic entrepreneurs craft work identity**

Bousfiha, M. and Berglund, H.

Presented at MOC-TIM conference in Zürich, Switzerland (June 2017)

### **Paper II - ‘What I do defines me’: Exploring entrepreneurial identity as an occupational identity**

Bousfiha, M. and Williams-Middleton, K.

Working paper

### **Paper III - Entrepreneurship as design: A literature review and typology**

Berglund, H., Mansoori Y., and Bousfiha, M.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at EURAM conference in Warsaw, Poland (June 2015)

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## **1. Introduction**

The nature of work is undergoing dramatic shifts in contemporary society. A growing share of the modern workforce is made up by multiple job holders and independent knowledge workers who refuse to settle for a single-occupation career and opt instead for more flexible and diversified working arrangements (Abraham et al, 2017). Work is increasingly multifaceted and role plurality and complexity are becoming its defining features (Caza & Creary, 2016). Since most individuals spend a large portion of their life working—and since work constitutes a prominent site for identity formation (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Van Maanen, 2010; Gini, 1998)—the changing nature of work will also influence the meanings and identities derived from work.

Recent evidence suggests that among multiple job holders, a significant portion are hybrid entrepreneurs who combine self-employment with an existing work role (Schulz, 2017). Far from being an “all or nothing” shift from one role to another (e.g. Hoang & Gimeno, 2010), entry into entrepreneurship happens gradually through intermediate phases where both work roles coexist with each other (Folta, Delmar, & Wennberg, 2010). During this process, individuals have to alternate frequently between their multiple work roles (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Transitions like these are fraught with unforeseen and irregular experiences that disrupt the sense of normality and place new, sometimes conflicting, demands on identity (Van Maanen, 2010).

Unfortunately, there are not many studies at the intersection of entrepreneurship, identity and work-transitions. Existing scholarly work tends to prioritize full time entrepreneurs and their identities over people who engage in entrepreneurship in addition to an existing work role. In general, very little attention has been paid to identity management by individuals who transition frequently between work roles belonging to different occupational domains. Existing research on such micro-transitions instead tend to focus on transitions between work and non-work domains (e.g. family and home) (e.g. Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Nippert-Eng, 2008), or between work-related roles within the same organization (e.g. boss and subordinate) (Ashforth et al, 2000).

Constructing and managing an entrepreneurial identity in parallel with an existing occupational identity is thus an under-researched and increasingly common phenomenon that may also be reflective of a more general trend of individuals holding multiple jobs with potentially conflicting demands on their work identity. Entrepreneurial work is uniquely multifaceted (cf. Lazear, 2002) and uncertainty-facing (Saravathy, 2009), and perhaps as a consequence, entry into entrepreneurship is not characterized by a formal socialization process. This stands in stark contrast to most work identity related research, which has focused on conventional jobs with fixed employment terms, formal job responsibilities, and cultural conventions and codes specific to the occupation (e.g. Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann; 2006, Ibarra,1999). Thus, a close examination of how entrepreneurship is combined with an existing work role can not only yield theoretically and practically interesting results, these results may also become relevant for a larger portion of the workforce of the future.

My empirical focus will be academic entrepreneurship. Since science and entrepreneurship are commonly seen as radically different—not least in terms of how knowledge is produced, validated, and utilized— and since the normative and practice-related differences that separate them are said to be substantial (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), academic entrepreneurship is arguably a case where the challenges of holding different work-related positions is especially salient.

### 1.1 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theoretical landscape within which the thesis is positioned. Chapter 3 outlines methodological choices and chapter 4 provides a brief summary of the appended papers. Chapter 5 integrates and builds upon the findings of the appended papers in order to suggest elements of answer to the research question and finally Chapter 6 outlines avenues for future research.



## 2. Literature review

The aim of this chapter is to provide a general overview of theories of identity, role transitions, and identity in entrepreneurship research. It presents the most significant contributions and highlights the research gaps that emerge at the intersection of these research streams.

