



## **The relatable entrepreneur: Combating stereotypes in entrepreneurship education**

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# The relatable entrepreneur: Combating stereotypes in entrepreneurship education

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## Abstract

Despite an estimated 582 million entrepreneurs globally, stereotypes plague the social cognitive concept of “the entrepreneur,” shaping assumptions of what entrepreneurship is while being far from representative of possible entrepreneurial identities. “Heroic” stereotypes of entrepreneurs (e.g., Steve Jobs or Elon Musk) stemming from the popular media shape the assumptions of students entering entrepreneurship classrooms. These stereotypes are strong and limiting, framing entrepreneurship as attainable only through exceptional skill and talent, and are often characterized by exclusively masculine qualities. Involving identity work in entrepreneurship education can expose the limitations that stereotypes impose on students aspiring to be entrepreneurs and introduce more heterogeneity. The use of narrative cases allows educators to facilitate a threefold approach: (1) raising awareness of stereotypes, (2) creating a structure for more realistic examples and socialization through narrative comparisons and (3) teaching students the basics of identity management for sustaining their entrepreneurial careers. The approach encourages direct conversations about what is—and who can become—an entrepreneur and reveals the limiting beliefs that students may bring with them into the classroom. Such discussion informs the educator on how to foster students’ entrepreneurial identity and empower their identity management.

## Keywords

Entrepreneurship education, identity, identity management, narrative, stereotypes

Increased media attention to entrepreneurship through TV shows, social media and podcasts,<sup>1</sup> has elevated certain entrepreneurs to celebrity-like status. Popularized examples, such as Steve Jobs or Elon Musk, have led to common understandings that position entrepreneurs as extraordinary and heroic (Ahl, 2002; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Bridge, 2017; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Hytti and Heinonen, 2013; Mitchell, 1996; Nicholson and Anderson, 2005). Such media attention, which crafts and reinforces pervasive stereotypes, contributes to the way audiences perceive the legitimacy and success of entrepreneurs in real life (Wheadon and Duval-Couetil, 2019). With individual reporting from personal knowledge of an entrepreneur on the decline (Bosma and Kelley, 2019), “heroic” stereotypes are all the more likely to shape common conceptualizations of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship research supports a view of entrepreneurs as heterogeneous (Alsos et al., 2016): they vary in race, gender, age, personality, background, field, level of experience, etc. (Gartner, 2008; Hamilton, 2013; Hytti and Heinonen, 2013; Jones, 2014; Rumens and Ozturk, 2019). Entrepreneurs are conceptualized in terms of function (e.g. risk-taker), role (e.g. founder), competence (e.g. skilled at business), behavior (e.g. taking responsibility) and performance (e.g. reputable) (see, for example, Casson and Casson, 2013). Entrepreneurs can also be defined by the

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organizational boundaries within which they are situated—for example, academic entrepreneurs (Brennan and Wall, 2005; Jain et al., 2009) or intrapreneurs (Menzel et al., 2007). Nonetheless, as Casson (1982: 1) notes, “the most difficult part of studying entrepreneurship is to define who or what is an entrepreneur.” Despite an emphasis in entrepreneurship research on diversity and distinction, entrepreneurship education often retains more polarized examples in the classroom, referencing high-profile individuals in order to anchor students in a common understanding. The media-shaped “heroic” stereotype intermingles with additional contrived notions of entrepreneurship, thus framing assumptions that students bring with them into the classroom (Farny et al., 2016).

University educators are uniquely situated to influence how students’ future professional identity is formed, as they govern the content and process of learning (Chapman and Pyvis, 2006). Increasingly, education research emphasizes the importance of students being provided authentic experiences, focusing on action and behavior as well as theory and concepts (Trede et al., 2012). With public voices asserting authoritative views that can overshadow the everyday stories of entrepreneurship (Gill, 2017), entrepreneurship educators are challenged to identify more realistic or relatable representations of entrepreneurs, and to determine how to incorporate them into their classrooms. Inviting practicing entrepreneurs from a local community to the classroom or engaging entrepreneurs-in-residence are some common approaches (Mwasalwiba, 2010). Such examples are used to make the role of entrepreneur more tacit and to energize the classroom with stories from real-life experience (Ramani et al., 2018). However, educators need to be mindful of how and when this is done, as such examples may inadvertently aid in reinforcing existing stereotypes, as students seek to align examples with their underlying assumptions (Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011). The intention of the educator in validating alternative representations may be lost on the students, as a new example may be taken as the new definitive type, thus excluding other “types” (Komulainen et al., 2020). Educators may also struggle to legitimize examples alternative to the prominent models idealized in the media (Boje and Smith, 2010) as they face pressure toward academic institutionalization (Loi et al., 2016), which tends to sacrifice contextual diversity and sensitivity (Blenker et al., 2014).

This paper investigates the use of narrative to expose preconceptions students bring with them into entrepreneurship education and to help them develop and manage their own entrepreneurial identity. Two narratives present individuals addressing their identity construction while becoming entrepreneurs as part of a career transition. The narratives are built from transparent and direct citations, which legitimizes the narrative as it is self-reported by the individual acting as (in this case) entrepreneur, rather than by a non-participant (Fayolle et al., 2016). The level of

contextual detail inherent in the narratives also reflects the situated complexity and sensitivity of entrepreneurship, often lacking in other pedagogic forms (Blenker et al., 2014). The paper argues for exposing students to narratives through facilitated discussion along a threefold approach in order to: (1) raise awareness of stereotypes, (2) create a structure for more realistic examples and socialization through narrative comparisons and (3) teach students the basics of identity management for sustaining their entrepreneurial careers. As such, the paper calls attention to the role of narrative in constructing meaning (Wang, 2020), and how its use can prepare students to independently filter socialized stereotypes as they develop their own entrepreneurial identity.

