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**Lewis, KV** (2015) *Enacting Entrepreneurship and Leadership: A Longitudinal Exploration of Gendered Identity Work*. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 53 (3). pp. 662-682. ISSN 0047-2778

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**Downloaded from:** <http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621506/>

**Publisher:** Wiley

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsbm.12175>

Please cite the published version

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# *Enacting Entrepreneurship and Leadership: A Longitudinal Exploration of Gendered Identity Work*

by Kate V. Lewis

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*Entrepreneurship and leadership are enacted as examples of practice and taken on as forms of identity; they are also both understood to be gendered constructions. The paper explores how entrepreneurial leadership is enacted by a female entrepreneur over time and how being a leader is integrated into entrepreneurial identity development via gendered identity work. The empirical foundation of the paper is a longitudinal case study of a New Zealand female entrepreneur that is informed by primary data spanning almost a decade (2005–2014). The data were collected via multiple, in-depth, narrative interviews and analyzed using the framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis.*

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## **Introduction**

As the ambit of entrepreneurship research has stretched, so too have the areas of tangential interest that have become interwoven with its primary focus of “the venture” or “the entrepreneur.” Leadership is one facet of interest that has become enmeshed with the key questions that preoccupy entrepreneurship researchers. Historically distinct domains of inquiry, entrepreneurship and leadership have now converged to create, what some label, a “new paradigm” of leadership (Bagheri and Pihie 2011). Both entrepreneurship and leadership are hybrid domains of inquiry, built by the joining together of the componentry of other disciplines and shaped according to questions and intent rooted in relatively recent history. As with any embryonic theoretical construct, emphasis has fallen on establishing its form, character, and definitional parameters; these include the articulation of specifically how entrepreneurial leadership is distinct from forms of leadership that are not

entrepreneurial in nature (Darling, Keefe, and Ross 2007). However, in both domains, there is the, often inextricable, intertwining of person and phenomena; that is, the “leader” of leadership and the “entrepreneur” of entrepreneurship (Jones and Crompton 2009).

Both the leader and the entrepreneur are gendered constructions (Patterson, Mavin, and Turner 2012a). There is consistent evidence of a dominant male gaze within the spheres of both leadership and entrepreneurship scholarship. It permeates multiple dimensions of both phenomena, spanning practice and participation through to discourse, modes of understanding, and exploration (Patterson, Mavin, and Turner 2012b). Areas of emphasis from a gendered perspective in terms of leadership and entrepreneurship research share some overlaps in terms of: preoccupations with quantifying and/or justifying women’s participation in either domain; delineating barriers peculiar to female leaders and entrepreneurs; differentiating capabilities or experiences affected by sex and/or gender

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rather than skill, capability, or experience; and/or, articulating tensions arising from multiple roles rooted in responsibilities emanating from gender norms (e.g., care-giving responsibilities) (Moore, Moore, and Moore 2011). Similarly, the underpinning discourse of both phenomena is acknowledged as being grounded in the widespread acceptance of the archetypical leader and/or entrepreneur being a heroic male (with all the ensuing implications of this norm in terms of narrative, stereotype and resultant gender blindness) (Ahl 2006).

Entrepreneurship and leadership are enacted both as examples of practice and taken on as forms of identity (e.g., the leader and/or the entrepreneur) (Carroll and Levy 2010). Given that both entrepreneurship and leadership have well-established origins in the discourse, symbolism, and universality of a masculine orientation, there is a need for a gendered consciousness in efforts to understand what it is to be a female entrepreneurial leader. This paper explores how entrepreneurial leadership is enacted by a female entrepreneur over time and how being “a leader” is integrated into entrepreneurial identity development via gendered identity work. Accepting that entrepreneurial leadership is a social process of becoming (Kempster and Cope 2010), the paper is conceptually oriented toward frameworks of entrepreneurial identity development and specifically coalesces around the notion of “identity work” in this context which merges entrepreneurial behavior, leadership, and gender. Identity work being understood to be the activities undertaken to develop, maintain, and exhibit identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). This choice of emphasis is congruent with the suggestion made by Leitch, McMullan, and Harrison (2009) that future studies of entrepreneurial leadership will require an integration of consideration of aspects of identity. Therefore, the objective of the paper is to take a longitudinal approach to examining the experiences of leadership and entrepreneurship for one female entrepreneur using the theoretical lens of identity work. The paper proceeds with a critical examination of the relevant bodies of literature germane to the central thrust of the paper (including entrepreneurial leadership, entrepreneurial identity, and identity work). The methodological imperatives and strategies are then outlined, and the data are presented (via a narrative approach). This is followed by consideration of the data relative to the chosen theo-