### 2.2 Theories of identity

Theories of Identity trace their roots back to the work of Charles Horton Cooley (1902) and of George Herbert Mead (1934) who both considered the self to be a product of social interaction. Cooley's metaphor of the "looking glass self" suggests the decisive influence of how others see us on who we become and how we define ourselves. This connects to Mead's famous characterization of the "I" and "Me" describing the ability of the individual self to become reflexively aware of itself through interaction with others. Over time, a number of identity theories have been developed to explain the social basis of the self, with *social* identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and *role* identity theory<sup>1</sup> (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000) being the most prominent ones. While *social* identity theory (SIT) finds its roots in the psychological side of social psychology, *role* identity theory (RIT) takes a more sociological perspective on identity. Attempts have been made to elaborate a perspective that combines insights from both theories (e.g. Ashforth, 2000; Stets & Burke, 2000). Here the self-concept is conceived of as a multifaceted construct comprised of a multitude of identities whose levels of salience vary depending on the individual and the situation (Ashforth, 2000)

The basic idea in *social* identity theory is that an individual's self-definition is a function of the defining characteristics of the social category to which one feels one belongs (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). People are considered to have a repertoire of such category memberships or social identities. A social identity is therefore, defined as that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from belonging to a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to such belonging (Tajfel, 1978). Having a particular social identity means being like others in the group and behaving in concert within the group. Key to social identity is, therefore, uniformity of perceptions and behaviors among group members (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity represents the collective aspect in one's self concept as a prototypical member of a group or a social category. This self-representation reflects membership in valued social groups and puts great importance on in-group cohesion (Brewer & Gardner, 1996)

The basic idea in *role* identity theory is that an individual's self-definition is derived from their roles in society and the behavioral norms and meanings that others attach to those roles (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980). The purpose and meaning of a particular role relies on the web of complementary roles within which it is embedded (Biddle, 2013); the role of teacher is meaningless without the complementary role of student. As Stryker and Statham note, "To use the term role is necessarily to refer to interaction" (1985: 323). Thus, a role-based self-definition

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<sup>1</sup> We employ the term role identity theory for clarity of writing even though it is usually referred to as identity theory (cf. Stets & Burke, 2000)

is grounded at least partly in a web of interdependent roles (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) such as entrepreneur-mentor, supervisor-subordinate etc.

## 2.2 Identity salience

It is widely acknowledged that individuals have multiple identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Nevertheless, they are neither equally valued nor enacted all the time. Instead, they vary in accessibility and salience (Marcus & Kunda, 1986). Some of these identities are enacted more often in a broad range of situations, while others become salient only in specific circumstances. According to role identity theory, salience is the probability that a given identity will be invoked in a given situation (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Multiple identities are ranked in a “salience hierarchy”. The higher salience an identity has relative to other identities within the self-concept, the greater the probability that behavioral choices will be consistent with and reflect that given identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Drawing on ideas from both IST and RIT, Ashforth (2000) argued that salience of an identity is determined by two factors: the identity’s subjective importance and situational relevance. A subjectively important identity is one that is highly valued by the individual and considered to be core to her sense of self. A situationally important identity is one that is socially appropriate to a given situation. Subjective importance is determined by internal preferences, while situational relevance is cued by external expectations and norms. An identity is salient when both dimensions are high.

The notion of a salience hierarchy suggests that an individual can only activate one identity at a time. This implies that as one identity becomes salient, the others necessarily become less so. However, Ashforth & Johnson (2001) argue that it is rather unlikely that individuals would suspend and ignore their other identities when one of them is salient. They suggest that, at times, multiple identities need to and can be salient simultaneously. A case in point is provided by recent studies that examine cases where many, often contradictory, entrepreneurial identities are concurrently activated (e.g. entrepreneur as dependent and embedded while also solitary and alone) (Clarke & Holt, 2017). In this case, the authors argue that confining entrepreneurial identity to any singular and dominant aspect will limit our capacity to fully understand entrepreneurs’ ability to live with and absorb complexity and ambiguity. The composite character of entrepreneurial identity, can therefore both complicate as well as facilitate the identification process for individuals who need to recurrently transition from one work role to entrepreneurship.

## 2.3 Role transitions

Work role-transitions and career shifts can induce profound changes in one’s identity (Hall, 2002). Hughes (1957) argued that as individuals learn about the new work they need to accomplish, they also construct new self-conceptions. Recent scholarly works have increasingly started to examine how individuals construct and negotiate their identities to match the demands of their newly assumed roles. Pratt et al. (2006), for example, showed how medical residents adapted their identities when they experienced a misalignment between their changing work activities and who they are. Ibarra (1999) similarly explored how professionals transitioned into more senior roles by observing role models, experimenting with possible

images of themselves and then selecting or discarding a particular identity based on perceived social feedback.