It is important to recognize that identities are complex, and the management of multiple identities happens over a lifetime. This paper is concerned with facilitating identity management at the phase in life when students are transitioning from school to work, recognizing the classroom as an identity-forming place. University educators should understand that facilitating an “entrepreneurial transition is not an end in itself, but a key stage in the development of a professional identity” (Warren, 2004: 33). Because this is a pivotal stage for students, educators have the ability to draw attention to the role of entrepreneurial stereotypes and guide how to build and navigate around them. Through highlighting two women within common premises, we focus the analysis on their different approaches toward adopting (or not adopting) an entrepreneurial identity and the relevance for entrepreneurship educators.

## Theoretical grounding

Educators regard students as “having little experience of, or knowledge about, entrepreneurship and enterprise on entry to university” (Jones, 2014: 245). More specifically, while students may be able to describe what an entrepreneur does, “they don’t know *what it is like to be* an entrepreneur” (Duening and Metzger, 2017: 2, emphasis in original). The lack of experience, limited personal association with someone representing an entrepreneur (Bosma and Kelley, 2019), and the lack of social models that help pin down role identities (e.g., a doctor goes to medical school and works in a hospital) (Williams-Middleton and Donnellon, 2017), may all contribute to reliance on stereotypes. Given that stereotypes of entrepreneurs are commonly characterized by (exclusively) masculine qualities (Gupta et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2013), often also white, middle-aged and from Western cultures, these stereotypes limit the perceived applicability of being or becoming “the entrepreneur” to a diverse set of students (Jones, 2014).

To enable students to become an entrepreneur, research has argued for the importance of including identity construction as part of entrepreneurship education (Donnellon et al., 2014; Metzger, 2017; Williams-Middleton and

Donnellon, 2017). Facilitating identity construction and development involves discussing the existence of multiple identities, introducing the complexity of the self-categorization process and recognizing the potential conflict of an entrepreneurial identity with existing identities.

### *Identity work*

An individual's self-concept can be understood as a structured set of "various identities and attributes, and their evaluations, developed out of the individual's reflexive, social and symbolic activities" (Gecas, 1982: 4). Identities can be generally categorized from an individual perspective (individual or personal identity), in the concept of role, or from a social perspective. Having a particular social identity means being like others in the group and behaving in concert within the group (Stets and Burke, 2000). Role identities are derived from one's roles in society and the behavioral norms and meanings that others attach to those roles (Stets and Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980). While individuals carry multiple identities, each is distinct (Markus and Nurius, 1987) and managed across contexts (Weigert et al., 1986). Each identity carries with it associated emotions, memories, motivations, behaviors, thoughts and contexts that aid individuals in their categorization process (Cantor and Kihlstrom, 1987; Linville, 1985; Showers and Zeigler-Hill, 2003).

These multiple but distinct identities can have an impact on the clarity, strength, development and use of one another (Ashforth, 2001: 295), serving to reinforce, strengthen or complement; or, in contrast, challenge, weaken or threaten. For example, the active presence of one identity may inhibit the activation of other identities (Martindale, 1980). Identities are considered salient if they are considered to "fit" the situation and thus likely to be activated (Stets and Burke, 2000). Salient identities without another conflicting identity present are likely to be more accessible and easier to activate or enact; alternatively, identities that are not as clear or are in conflict with a strong present identity present a greater challenge to enact.

Entrepreneurial processes—for example, founding and validating a business (or model or opportunity)—are emergent (Gartner et al., 1992). Unlike those entering other professions, individuals seeking to become entrepreneurs cannot simply step into one bounded organizational context in which established individuals can represent "possible selves" (Ibarra, 1999), allowing for modeling of a desired professional identity. Instead, one's own entrepreneurial identity is shaped through multiple and overlapping discourses that the individual has to manage (Down, 2006; Gill, 2017). The crafting and managing of identities, or "identity work" (Hytti, 2005; Watson, 2009) helps to frame the intersection of existing identities and the individual's possible entrepreneurial identity. The

possible entrepreneurial identity is negotiated with and can gain recognition through interaction with others (Berglund et al., 2016; Rae, 2005), for example through a role-set (Carsrud and Johnson, 1989; Williams-Middleton, 2013). However, validating the entrepreneurial identity is often tied to the simultaneous entrepreneurial process (Lundqvist et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2012). Because of the emergent quality of entrepreneurship, the possible entrepreneurial identity can lack salience due to tension between existing social imagery of "the entrepreneur" and an individual's self-concept (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007), thus making the identity difficult to activate or enact, or gain recognition for while under construction.

### *Self-categorization of identity*

Self-categorization describes the process through which "an individual sorts selves, based on a perceiver's judgments of similarity among relevant beliefs" (Showers and Zeigler-Hill, 2003: 106). Through the ongoing conscious and subconscious reflexive self-categorization processes, individuals not only make evaluations of their multiple identities but also create pathways for actualizing an identity (Oyserman et al., 2006). This indicates that an entrepreneurial stereotype not only shapes the perception of the possible entrepreneurial identity, but could influence whether or not that possible identity will progress to an actual identity. Because multiple identities collectively form an individual's broader self-concept (Stryker, 1989), even if an entrepreneurial identity were perceived as possible and were held in high esteem, a perceived identity conflict could still impact an individual's overall self-concept. Addressing (and potentially combating) entrepreneurial stereotypes, relative to self-concept, can illuminate (dis)comfort levels with certain elements of being an entrepreneur and point to areas where the new entrepreneurial identity is in conflict with existing identities (Warren, 2005).