retical underpinnings and, finally, with the presentation of associated conclusions.

## *Theoretical Context*

### Entrepreneurial Leadership

The entrepreneurial leadership literature reflect a focus that is, in essence, a fusion of three concepts: entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial orientation, and entrepreneurial management (Gupta, MacMillan, and Surie 2004). The form and character of entrepreneurial leadership is accepted as being malleable in the sense of both enactment and exploration. For example, it can be a leader behaving entrepreneurially; an entrepreneur exhibiting leadership behaviors; and leadership in the context of a new venture, an entrepreneurial venture, or a venture that is small or medium in size (Ensley, Pearce, and Hmieleski 2006). However, the majority of leadership studies have been empirically grounded in large, and less entrepreneurial firms, and demand has emerged for studies that are situated in the context that is entrepreneurial in nature (either in terms of the individuals or enterprises concerned) (Todorovic and Schlosser 2007). Acceptance of entrepreneurial leadership as being distinct, or the entrepreneurship context warranting a different type of leadership, is evidenced by the fact that though general leadership principles might be transferable to a multitude of different contexts, it is likely that an entrepreneurial firm (that may or may not be small or medium in size) demands a particular type of leadership—one that may not be efficacious in a large or nonentrepreneurial enterprise context (Renko et al. 2015; Wang and Poutziouris 2010).

The nature of firms that are dominated by an entrepreneurial orientation, or embody entrepreneurship by being a venture start-up (and, therefore, are potentially small or medium in size), are such that: resources may be scarcer than in a nonentrepreneurial large firm; management structures are likely to be less bureaucratic, more flexible, and less hierarchical in nature; and human resource practices will reflect the management structures and, as a result, may tend toward informality rather than formality (Leitch, McMullan, and Harrison 2009). For the leaders involved in such entrepreneurial firms, these characteristics can result in more permeable boundaries between those who are leaders and those who are followers (and particularly in instances where the leader is the founder and/or manager); leaders may

occupy and execute dual roles; and have multiple responsibilities and reporting lines with overlapping and indistinct divisions (Cope, Kempster, and Parry 2011).

Both leadership and entrepreneurship can be conceived of as embodying a distinctive and identifiable set of underpinning traits, behaviors, and competencies (Engelen et al. 2012). Furthermore, both have ultimately been proven to be social processes. As a result, there has been a distinct shift in both domains away from isolated competency or trait-driven studies to those that explicitly acknowledge the socio-cultural context in which leadership and entrepreneurship exist (i.e., the emergence of the emphasis on embedded relationship-driven research questions) (Vecchio 2003). This is congruent with the constructivist view that both are contextually and situationally embedded (Leitch, McMullan, and Harrison 2013). Increasingly, and in addition to exploring the embedded nature of entrepreneurial leadership, emphasis has also been given to understanding how it is developed; both from the perspective of training nascent leaders and the development of additional capability among those already in leadership roles (Vecchio 2003). Leadership in the context of learning and development has also attracted a considerable amount of research energy (ultimately with a view to, potentially, predicting leadership potential). This has contributed an understanding of the role of socialization in the development of entrepreneurial leadership capability and the value of a dynamic learning perspective (Kempster and Cope 2010).