Nicholson (1984) provided a framework for tying work role transitions and identity by examining how and under what conditions identities change as people transition into new work roles. Depending on the job conditions, individuals can either change their role, change their identity, change both, or conserve both. Building on this framework, Pratt et al. (2006) found that medical student who were unable to change their working environment and tasks instead focused on customizing their own identity to accommodate and fit with the work they were forced to do.

In another treatment, Ashforth (2000) distinguished between two main types of role transitions: macro role-transitions and micro role-transitions. The first type describes infrequent and rather permanent changes between sequentially held roles, such as when one exists an old professional role or organization to enter a new one (e.g. Ibarra, 1999 or Breyer and Hannah, 2002). The second type denotes movements between simultaneously held roles where entries and exists tend to be temporary and frequent. (e.g. being a tough police officer at work and a loving father at home). It is worth mentioning that the current thesis examines micro role-transitions in the work domain only.

#### 2.4 Entrepreneurship and identity

Inspired by economic and psychological perspectives, part of the entrepreneurship literature has long conceived of an individual's behavior as mainly determined by personal characteristics (Gartner, 1988). This led to an emphasis on specific traits and dispositions that were said to characterize entrepreneurs, something that reinforced the idea of entrepreneurs as extraordinary and heroic figures (Hytti, 2005). Today, an emerging consensus in the literature argues that richer insights can be generated by studying entrepreneurship as a dynamic and situated experience (Welter, 2011). Instead of looking at the individual as a fixed collection of characteristics, the identity construct offers a conceptual bridge between the psychology of the individual and the context in which he/she is embedded (Brewer, 2001). Ireland & Webb (2007) went so far as to claim that "in many ways, entrepreneurship is a process of identity construction. Entrepreneurs establish ventures based on and driven by self-identities" (p:916)

The literature that exists at the intersection of entrepreneurship and identity can be generally categorized into two camps: one that regards identity as stable and enduring, and another one that views identity as fluid and in a process of becoming (Brown, 2005). According to the latter stream of research, identity is neither created internally in the entrepreneur's mind, nor externally by the structure of society but constructed dialogically between entrepreneurs and others in everyday interactions and conversations (Hytti, 2005). This view of identity as a process of "*becoming*" (Giddens, 1991) instead of a state of "*being*" shifts focus from categorizing entrepreneurial identities per se to explaining the process behind their formation (Leitch & Harrison, 2016). The dichotomy between "*becoming*" and "*being*" also reflects the distinction between, on the one hand, viewing the self as a holistic gestalt where the frontiers around each identity meld into a rich and transcendent whole and, on the other hand, viewing

the self as compartmentalized and consisting of bounded identities that could be either overlapping or conflicting with the ability of individuals to move from one to the other (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001).

Within these two camps, different conceptualizations of entrepreneurial identity have been advanced. Each of these conceptualizations draw from a different theoretical tradition. Some examined entrepreneurial identity through the lens of role identity theory (e.g. Murnieks & Mosakowski, 2007; Mathias & Williams, 2017; Cardon et al., 2009), others adopted a social identity theory perspective (e.g. Fauchart & Gruber; 2011; Alsos, Clausen, Hytti, & Solvoll, 2016) while others argued for combining both theoretical lenses (e.g. Powell & baker, 2014, 2017; Gruber & MacMillan, 2017). A separate stream of research adopted a social constructionist stance and relied on postmodernist ideas to discuss entrepreneurial identity construction and negotiation (e.g Warren, 2004; Down & Reveley, 2004; Jones et al., 2008; Watson, 2009). Paper II offers a more detailed account of the literature on entrepreneurial identity.