Thus, the influence of an entrepreneurial stereotype impacts the self-categorization process because the associated beliefs and perceptions are pinned too closely to the possible identity. The formation of an entrepreneurial identity is, therefore, dependent on the self-categorization process, both in terms of the associations paired with the identity, and in how the self-categorization is enacted in line with those associations. Should a possible entrepreneurial identity form through the close influence of entrepreneurial stereotypes, an individual may disregard working on the identity further under the faulty assumption that their existing identities do not align with an entrepreneurial identity.

### *Narrative as a pedagogical tool*

Narratives have the ability to serve as strong pedagogical tools in the classroom. Narrative traditions aim to

encapsulate and represent the participants' senses of self, as well as the dynamic identities formed by and between life events (Sparrowe, 2005). As narratives illustrate individuals' own understanding of actions and events that contribute to construction of identity (Downing, 2005), their use in entrepreneurship education has been emphasized as they can help make tacit emerging identities which otherwise lack situated boundaries that help define them (Nielsen and Gartner, 2017). Because narratives may have only limited impact when they are perceived to counter what is expected (Hytti, 2005), students can be challenged with making sense of multiple identities (Nielsen and Gartner, 2017) and may revert to established identities when attempting to balance between distinctiveness and belonging (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Due to this tendency, educators face challenges in proactively supporting the identity work of their students.

When developing entrepreneurial identity, narratives allow for associating with metaphors and clichés of "entrepreneurial type" (Down and Warren, 2008), which in turn can be refined when combined with collective sharing of experience, tacit knowledge and reflection in educational settings (Aaltio, 2008). Furthermore, targeted discussions of conceptualizing oneself as an entrepreneur helps students to align intended future identities with existing self-concept (Berglund et al., 2016; Rae, 2002; Williams-Middleton, 2013). The community of students in a like-minded learning space becomes an "identity workspace" in which to build a legitimized self-narrative through practiced re-storying (Harmeling, 2011).

Research also argues for narrative in combination with other forms of identity construction (Donnellon et al., 2014). Narrative use is seen as particularly impactful when combined with experiential learning through the practice of entrepreneurship (e.g., in starting up a venture as part of the education, or engaging in an entrepreneurial initiative) because the individual self-narrative can be combined with symbolism and reference to the process narrative (e.g., the story of the venture). The usefulness of narratives as a pedagogical tool, thus, lends itself to use in both curricular and co-curricular entrepreneurship education settings, ranging from introductory classes to venture development activities.

## Methodology

This paper builds on empirical data from a broader explorative narrative study of 14 new entrepreneurs. A new entrepreneur was identified as an individual who had recently transitioned into starting a new business, alone or together with others—"recently" being defined as no more than 3.5 years before being interviewed. This description aligns with the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor definition of "early-stage entrepreneurs" (GEM, 2017), and was thus seen to validate the selected individuals as representative

for the study. The interview data of two individuals from the initial study are used to construct narrative cases for the purpose of this paper. Prior to being interviewed, individuals were sent an online questionnaire. The 60-minute interviews were semi-structured, with the questionnaire analysis used as the basis for posing specific and descriptively oriented questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The two individuals were selected as cases based on their common codes for "entrepreneurial stereotype" and their similarity to one another (e.g., gender, time as an entrepreneur), which favored comparison and contrasting of their approaches.

A narrative approach allows for the presentation of chronicled events, with the interviewee as "author," providing a way to understand situated and detailed human action (Czarniawska, 1997). The structuring of the narrative follows the oral history and interviewee's personal logic of representation (Czarniawska, 2001, 2004). Narratives not only illustrate past behavior but can also be used to impart exemplar behavior for other individuals connected to the same community (Linde, 1993; Wang, 2020), as the story's transferring power is in its "openness for negotiated meaning" (Czarniawska, 2004: 9). It is on this premise that the narrative cases of the two new entrepreneurs are presented as a means of discussing entrepreneurial identities.

To construct the narratives, the transcribed interviews were analyzed to identify key statements relating to the concept of "entrepreneur." Table 1 presents key quotations that guide construction of the narratives. The interview material includes the participant's own perspectives on conceptions of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial stereotypes and personal accounts of identity alignment and conflict, identity management strategies and the impacts of entrepreneurship on social supports. Quotations from the transcriptions are used to illustrate the understanding of entrepreneurship the interviewee had relative to the way in which they associated this understanding with their existing and also their desired identities.

The selection of the two women as cases for this paper was based on their relative commonalities and distinctions (see Figure 1). Commonalities include: recent transition to being an entrepreneur (9 months, prior to the interview); family members who were entrepreneurs; and previous careers in which they had both creative or enterprising positions and positions in which they felt constrained. Despite these commonalities, the two women reacted differently to entrepreneurial stereotypes, and held different views on what being "an entrepreneur" signifies. The case selection was thus done purposefully to challenge a singular perspective of "the entrepreneur."