Despite such fine-grained lenses to understanding the phenomenon of entrepreneurial leadership and its variants, there remains a dominant orientation: studies that objectify, replicate, or generalize. That is, those that are predicated on furthering the knowledge base by virtue of quantification, or the reduction of experience to the shared or generalizable, rather than the capture of outliers or extremes of experience. As a result, there exists a substantial cadre of evidence that reinforces that which is already known and shores up the traits, attributes, and attitudes that characterize “good leadership” (entrepreneurial or otherwise) (Darling and Beebe 2007). The ascription of uniformity to that which is ultimately still the act of a single human being, at a single point in time, around a single act renders that individuality, creativity, and artistry mute in favor of

reductionist perspectives that seek to confirm rather than disconfirm—and, as a result, texture and context are lost (Watson 2008). The domination of the objective tends to exclude, or locate at the periphery, those studies that focus on the subjective: the lived experience of entrepreneurial leadership that, though rich and evocative, tends to be rooted in small samples, built around a qualitative research design, and subscribes to the interpretive worldview of how knowledge is constructed (Cope, Kempster, and Parry 2011). Much of what has been studied in the realm of entrepreneurial leadership is, therefore, devoid of context, or conceives of context as a static backdrop to a play in which the plot is known, protagonists cast, and motives understood. This exclusion, or relegation, in turn, predicates an emphasis on examining and narrating the emerged rather than the emergent, and as a corollary precludes acknowledgement that leading, and being a leader, is as much about evolution as it is a state of arrival (Kempster and Cope 2010). This despite recent research that postulates the notion of leader as “identity” (Carroll and Levy 2010) and leadership as a “process of becoming” (Kempster and Cope 2010). In parallel, understanding has developed that conceives of entrepreneur and entrepreneurship in a similar way and that has seen an investigatory focus on the development and enactment of an “entrepreneurial identity.”

### Entrepreneurial Identity and Identity Work

As a construct, identity is one that has been interrogated from numerous vantage points and via a diverse range of disciplinary perspectives (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008). In simplistic terms, and for the purposes of bounding the nature of the focus taken in this paper, it is possible to separate studies into those that focus on what can be termed “personal identity” (i.e., drawing on theories of psychology) and “social identity” (sourcing frameworks and lenses to understanding from the discipline of sociology) (Downing 2005). More disaggregations of the broader notion of identity have emerged as research has intensified, and these have spawned niche areas of inquiry such as occupational identity and, indeed, entrepreneurial identity (Gill and Larson 2014; Pitt 1998). Entrepreneurial identity has been defined by Hoang and Gimeno as encompassing “how a person defines the entrepreneurial role and whether he

or she identifies with that role” (Hoang and Gimeno 2005, p. 87) and comprises four dimensions: a set of descriptive attributes or traits (either experiential or ideal); perceptions of the constitutive elements of entrepreneurship (and associated congruence); identity centrality (relative to self-definition and enactment); and identity regard (positive or negative appraisals).

Identity has been shown to be dynamic and evolving and is not located within an individual *per se*. Rather, it is constituted via interactions between the individual, society, and culture (Jones, Latham, and Betta 2008). It is crafted and re-crafted; an ongoing project of the self that is rooted in cyclical interactions between narration and action (Bjursell and Melin 2011). The nature and outcomes of such interactive processes contribute to the degree to which an identity gains traction, maintains salience, and achieves stability. In turn, that salience or centrality is directly correlated to the level of comfort the individual feels in “inhabiting” an identity; how it manifests itself relative to other identities, roles, and domains (i.e., in terms of tensions, conflicts, and boundaries); and the impetus and/or desirability of shifting, abandoning, or adopting an alternative, new or former identity (Hoang and Gimeno 2010).