## 2.5 Synthesis and research question

The general purpose in combination with the literature review points to two related issues where more research is needed. First, most research on work related identity has focused on permanent macro-transitions, thus overlooking the temporary and frequent micro-transitions of people who simultaneously hold multiple roles, including the potentially quite different implications this has for how individuals develop work identities. Second, most contributions that target the intersection of entrepreneurship and identity focus on the identities of full time entrepreneurs, with only very few scholars examining the simultaneous engagement in entrepreneurship and another occupational role. Taken together, I believe that a deeper understanding of how these two roles combine, at the level of concrete practices and work activities, can help us understand how individuals make sense of their multiple work identities. The present thesis is an attempt to tackle this issue by trying to answer the following overall research question: *"How do individuals negotiate their multiple identities at work when frequently transitioning between an existing occupational role and an entrepreneurial one?"*

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter describes the methodological choices made when sampling, collecting, coding analyzing data in Paper I. It also presents the methodological process followed to systematically review the literature in paper II and paper III. The current thesis represents an attempt to explore an understudied phenomenon through both a qualitative empirical study and systematic reviews of relevant literatures.

#### **3.1 Paper I**

##### *3.1.1 Sampling*

The main source of data was semi-structured interviews (N=20) with faculty members with different levels of academic experience ranging from post-docs to full professors. All interviewees were affiliated with a leading Swedish technical university. The choice of this particular university as a site of data collection is justified by its historical reputation as a fertile environment for creating research-based ventures both on a regional and national level (Jacob et al, 2003). This allowed us to increase the likelihood of finding rich and interesting subjects to interview. The participants were selected based on whether they had founded a research-based venture in parallel with their academic work at the university. Their levels of venture creation experience ranged from novices to serial-founders of research-based firms (i.e. more than 2 startups). Our main goal was to include a diversified set of academic entrepreneurs, as this would allow us to collect richer and more textured data, not just from the ones who have done it and learned but also from the ones who are still in the midst of it. Interviewees were active in different research areas in natural sciences including biotechnology, computer science and materials science. These fields are characterized by the abundance of technological discoveries that can potentially form the basis of a venture.

##### *3.1.2 Data collection*

In preparation for the study, a series of pilot interviews were conducted to test and refine the interview questions. Before each interview, we search for publically available data about both the researchers and their companies using websites, public interviews, blogs and press releases. This input was used to customize certain questions and enable better contextualization of responses, which helped increase our confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed at the earliest possible time. At the end of each interview, we asked informants to suggest or introduce us to other academic entrepreneur who might have undergone a comparable commercialization process.

Using semi structured interviews made it possible to engage in a conversation whereby informants were given ample opportunity to tell their own story and therefore produce richer data. All interviewees were asked a series of open ended questions, that were complemented with follow-up questions that allowed for probing interesting and novel areas or clarifying a statement. Questions addressed issues such as interviewees' background and experiences with founding and building a startup while still on academic duty, their perceived challenges or opportunities when trying to meet the demands of both roles and finally how they experienced the social feedback generated as a result of their entrepreneurial engagement.

### 3.1.3 Data coding and analysis

Data coding and analysis were inductive in nature. The authors read each transcript line by line and broke down the text into separate meaning units (i.e. one or several sentences that convey a particular idea or meaning). Each unit was then given a label while trying to adhere faithfully to informant terms (i.e. *first order categories*). During this initial phase, the authors frequently went back to listen to the recorded conversations which helped in recalling the atmosphere of the interview and allowed for more accurate labeling. As the coding progressed, the authors started identifying similarities and differences among these categories and began clustering them into a set of more abstract *second order themes*. Connections between the various themes made salient a number of theoretically relevant *dimensions* that help in developing a theoretical explanation of what was going on in the data (Gioia, Corley, Hamilton, 2012). This process was highly iterative in nature and was done in parallel with data collection. When a new theme or dimension was identified inductively, the authors tried to confirm or qualify it in subsequent interviews. As a result, the interview guide evolved somewhat as our analysis advanced. (Huberman and Miles, 2002)

## 3.2 Paper II

Paper II is a systematic review of published work on entrepreneurial identity and the extent to which it has been conceptualized as occupational identity. To do this, the authors combined a systematic, protocol driven search using Scopus with a “snowballing” technique. *First*, the keywords “entrepreneurial identity” and “founder identity” were used to search in both abstracts, titles and keywords of peer-reviewed journal articles, articles in press and book chapters published up to January 2018. No predefined starting date was set to allow for a more comprehensive review of the literature. This enabled us to identify 144 documents that formed the review library. *Second*, we read the abstracts of all 144 articles to remove studies where entrepreneurial identity was not the focal construct. We excluded articles that examined team and firm identity and focused on an individual level of analysis. Concluding this step, 42 articles and book chapters were deemed eligible. They were then divided between the two authors who read them in full, often several times, over a period of 6 months. We soon realized that we could not solely rely on our keyword-based search strategy. A number of evidently relevant articles and book chapters were identified by asking colleagues, sifting through backward and forward citations of selected papers or by simply being alert to serendipitous discoveries. This complementary strategy helped in improving the comprehensiveness of our review.