## Narrative cases

Figure 1 presents the two female entrepreneurs, with an emphasis on how they are similar and how they differ from

**Table 1.** Selected quotations from the entrepreneurs interviewed.

## Vicky

- Q1 I've got two minds about it because I feel like I'm able to do something that I want to do and pursue something that I want to do because I'm a wife to someone who makes a good living, and that's almost, it's almost embarrassing because there are people out there that are really suffering for their passions and I'm not. So, I almost feel like a fraud. Like, "Okay, you're an 'entrepreneur'." Well, sure. I fit the definition of starting your own business and creating something from nothing. Sure, that's what it is. And we're creating a product, and I developed the website and I've done all these things, but as a woman, I almost feel like it's not . . . there's no risk.
- Q2 It's like the Bill Gates story. He was a kid in his parents' garage. He wasn't doing a lot of risk, so he got to be creative and he got to take a bunch of the risks without really risking too, too much. And he did very, very, very well, but he's not like TOMS Shoes, where he's selling stuff and taking out loans on his credit cards and selling his shoes himself and hawking them, because he has this vision of what he wants to do.
- Q3 So, I do think that there are degrees of privilege that maybe to be a *real* entrepreneur you got to have . . . we have skin in the game. We've thousands of dollars in the game, but 15,000 bucks isn't going to break the bank. It doesn't feel good and it's not my husband's savings that's coming out of my coffers. But I think the more real skin that you have in the game, like the more things that you're really putting yourself at risk for . . . I respect that more.
- Q4 We are female business owners. I mean, we own the business. [ . . . ] That does feel good, to say, "Okay, I'm a woman, and I own a business." So, that part feels good, but yeah, I definitely feel like . . . a *true* entrepreneur should be risking probably more than we are.
- Q5 I do think that part of this is I am privileged that I have a husband who can help, but I'm also hindered by him and his career and where he lives because we have big decisions as a *family*. [ . . . ] My husband's identity hasn't shifted because he married me, and his work identity hasn't shifted either. He hasn't had to make choices that I've had to make, so couple that with being older and my priorities shifting naturally as well, weathering this kind of stuff.

## Rachel

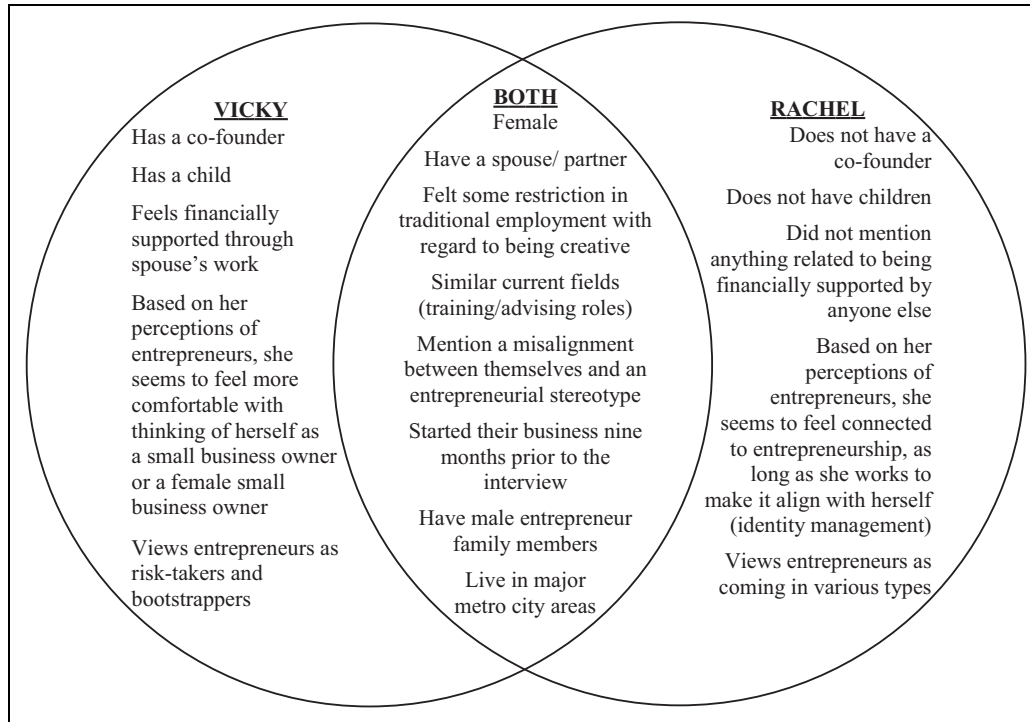
- Q6 I actually used to love that show [*Shark Tank*], and I still do, but I, literally, didn't even want to watch it for two months because I was like, "Ugh, I can't . . ." I even love the podcast *How I Built This*, like absolutely love it, know every episode, but I even stopped listening to that for a month or two because I just wanted the pressures of what everyone else says you should be off of me for a bit.
- Q7 And now, I love it and will listen to [the podcast] and love all that stuff because I've kind of given a little bit of peace to just do my own thing. If you listen to *How I Built This*, my favorite part of it is, you know, "We started off with nothing." You know? Or the people who are super genuine and honest and will be like, "Yeah, it's still tough." Or whatever. Or the ones afterward, where it, you know it's like a new launch entrepreneur, where they kind of talk about their really scrappy story, and how they're still figuring it out. Like those make me feel good.
- Q8 I think just for a while I was just like, I can't stop. I do want to look up to someone as an entrepreneur, but I can't limit myself to just the people I see that are way up there already. And I think that's why I was looking for a women's group or something. I really wanted something that was closer and more relatable to me at that time, and I couldn't find it really.
- Q9 There are all these pressures of like, to be the ideal *cool entrepreneur*, to be like this person you have to go to all these parties, you have to blog in this way, you have to be on Instagram, you have to have all these followers, all these things.
- Q10 But it hit me, and I was like, "Wait, let me just focus on having a great business before I try to make myself this person." It's really not about me; it's about having a great product. That's what I really want. . . . I think I'm just trying to learn as much as I can from other people, but not necessarily follow this exact path of, "Do all these things, and be an entrepreneur superstar."

one another, followed by a more in-depth presentation of their narratives. Despite similarities (e.g., gender, time since transitioning into entrepreneurship, leaving professional environments that did not suit them well), the cases of Vicky and Rachel highlight different reactions to entrepreneurial stereotypes and how this influenced identity construction while becoming entrepreneurial.