As understanding of how identity is enacted, interpreted, and influenced has become more nuanced, so too have the ways in which its primary mechanisms of engagement are conceptualized (Hytti 2005). The dominant emphasis given to the agentic nature of its origins and enactment has shifted somewhat to a poststructuralist position that acknowledges identity as being, in essence, social constructionist and relational in character (Nadin 2007; Watson 2008). The shift in the perceived central locale of identity has had implications not only for understanding, but also in terms of research design and emphasis (Larson and Pearson 2012). Evolution away from agency as the primary construct of traction and energy in terms of identity formulation and generation has seen the scope of research extend to incorporate the broader milieu in which the agent exists and identity is enacted (Anderson and Warren 2011). This focal shift is not simply to habitus, but to the shape, form, and character of the embeddedness itself (Pitt 2004). The implications of those connections for identity (conscious or subliminal) then become germane. So too does how they are leveraged to maintain and manipulate identity—either by

the individual or, conversely, how the collective knowingly or unknowingly influences the individual (at the level of perception or action, or both) (Nielsen and Lassen 2012).

The nature of embeddedness and its role as a variable of influence on identity has also resulted in a commitment to appreciating and investigating its linguistic turn—both in terms of that which gives voice to the cultural and social milieu (i.e., discourses) and those that narrate individual identities either publicly or privately (i.e., story, myth, and cliché) (Down and Reveley 2004). Research, therefore, seeks to recognize (if not reconcile) the singular human agency approach (which envisages energy, influence, and composition in relation to identity residing within the person) with the relational, embeddedness-driven appreciation (which seeks to capture, depict, and unbundle the diverse relationships that inform, mediate, and moderate identity formation and communication at both an individual and collective level) (Gotsi et al. 2010). A constructionist approach then sees identity as discourse, socially constructed through language and embedded in power relations. In so doing, it acknowledges that neither agency (self-determination) nor the determination imposed by others via structural means is an absolutely free choice in terms of either identity or discourse (Essers and Benschop 2007; Watson 2013).

The public narratives built around the construct of entrepreneurship and those who enact it are broadly accepted as occupying a series of well-established (if outmoded and one-dimensional) interpretations and consisting of a limited number of dominant plotlines: “Media stories and representations are inevitably an influential part of that cultural discursive milieu, shaping, reinforcing, and legitimizing a stereotypical entrepreneurial identity, something that is ‘like an entrepreneur’ in the public imagination” (Anderson and Warren 2011, p. 592). In so doing, such discourses also end up grouping together a somewhat disparate grouping of attributes and actions as a supposedly entrepreneurial rubric (Anderson and Warren 2011). The androcentric approach to understanding and communicating entrepreneurship is amplified, according to some, by methods that privilege male norms, masculinized interpretations of meaning, and a languaging and discourse that silences the feminine (Cohen and Musson 2000). Despite calls for new approaches (Calas,

Smircich, and Bourne 2009), there remains strong “evidence of the resilience of the male norm” in terms of entrepreneurship discourse (Hamilton 2013, p. 90). The heroic entrepreneur of the media is always a man, and such positioning sets up the ideal (and, therefore, normative) entrepreneur as being male (Ahl 2006). Indeed, entrepreneurship is consistently described, evidenced, and operationalized as being a construct of masculinity: “the features of entrepreneurship reside in the symbolic domain of initiative-taking, accomplishment and relative risk. They therefore reside in the symbolic domain of the male” (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004, pp. 407–8). Consequently, for women to gain legitimacy within the entrepreneurial discourse, they are encouraged to adopt and reproduce attitudes and behaviors that are facsimiles of what men do (Marlow and McAdam 2013). For women seeking to craft an entrepreneurial identity, there is reportedly a challenge in confronting two seemingly conflicting discourses: those of womanhood and entrepreneurship (Ashe and Treanor 2011; Kovalainen and Österberg-Högstedt 2013; Madsen, Neergaard, and Ulhøi 2008; Orser, Elliott, and Leck 2011; Warren 2004).