Two primary forms of analysis were applied. First, we read all retained articles and book chapters to identify the main conversations in the literature. We took note of the key findings of each piece and determined if the concept of entrepreneurial identity was a central or more peripheral theme. To address ‘centrality’ we examined if ‘entrepreneurial identity’ was used in the research questions, contributions and literature reviews of the piece of literature. This

resulted in selection of 30 pieces of literature that, at least partly, examined the concept of entrepreneurial identity as it relates to work activities and interactions.

### 3.3 Paper III

Paper **III** reviews the literature on entrepreneurship as design. The authors went through all 1114 articles published in the three main entrepreneurship journals concerned with entrepreneurship as venture creation—*Journal of Business Venturing*, *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice*, and *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*—going back to the year when Shane and Venkataraman’s (2000) pivotal AMR paper on entrepreneurship as a field of research was published. Starting with a predefined set of inclusion criteria, the authors read all abstracts and reduced the list to 140 papers which were read in full. After a closer reading, 52 papers were retained. The inclusion criteria were based on Simon’s view of design as taking place on interfaces between inner and outer environments (Simon 1996: 6, cf. Garud et al. 2008). The authors interpreted this to mean that papers should be retained if they examined the interface or relation between 1) individuals (e.g. founder or founders, other individuals), 2) organizations (e.g. venture, firm, team), and 3) environments (e.g. product markets, regulations, government institutions). Thus, the review includes papers that addressed the interfaces between individual—organization, organization—environment, and individual—environment. To complement the systematic review, the authors conducted a nonsystematic review of additional scholarly work identified in a more ad hoc manner (e.g. works that the authors were already familiar with or were recommended by colleagues in the field). This came to include academic publications from other entrepreneurship journals and from other fields as well as practitioner-oriented outlets.

## 4. Summary of papers

### 4.1 Paper I

*Title:* Identity work at “work”: How academic entrepreneurs craft work identity

Through a qualitative study, the authors examine how work identities are crafted by individuals who repeatedly transition between professionally distinct work roles. Findings are based on in-depth interviews with academic entrepreneurs, i.e. academics who start companies to commercialize their research while remaining with the university. The paper first highlights the role tensions experienced by these individual and inductively develop three mechanisms for making sense of role plurality and crafting a manageable work identity. These mechanisms contain a mix of defensive tactics aimed at separating the roles, and more proactive and synergy seeking tactics that seek to weave the roles together. This paper contributes to the literature on academic entrepreneurship by extending and nuancing the work of Jain et al. (2009) who noted how academic entrepreneurs tended to protect, prioritize and cherish their core academic identity at the expense of their entrepreneurial identity. The results instead show that both identities were indeed cherished and enacted in a way that allowed them to harness cross-fertilisation effects between their distinct work activities. The findings were in line with Nicholson (1984), by confirming that high levels of autonomy and discretion in both roles allow for identity and work to coevolve and shape each other. Lastly, this study illustrates how practices and work activities can be central for understanding how individuals make sense of their multiple identities at work.

### 4.2 Paper II

*Title:* ‘What I do defines me’: Exploring entrepreneurial identity as an occupational identity

While ‘who is the entrepreneur?’ might be the wrong question, the field of entrepreneurship is increasingly interested in understanding how individuals answer the question ‘who am I’ when engaging in entrepreneurial activity. This paper aims to explore how entrepreneurship has been conceptualized as an occupational identity in existing literature. The authors conduct a comprehensive review of the fragmented literature on entrepreneurial identity, while building from literature on occupational identity, to explore individual identification based on ‘what I do’. Reviewing the literature revealed a number of ways that scholars conceptualized entrepreneurial identity. The authors inductively distinguish between four bases of conceptualization: work role, career, social group and discourse-based conceptualization. The findings highlight how current conceptualizations of entrepreneurial identity suggest that being “entrepreneur” is not yet fully perceived as an occupational identity. Most studies addressing the transition to entrepreneurship from other occupations note the intertwined nature of previously held occupational identities with the newly developing entrepreneurial identity. An entrepreneurial identity is formulated as occupational in nature only when infused with meanings grounded in some other professional expertise.