*Case 1: Vicky.* Vicky is a mid-career professional who has been working in the education and training fields broadly for several decades. Vicky came from a family of entrepreneurs, with her father, uncle and grandfather all having started businesses. She remembers voicing an interest in owning her own company when she was only 22, and she

even had an opportunity to start a business with a friend in her earlier years of her career. Despite being tempted, she was afraid to leave her work without a guaranteed income. While she spent most of her professional life in traditional employment, there were a few occasions when she engaged in independent consulting work. She worked in a variety of positions and moved across the country before getting married and having a child.

Before the time of the interview, she had been working for years at an educational organization where she had felt fairly settled and autonomous in her work until a change in leadership and the organization's work culture caused her to resign. She did not plan her departure with much notice, and thus left her position without anything else lined up.



**Figure 1.** Common and distinct characteristics of the two entrepreneurs.

She had a spouse who had a position her family could depend on financially, and she had some personal savings that allowed her some flexibility so that she did not need to jump into another position. Upon reflection, she felt as though she could consider a shift into entrepreneurship because she was in a good financial position to do so.

A friend got in touch with her and asked her if she might be willing to start a business with her. Because Vicky had done some consulting work in the past, transitioning into independent work was somewhat familiar to her, and she was thankful to have the opportunity to keep working in an area of interest to her and with a good partner. Her friend was someone like her: a wife, mother and mid-career professional. They bonded because both wanted to work for themselves so that they could set their own schedules and align their life priorities better (e.g., picking their children up from school, going to their children's activities). Vicky also had some caring responsibilities for her mother who lived with her family, so the flexibility of setting her own agenda was a welcome change in her career.

She accepted the offer to partner with her friend, and the two started on the back-end preparations needed to launch their company's products and services months later. Part of the immediacy of their timing was connected to having a client already. When interviewed, Vicky noted having put in a significant amount of time, effort and money into her new venture since starting it 9 months prior. Despite being experienced in her professional field, she felt the new role stretched her in less familiar directions (e.g., marketing).

While she spoke to how she envisioned the work would look 3 years out, Vicky also noted tentative plans to potentially return to traditional employment. At the same time, she was also furthering her education to see what other opportunities that might open up.

One of the many conceptions of entrepreneurship is "someone operating economically at risk" (Bridge, 2017: 53–54), which was an evident belief of Vicky in her narrative. In viewing herself as a financially supported wife (Table 1, Q1 and Q5), she allowed herself to embrace a role identity of being a "small business owner" and a "female business owner" (Table 1, Q4), but she stated that she failed to connect with being an "entrepreneur" (Table 1, Q1–Q4) due to the perceived differences in her circumstances and those she perceived with regard to "entrepreneurs" (e.g. risk-taking). Vicky explicitly identified herself as a woman on several occasions, stating both perceived privileges and perceived challenges related to her gender (Table 1, Q1, Q4 and Q5). She considered herself fortunate to be married to a spouse who could financially support the family. She also felt that being a married woman conflicted with being able to prioritize her initial career goals, and that being a woman in her field was too easy. Because Vicky's business partner is also a married mother with a spouse who can help provide with health insurance and steady income, Vicky felt she was having an entrepreneurial experience through the long hours and through working with a business partner, but was challenged to refer to her activities as "entrepreneurship" because of how comfortable her life was otherwise.

Vicky's framing of her privilege reinforced her own perceived stereotype that entrepreneurs should be risk-takers. Despite her long hours in the first months prior to launching her business, she felt the transition was almost too easy in certain respects, stating that transitions into entrepreneurship should be riskier and more "high stakes" than had been the case for her. For Vicky, the stereotype of the risk-taking entrepreneur was what defined entrepreneurship, making her feel more comfortable describing her new professional identity as a business owner rather than an entrepreneur. Vicky used the word "fraud" when she thought about herself as an entrepreneur (Table 1, Q1). When asked to expand on her working conception of entrepreneurship as risk-taking, Vicky mentioned that she did not feel her professional identity aligned with the risk-oriented type she imagined when thinking of well-known stereotypes of entrepreneurship. Her comments on the founder of TOMS Shoes indicated that Vicky also conceptualized entrepreneurs as "bootstrapping" (Table 1, Q2). At the time of the interview, Vicky had invested \$15,000 USD of her own savings in her company but, because of her household's financial situation, she did not see the investment as high-risk enough to qualify her as an "entrepreneur" (Table 1, Q3). Vicky was highly influenced by existing stereotypical notions of entrepreneurs needing to engage in high-risk situations and to feel the initial hardship of their circumstances (i.e. bootstrapping). Her assumptions of an "entrepreneurial type" did not align with her own existing identities and circumstances, serving as a barrier to seeing herself as an "entrepreneur."