Women overcome the perception of divergence from the masculine norm by either adhering to the “male” stereotype or distancing themselves from its predominance, particularly if they perceive it to be negative for themselves and their self-identity (Nadin 2007). Some female entrepreneurs deliberately adopt a feminized entrepreneurial identity as a means of authenticity and as a means of not fitting in with the masculinized identity associated with entrepreneurship (Lewis 2013). Essers and Benschop (2007) proposed three strategies in relation to the crafting of a gendered entrepreneurial identity by women: the claiming of femininity (often as dictated by cultural norms); denouncing expectations relating to gender; or resisting the masculine connotation of entrepreneurship by disconnecting it from masculinity. Some observers have gone so far as to suggest that the discourse of “womanhood” is at odds with that of entrepreneurship (García and Welter 2013), and that women can opt to support the status quo by “doing” or challenge it by “re-doing” gender in relation to entrepreneurship (Phillips and Knowles 2012). Arguments have subsequently been made that this going against the grain of a male-orientated worldview further reinforces stereotypes in

respect of gender and entrepreneurship and encourages role conservation as opposed to role innovation. Alternatively, such an approach exaggerates role tension as an antecedent to entrepreneurial entry on the part of women and simplifies both its outcomes and its potential as a solution to issues of role conflict and/or tension (Bjursell and Backvall 2011). However, available discourses, whatever their character, stimulate, inform, and resource identity creation via identity work. Subsequently, they are likely to also influence what behaviors are used to legitimize or authenticate that identity within the relevant domain. However, the nature of the construct of authenticity is ultimately contestable given that it may be conceptualized as being credited to external parties as much, if not more, than any inner dialogue of the entrepreneur concerned. Therefore, the perception of what is and what is not “authentic” is mediated not only by the creator of the identity but also those for whom the identity is “performed” (or its “audience”) (Anderson 2005) and can be both contested and legitimized simultaneously (Hamilton 2014).

Identity work has been defined as the internal and external activity (either in talk or action) that an individual invests in confirming, maintaining, altering, or evolving their identity (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). Identity work can comprise reflexive self-narration (i.e., drawn from socially supplied narratives and discourses) and face-to-face interactions (i.e., the mounting of credible dramaturgical performances) which, in turn, are mutually reinforcing (Down and Reveley 2009). That is, identity work is a combination of internal/inward facing (self-identity focused) and external/outward facing (social identity focused) processes (Watson 2009b). The salience (readiness) or centrality of an identity (and if it is regulated) are important factors in relation to the nature of the work that is enacted by an individual in relation to that identity (Murnieks, Mosakowski, and Cardon 2014). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) put forward a conceptualization of how self-identity, identity regulation, and identity work interact. In their framework, self-identity is an unstable outcome of identity work. Though identity work stimulates the reworking of self-identity, the nature of self-identity itself also induces identity work. In turn, identity regulation (drawing on discursive resources) both prompts, and is informed by, identity work. An individual’s perception of self-identity is either

accomplished via that regulation, or is responsive or resistant to it. Therefore, at each of the overlapping points of the three constituent elements, there is the potential for reciprocal influence.

Critical to the creation and maintenance of identity are discursive resources; hence, the emphasis latterly in entrepreneurial identity research on the narrative and linguistic turn both internally and externally (i.e., the stories we tell ourselves are influenced by the discourses of the social and cultural milieu in which we exist, and vice versa) (Down and Warren 2008; Phillips, Tracey, and Karra 2013). There is then a form of circularity at work: a mutually reinforcing spiral that identity work can either synchronize with or rupture in terms of its role in the identity work of the individual relative to the identity(ies) that he or she ascribes to himself or herself. Various demographic factors (including age, sex, and ethnicity) also shape the nature of identity assumption and the identity work that is then undertaken subsequently (Hytti 2005). Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) elaborated as to how situational factors (via identity demands) and individual factors (identity tensions manifested either as a need for inclusion or a need for differentiation) (Shepherd and Haynie 2009) influence the shape and form of identity work. They further demonstrate how—in seeking to mitigate the influences—an individual will pursue either integration, differentiation, or dual function tactics in terms of reconciling roles and identities.