### 4.3 Paper III

*Title:* Entrepreneurship as design: A literature review and typology

This paper reviews the literature on entrepreneurship as design. The review produced six categories, comprising two distinct positions, that summarized how entrepreneurship as design is conceptualized in the literature: the nature of uncertainty (epistemological or ontological), the role of vision (essential or incidental), the relation to external stakeholders and the environment (transactional or generative), the purpose of behavioral principles (analysis or synthesis), the locus of control (centralized or distributed) and the character of individuals (visionary or docile). Based on these categories, the authors developed two logically consistent ideal types of entrepreneurship as design, termed experimentation and transformation, that appear to be useful for developing both the theory and practice of entrepreneurship as design.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this section is to integrate and build upon the findings of the appended papers in order to answer the question: *How do individuals manage their multiple identities at work when frequently alternating between an existing occupational role and an entrepreneurial one?* The purpose is not to reiterate the results of the individual papers but rather to discuss more general issues. The discussion focuses on the context of academic entrepreneurship studied in paper I and centers on three core issues: simultaneous enactment of multiple identities across work domains, selective identification, and the potential value of the concept of epistemic identity.

### 5.1 Wearing many hats at the same time - simultaneous identity enactment

Literature on multiple identities suggests that individuals are capable of invoking only one identity at a time (cf. Marks & MacDermid, 1996). This is exemplified by concepts such as identity hierarchy (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and the process of self-categorization. The findings in paper I show that when alternating between two work roles, academic entrepreneurs purposefully, and sometimes strategically, enact their two identities of entrepreneur and academic at the same time. For instance, evidence from paper I shows that during teaching, a core academic activity, academic entrepreneurs often enact their entrepreneurial identities as well. They did so by highlighting how they had applied the theoretical content of the course to solve concrete problems in their own startups. The social feedback from students was perceived to be very positive and one interviewee explained that it “earned him a different kind of respect” from his students. This finding connects and builds on Ashforth & Johnson (2001) who—when exploring what makes different identities more or less salient to individuals—suggested that the metaphor “which hat to wear” maybe too limiting and speculated about the possibility of *simultaneous salience* of different identities. Other interviewees noted that highlighting and enacting their academic identity in entrepreneurial situations (i.e. during customer interactions), made them seem more legitimate and trustworthy as entrepreneurs (i.e. academics as perceived as more rigorous, honest and less sales oriented). This example illustrates that while situationally less relevant when interacting with startup customers, the enactment of one’s academic identity can in fact facilitate and even reinforce the enactment of one’s entrepreneurial identity. This thesis therefore suggests that by bringing both identities to bear on their everyday work situations, academic entrepreneurs can benefit from mutually reinforcing effects that both facilitate and enrich work in both domains. Paper II discusses how the literature often conceptualizes entrepreneurial identity as coexisting with a current occupational/professional identity and how it is usually ascribed a peripheral position in one’s self-definition (i.e. supporting the expression of a core occupational identity). I argue that through simultaneous enactment, academic entrepreneurs instead allowed both identities to mutually reinforce each other in a way that recalls Pratt & Forman’s (2000) notion of “identity synergy” or what Ramarajan (2014) refers to as identity enhancement.

This thesis confirms Ashforth & Johnson’s (2001) speculation about the possibility of simultaneous salience of identities. But while they examined the identities of individuals working within one organization, our evidence generalizes this point by showing how individuals holding parallel work roles in distinctly different work domains and organizations

can benefit from the simultaneous enactment of identity. Micro-transitions (Ashforth, 2000) between parallel work roles may in fact be particularly suitable for the study of simultaneous identity salience since such transitions requires invoking multiple identities more often, thus making it more likely for individuals to nurture cognitive associations between them which then ultimately facilitates their simultaneous enactment.