**Case 2: Rachel.** Rachel, a young professional, transitioned to being an entrepreneur with her own service-based company following years in the corporate sector. As a college student, Rachel had always loved the essence of entrepreneurship and having the ability to come up with ideas. However, on graduation, she said she felt like she was doing the responsible thing by filing into a traditional corporate career path, so she worked for a large corporation and rose through the ranks. She noted that her initial approach to life was traditional overall: "get a good job, meet someone, [...] get married..." She noted how she felt that entrepreneurship was very outside of that line of thinking. She also felt as though she never had an idea that she loved for a business, so she kept along the traditional path.

Toward the end of her time in traditional employment, Rachel felt like she was "bursting" out of her role, with a limited ability to learn and grow within the organization. She wanted to explore her interests more professionally, and felt that her work limited her ability to be creative and free to explore her interests. Concurrent with her discontent with her work, within the span of a couple years, Rachel was divorced from a husband who had not been supportive of her entrepreneurial ambitions, moved to a city, paid off all of her student loans, left her corporate position and

started in a transition job at a small start-up. During these years, she also noticed herself gravitating toward some of her entrepreneur friends, even supporting one of them the year before she made the leap into entrepreneurship herself. When the transition job at the start-up also did not suit her, she decided to pursue an idea for a company that she had been thinking about for some time.

She felt optimistic about her aspirations and emphasized her desire to persevere in her work as an entrepreneur, and she actively built her networks to intentionally shape an entrepreneurial type that aligned with her existing identities, including being a woman. In her personal life, Rachel found a new partner who supported her entrepreneurial aspirations. When interacting with a male entrepreneur family member who embodied the typical depiction and accompanying platitudes of being an entrepreneur, she noted that, despite his well-meaning guidance to her, she had to find her own path and fit as an entrepreneur. To build a more like-minded professional community, she joined a co-working space's women's entrepreneurship program to find others who had similar orientations. She even mentioned wanting to give back to these types of programs because she felt as though women often experienced issues with being unvalued due to how they portrayed their confidence and leadership compared to men.

Throughout her transition into entrepreneurship, Rachel engaged in identity reflections that allowed her to protect her alignment with entrepreneurship. She stated in the interview that she felt a distinct difference between how she saw herself and how she viewed the entrepreneurial stereotypes reinforced by the media (Table 1, Q6, Q8, Q9 and Q10). Rachel discussed how she had historically enjoyed watching and listening to media on entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship (Table 1, Q6 and Q7). When starting her new role as an entrepreneur, Rachel felt that the entrepreneurial stereotype made her feel pressured to question herself and her ability to navigate into entrepreneurship. She also intentionally adjusted her consumption of media on entrepreneurship as a means of allowing her assumptions of an "entrepreneurial type" to align with her existing identities, and she even chose to stop consuming entrepreneurship media for a period of time in order to find her own identity as an entrepreneur, devoid of media influence. Rachel noted that she had re-engaged with media about entrepreneurship once she felt more established in her work and entrepreneurial networks, but she said she actively monitored impacts on her identity. She chose more realistic, authentic stories of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship which showed struggle and development throughout the process of being an entrepreneur (Table 1, Q7 and Q8).

Rachel actively grappled with the pressures from comparing herself with how the entrepreneurial stereotypes would approach entrepreneurship, noting that instead she wanted to focus her attention on developing a great business and product (Table 1, Q10). Her active reflections,



intentional network building of like-minded, realistic entrepreneurs and modified consumption of entrepreneurship media served to protect the more favorable, aligned entrepreneurial self-image she was crafting. Like Vicky, her identity as a woman had some perceived conflict with an entrepreneurial stereotype; however, unlike Vicky, Rachel worked to actively modify how she perceived entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. This identity management seemed to be motivated, at least in part, by her desire to be an entrepreneur and for her business to thrive under her direction and leadership.

## Discussion

Entrepreneurial narratives play a significant role in the development of entrepreneurial identity (Down and Warren, 2008). This paper investigates how narrative cases of real-life entrepreneurs can help to break down assumptions about entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship held by students when entering the entrepreneurial classroom. Narrative cases are constructed to differentiate from common entrepreneurial stereotypes, in order to provide students with more diverse stories of real-life entrepreneurs. In addition, the two cases exemplify how the two individuals themselves opted to manage their own entrepreneurial identities relative to stereotypes and other influences, comparing and contrasting their different approaches. Discussing the cases in combination with general discussion of entrepreneurial stereotypes provides students with potentially rich reflection that can unearth assumptions and replace them with more realistic viewpoints and strategies. Facilitated discussion, including the use of narrative cases, it is argued, allows educators to address entrepreneurial identity with a threefold approach: (1) raising awareness of stereotypes, (2) creating a structure for more realistic examples and socialization through narrative comparisons and (3) teaching students the basics of identity management for sustaining their entrepreneurial careers (see Appendix).

Through highlighting two narrative cases within common premises, we focus discussion on approaches toward adopting (or not) an entrepreneurial identity and the relevance for entrepreneurship educators. While the two cases are designed for use in education and to facilitate reflective learning, we do not provide specific discussion of applied use of the cases, though they have been tested in learning settings. The reason for this is that use of the cases is also contingent on the contextual setting of the education—the students, the specific design of the education, associated content, etc.—all of which inform the selection of exercises and activities that are most appropriate for the particular classroom or students.