Entrepreneurial identity work is relational and dialogic in character and is negotiated in contestation with others (Watson 2009a). It is as much about who you are not as who you are and is not informed by enterprise culture or discourse in isolation (Jones, Latham, and Betta 2008; Watson 2009b). It is important to distinguish that all internal identity work need not be focused exclusively inward *or* outward. Indeed, Watson has argued that identity work is not most usefully understood as an internal self-focused process and that, though there is a need to differentiate between the two, the best approach to understanding is recognizing and exploring the mixing of internal and external, and talk and action (i.e., the duality of identity work) (Watson 2009b). “We can give more analytical power to the concept of identity work if we incorporate into it more explicit recognition that whenever identity work is done there is an

element of working on the ‘external’ identity of the person, alongside the shaping of the ‘internal’ aspects of personal identity” (Watson 2008, p. 127). Watson’s analytic distinction between internal self-identity and external social identity (and the dialectic between) leads to his conclusion that it is the symbolic interactionism between the two that is the missing link in terms of furthering understanding (Watson 2008). However, he also noted that there is little empirical evidence of the identity work process in action and that which is undertaken tends to ignore its temporal, cultural, and life course dimensions (Watson 2009b, 2013).

## Methodology

The design of the study was predicated on a number of assumptions, including that individuals play an active role in the “construction” of knowledge and that knowledge consists of multiple realities (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). This type of ontological relativity “holds that all tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world” (Patton 2002, p. 97). Given the focus of the research objective, and a privileging of its phenomenological essence, in-depth narratively driven interviews were chosen as the data collection method. Phenomenology is the study or description of phenomena as experienced by people (Hammond, Howarth, and Keat 1991), and a phenomenological approach embodies a focus on “meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations” (Moustakas 1994, p. 21). A phenomenologically oriented study aims to capture the essence of the experience of a phenomenon and to “elucidate the importance of using methods that capture people’s experience of the world” (Patton 2002, p. 107). Therefore, a sample of interviewees must comprise “people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have ‘lived experience’ as opposed to second-hand experience” (Patton 2002, p. 104). The interpretive orientation of the phenomenological perspective has also been argued to provide great potential to substantiate understanding of central abstracts (Cope 2005; Steyaert 2007) (in this instance, entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial leadership), as have post-positivist approaches to entrepreneurship scholarship (Drakopoulou-Dodd et al. 2014; Karatas-Ozkan et al. 2014).

The research context, in concert with the methodological choices dictated by the research objective, led to the case study as the choice of design framework within which to embed the associated data collection process. The research parameters in terms of both intent and scope were also congruent with the choice of a holistic single case study design (Yin 2003). For this type of theoretical sampling, a case is selected because it is “particularly suitable for illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs” (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, p. 27). Irrespective of a lack of opportunity for generalization does not mean, according to Flyvbjerg (2006), that the outcomes of such a research approach “cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a society” and a “phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize can certainly be of value in this process” (p. 227). The chosen case also met Yin’s (2003) criteria for the deployment of a single case study approach: as well as being longitudinal (the same single case at two or more different points in time) it also contained elements that sufficed the critical and revelatory rationales.