### 5.2 Identity and practice - selective identification across traditional role boundaries

Academic identity has been portrayed in terms of a norm set comprising universalism, communism, disinterestedness and organized skepticism (Merton 1968) that academics internalize making them “inextricably intertwined with their role identity” (Jain et al. 2009: 924). In contrast, studies of academic entrepreneurship often use the inverse of these norms—secrecy, uniqueness, passion and over-optimism—to describe entrepreneurship (e.g. Jain et al. 2009, O’Kane 2015, cf. Mitroff 1974), with the clear implication that entrepreneurial pursuits directly conflict with the traditional academic identity. By starting from a focus on academic and entrepreneurial identities as complete gestalts that are essentially different with little or no overlap, these studies tend to overlook the potential explanations made possible by accepting more intra-role heterogeneity and complexity. Study I thus revealed a more nuanced picture that recognized the complex and nested nature of both identities. Academic entrepreneurs were for instance shown to distinguish between a broad range of activities that they associated with both roles, and instead of a wholesale identification with one role or the other, they selectively related with certain work activities and distanced themselves from others. In other words, respondents shifted the level of identification from the role, as a unitary entity, to its constitutive parts. To illustrate, they were just as happy to delegate product development and sales in the company as they were to delegate mundane lab work and exam grading at the university. Similarly, deciding on the strategic direction of the company was considered just as meaningful to their identities as was formulating and solving advanced research problems. There is clearly a more nuanced and intricate relationship between the two roles than can be understood by seeing them as two holistic and essentially different gestalts. Therefore, I propose that frequent transitions between two work roles lead to selective identification with certain activities, and that this connects identity with a web of concrete practices and substantive work content (cf. van Maanen & Schein 1977, Barley & Kunda, 2001) rather than with a distinct role or social category.

### 5.3 Towards an epistemic identity

Through selective identification, respondents purposefully chose to identify with work activities that were meaningful to them. Most of these were related, in one way or another, to the pursuit of knowledge whether through academic or entrepreneurial work. To understand this dimension of identity, it may be meaningful to use the notion of ‘epistemic identity’ when speaking of individuals’ beliefs, attitudes and values regarding how to develop, justify and use knowledge. What differentiates epistemic identity is the grounding of identity in beliefs, attitudes and values regarding the pursuit of knowledge rather than in the inclusion in a social group or occupational role. Highlighting the epistemic dimension makes possible novel

analyses of identity and identity work that are increasingly relevant in an era characterized by knowledge-intensive work, technological and disciplinary convergence, and increasing demands for industry-academy partnerships. It seems that the ‘moral imperative’ of knowledge creation is maintained by the academic entrepreneur, as they engaged in both entrepreneurial activities and traditional academic tasks. Instead of transitioning from, or maintaining distance to, an essentially different entrepreneurial identity (cf. Jain et al. 2009), a new epistemic identity appears to be formed that manages to integrate both new and old activities. And in this process, knowledge development and utilization, and perhaps curiosity, appear to be central integrative principles.

## **6. Conclusions and future research**

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how individuals construct work identities when frequently transitioning between two work roles that do not belong to the same occupational domain. This was done in the context of academic entrepreneurship since here the challenges of holding different work-related positions is especially salient. Given the rarity of studies at the intersection of entrepreneurship, identity and work-transitions, this thesis is an attempt to explore an understudied phenomenon through both a qualitative empirical study and systematic reviews of the relevant literatures. Some of the key findings in this thesis show that, counter to existing studies that highlight role segregation as the way to reduce work identity ambiguity, academic entrepreneurs purposefully, and sometimes strategically, enact their two identities of entrepreneur and academic at the same time. Moreover, by selectively identifying with concrete work activities across traditional role boundaries they shifted the level of identification from the role, as a unitary entity, to its constitutive parts.

It is well acknowledged that individuals strive to behave in a way that is consistent with the meanings inherent in their identity. Therefore, this thesis argues that a more nuanced and detailed understanding of how academic entrepreneurs craft and reflect on their work identity when engaged in commercialization work has valuable implications for several actors. These include policy makers, university administrators, and technology transfer officers who are particularly interested in encouraging and facilitating the process of research commercialization and the transfer of technologies from the university to the economy and society at large.

In the future, it would be fruitful to dig more into the different mechanisms that individuals use to construct work identities when alternating between two or more work related roles. One interesting direction is to investigate how such mechanisms evolve over time as individuals advance in their career and learn more about the work and about themselves. The idea of simultaneous salience of identities and how it affects individuals’ behavior and understanding of themselves is another research avenue that is worth investigating in more details. Lastly, it would be interesting to explore the concept of epistemic identity as a way to make theoretical sense of the identities of individuals straddling knowledge producing roles.

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