The threefold approach aims to move students from varying stages of perceived entrepreneurial identity alignment toward a state of higher personal alignment across the classroom. The process in each stage aims to draw on

reflexive pedagogy, with its knowledge creation through the critical positioning of entrepreneurship in its social, environmental and temporal contexts (Higgins et al., 2013). The first stage defines the breadth of understandings of entrepreneurship, along with the stereotypes that underpin the students' own assumptions and conceptions. The second stage utilizes the two narrative cases as illustrations of real-life identity reflections while practicing as a new entrepreneur for the sake of identification, comparison and contrast. The third stage raises awareness of the process of identity formation. Each stage builds on the last by redefining entrepreneurship, informing entrepreneurship through authentic narrative stories and building identity strategies for future exposure to entrepreneurship.

**Stereotype awareness.** Entrepreneurial stereotypes play a significant role in the foundational development of an entrepreneurial identity, particularly related to how individuals define a possible self (Hoyle and Sherrill, 2006). If individuals do not affiliate themselves with the existing stereotypes, it can be challenging for them to see themselves as entrepreneurs and to connect with an entrepreneurial identity (Mallon, 1998). In order to raise awareness of stereotypes, entrepreneurship educators should introduce the breadth of definitions of entrepreneurship. Bridge (2017) identified 10 common usages of the word “entrepreneur”: (1) someone operating economically at risk; (2) an innovator—and creative destroyer; (3) an enterprising person and a self-starter; (4) an ingenious self-advancer; (5) a “heroic,” compulsive venturer; (6) a selfish near-criminal; (7) business owner; (8) self-employed person; (9) source of jobs (and/or economic growth); and (10) source of high-tech, high-growth businesses. The narrative cases allow for determining which definition or definitions could underpin the narratives of the two entrepreneurs. Once they understand the breadth of definitions, students can be asked to reflect on the potential impact of subscribing to each definition.

The narrative cases are the stories of two female entrepreneurs who have been in their respective new entrepreneurial roles for 9 months, having left previous employment which they stated had not been aligned with their sense of self. The gender profile, nascency in the role and the initial intention to leave the previous employment are all factors that differentiate the cases from the stereotypical entrepreneurial profile, and can act as the first “shock” to stimulate raising awareness of the student's own assumptions or preconceptions of who and what an entrepreneur is. Furthermore, the ability to compare the individuals in the cases helps to challenge generic examples by illustrating that, while they share basic traits—gender, time as entrepreneur, transition from other employment—their experiences are significantly different.

Gendered stereotypes of a profession can trigger the need for identity management. When looking to other

vocational areas, in a qualitative study of male nurses in Poland, Kluczyńska (2017) noted that the perception of the profession as being “feminine” had caused some of the men to reconceptualize their work as being in the medical profession, and for some it had played a part in their decision to leave the profession. A “masculinized” conception of entrepreneurship may have a similar impact for female entrepreneurs, like Vicky, who may find more alignment with self-identifying as a small business owner. The influence of stereotypes persists beyond the decision to enter a profession—an aspect which is also brought forward in the narratives presented.

The narratives provide multiple layers of learning as they both illustrate how the individuals becoming entrepreneurs are challenged by stereotypes existing in the media, and also how they have chosen to react to the stereotypes. Through use of these narratives in stages, entrepreneurship educators can serve a more intentional role in helping students become entrepreneurial by unpacking and revealing assumptions and mental models utilized in the construction of entrepreneurial identities. Addressing existing perceptions and influences of entrepreneurial stereotypes can help students build their own conceptions of entrepreneurship—what it is and is not, and who is and is not an entrepreneur—that are relevant for them and their context. Developing their own “type” can serve to characterize a possible self for the individual (Hoyle and Sherrill, 2006) and reconcile the self with a future identity.

*Modeling through narrative comparison.* Following the first stage addressing stereotype awareness, the two narrative cases provide a structure through which students explore the impact of more realistic examples and socialization. When comparing how Vicky and Rachel navigate their emerging entrepreneurial identities, it is possible to see differences regarding the use and valuation of identity-building resources. In both narratives, typical resources include stories of entrepreneurs as depicted via podcasts, TV shows or in person, as well as general entrepreneurial stereotypes. In one case, the individual has found ways to balance influences to fit her; in the other case, the individual feels uncomfortable being identified as an entrepreneur.

As illustrated by quotations from her interview, Rachel filters stereotypes and models that she finds problematic in order to minimize the discord with her existing identities. In doing so, she states she is actively working to build an entrepreneurial “type” that is better suited for her own use. She views the media portrayals of entrepreneurs as inspirational but also demotivating. She positions the “*Shark Tank*” entrepreneurs as distinct from “real-life” entrepreneurs, and associates herself with the latter as a way of dismissing the “heroic” stereotypes she felt came with the “*Shark Tank*” version. Rachel repeatedly speaks to how she actively and consciously develops her identity as an entrepreneur. She seeks stories that feel realistic, accessed

through a mentoring program with fellow female entrepreneurs, in order to surround herself with examples supporting the idea of an entrepreneur with which she can relate.

In comparison, Vicky finds it more difficult to adopt an entrepreneurial identity. For her, predominant models of entrepreneurship conceive the entrepreneur as a “risk-taker” and “bootstrapper” and are reinforced through social media examples like Blake Mycoskie, founder of TOMS Shoes. Vicky speaks to the challenge of managing the new identity of entrepreneur in relation to her identities of wife and mother. She experiences discord between her own expectations and her responsibilities as wife and mother, and the risk she feels she “should” be taking if she is to be an entrepreneur. In Vicky’s narrative, there is an accessible and realistic example—Vicky’s business partner—who is also a wife and mother. However, in comparing both herself and her business partner to stereotypes, Vicky does not acknowledge or access her partner as a possible entrepreneurial example.

University educators should reinforce the importance of drawing from multiple discourses when constructing a possible entrepreneurial identity that will align with one’s self-concept. Because identities reflect the breadth of social group memberships held (Hogg et al., 1995), educators can structure classroom and co-curricular experiences with more realistic and “human” representations of entrepreneurs. By providing diverse and relatable entrepreneurs, willing to share their own challenges with identity construction, educators can present entrepreneurial identities that will seem more attainable to students. Varied entrepreneurial examples introduce social contexts and discourses through which students can explore possible identities and they also better prepare students’ “readiness to act out an identity” (Stryker and Serpe, 1994: 17). The frame of education affords students the leeway to engage in identity work in a low-risk setting (Harmeling, 2011; Williams-Middleton and Donnellon, 2014), allowing them to explore possible entrepreneurial identities accompanied by guidance, support and space for reflection.

*Identity management.* Given the complexity of managing multiple identities, it is important to note that the processes of categorization, comparison and interaction outlined do not relate only to salient, actual identities. Possible identities are categorized and compared to actual identities to assess how possible they may be (Quinlan et al., 2006). Identity management can play an important role in entrepreneurship education, particularly as intentional identity management can help to legitimize a suppressed identity (Swail and Marlow, 2018). Supporting students’ identity management through the use of narrative can help to situate identities in relation to one another and frame identity boundaries; this can contribute toward psychological well-being through the enactment of a compartmentalization strategy to preserve the identities as distinct from one

another (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Through narrative identity management, students can operationalize such a strategy when they anticipate an identity conflict.

The cases illustrate how the individuals concerned experienced the transition into an entrepreneurial role, which involved a self-categorization process through which they formed judgments and assessments of the feasibility and attractiveness of the possible entrepreneurial identity. The case of Rachel exemplifies a forward move in developing the possible identity into a professional identity, and shows how she used resources at hand to make that entrepreneurial identity feel more salient. The case of Vicky illustrates an ongoing conflict of the entrepreneurial identity with other existing identities.

Students can be taught about identity management and can reflect on their existing and possible or aspirational identities. Because identities are discernible through the unique attributes, functions, significance and features that characterize them, as well as by what they share in common (Williams, 2000), students can reflect on the identities and how they fit into a bigger picture. This aligns with the self-categorization process of identities being organized into a hierarchy, according to their significance and contextual relevance (Rosenberg and Gara, 1985; Stryker, 1980; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Stryker and Serpe, 1982). The staged discussions of the threefold approach create a baseline for students aspiring to an entrepreneurial role to develop skill in onboarding and filtering inputs and information from mentors, stakeholders, peers, social media, etc. as they construct their own entrepreneurial identity.

Entrepreneurship educators need to think beyond typical demographic information, and encourage students' awareness of their own identity formation and how they are shaping it through their interactions, encounters and media consumption. The use of narratives like those highlighted in this paper can show more about the process of becoming an entrepreneur and what it might entail with regard to identity management. Encouraging students to find entrepreneurial examples that both resonate with them and align with their existing identities may also help them to build more grounded notions of entrepreneurship. A possible identity needs to be attractive if it is to become a provisional identity, and a provisional identity needs stabilization to become salient. Entrepreneurship educators have the ability to help students understand identity formation, the potential influences of entrepreneurial stereotypes and how identity alignment can help or hinder their development of an entrepreneurial identity.

To this end, for identity management to become widely adopted and embraced in entrepreneurship educators' practices, more research will need to be done in this area. While our understanding of entrepreneurial identity is still in its infancy, research on identity formation, construction or transition is even less explored and further empirical

studies are needed to better understand its full value in entrepreneurship education scholarship.

## Conclusions

The threefold approach helps, respectively, to explore students existing preconceptions about entrepreneurs and thus unpack the potential baggage they bring with them into the classroom; to examine, discuss and reflect on parallel stories of entrepreneurs as a means to distinguish between entrepreneurial stereotypes, media portrayals, narrative cases and self-concept; and to facilitate discussion of how the students themselves will manage their emergent entrepreneurial identity.

Given the breadth of definitions of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship (Casson and Casson, 2013), this paper argues for engaging an appropriate spectrum of examples to reflect them, and also to help students specify and contextualize their own desired entrepreneurial identity. Students, as aspiring and nascent entrepreneurs, enter into entrepreneurship studies with biased and differentiating conceptions and definitions of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. It is challenging to uncover the assumptions and preconceptions that they bring with them. Through the use of real-life narrative cases from new entrepreneurs, educators can dismantle stereotypes and open them up for discussion. Hearing students voice their assumptions can help educators obtain better understandings of where they should have targeted discussions. Thus, it is important for entrepreneurship educators to spend adequate time with students reflecting on who entrepreneurs are, and what entrepreneurship is, as they work to manage their possible entrepreneurial identity.

Addressing the stereotyped perceptions of entrepreneurs, and how one relates to or rejects these in comparison to oneself, allows for rich discussions in the classroom. For educators, bringing these conceptions to the forefront of conversation can help identify the existing biases and assumptions that exist among their students; comparing oneself to an entrepreneurial "type" can indicate comfort levels with certain elements of being an entrepreneur and point to areas in which new entrepreneurs are feeling a conflict with another existing identity.


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## Note

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## Appendix