Giving a temporal dimension to the sense-making associated with identity construction is invaluable (Musson and Duberley 2007); therefore, this paper is informed by data spanning almost a decade. Phase one of the longitudinal data collection (in 2005) relied upon Seidman’s (1998) multiple interview method (originally designed by Dolbeare and Schuman, and described in Schuman 1982) and comprises three interviews so as to adequately contextualize the experiences of the participants within their lives as a whole. This model is also highly congruent with Larty and Hamilton’s (2011) framework for analyzing narrative material where they suggest a shift from structural emphasis (establishing events, roles, and functions) to contextualization (embedding the story and storyteller) and, eventually, to further in-depth analysis around emergent themes. The interviews were largely unstructured and used Spradley’s (1979) notion of “grand tour questions” as a means to privileging participant “voice,” “vocabulary,” and “perceptions.” The three “grand tour” questions that guided the three interviews in phase one of data collection were: “Tell me the story of your business”; “Tell me the story of how you came to be self-employed,” and “Do you identify as

an entrepreneur?” The three interviews were 60–90 minutes in length each and took place in the interviewee’s home. The second phase of data collection (in 2014) involved one follow-up interview (60–90 minutes in length) by telephone. It relied upon a parallel orientation in terms of ontological and epistemological priorities but was, to an extent, more unstructured than the earlier interviews. This was because it was implausible to predict what might have occurred thematically, or otherwise, in the intervening nine years (the objective being to explore the personal and professional developments in the life of the entrepreneur since the first data collection point). The primacy of narrative was a given, particularly as it has been established that such approaches are especially pertinent to a focus on stories centered on, or around, the construction of entrepreneurial identities (Johansson 2004). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to facilitate data analysis. Transcripts of the interviews were also returned to the interviewee as a means of cross-checking both the accuracy and completeness of the transcription process.

Primary data analysis processes relied on the tenets of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith 2004; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) and were strongly idiographic, inductive, and interrogative in character. The primary consideration given to the first reading of the transcripts was for codes that “reflect emerging ideas rather than merely describing topics” (Charmaz 1990, p. 1167). Therefore, during the initial readings (or initial coding phases), priority was given to remaining “open to all possible theoretical directions indicated” (Charmaz 2006, p. 46). Subsequently, focused or selective coding was engaged (based on the initial codes) in order to synthesize and integrate larger and larger amounts of data. The process allowed the fracturing of data into manageable elements (Coffey and Atkinson 1996), and for those data to be rejoined, in alternate ways, in order to represent new categories and emerging ideas. Subsequently, this fracturing and rejoining process was reiterated to facilitate the formation of cohesive relationships and to enable concepts to begin to emerge (i.e., it is the linkages that emerged and the subsequent further analysis of those interconnections that extended the analysis beyond the more rudimentary coding aspects of analysis). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) effectively



described this process as a: “mixture of data reduction and data complication. Coding generally is used to break up and segment the data into simpler, general categories *and* is used to expand and tease out the data, in order to formulate new questions and levels of interpretation” (p. 30).

The primary “thinking unit” (Lofland and Lofland 1984) that emerged from these coding cycles was theme. This was appropriate when weighed against the imperative of incorporating the multiple realities of a constructivist study and the focus on meaning and essence dictated by the choice of a phenomenological approach to in-depth interviewing. Themes are a means of “identifying the structures of experience” and are “a form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand” (van Manen 1990, pp. 86–7). Three approaches were taken to translating the data into themes: (1) a holistic interpretation that attempted to distill key passages or themes into a phrase that reflected its essence; (2) a more selective interpretation that involved the highlighting of key elements of sentences that seemed especially significant within the data set as a whole; and (3) a detailed interpretation that focused even more closely on minute clusters of words or sentences that revealed meaning (van Manen 1990). Practically, this translation of codes, text, and ideas into themes occurred via two steps: first, individual codes, ideas, and passages of text were examined in relation to one another, and consideration was given to possible interrelationships and, second, when, or if, linkages between codes, ideas, or text were identified, an overarching theme was attached that reflected coherence in terms of patterning.

Data from both longitudinal collection points are drawn upon in the paper. A case study vignette is presented first, and then primary threads of the narratives (in a form that is as intact as possible) are offered that are oriented to the overarching themes of the paper (year identifiers of either 2005 or 2014 are attached to each). In terms of Perren and Ram’s (2004) paradigmatic map of the use of case studies in entrepreneurship research, the case that is the foundation of this paper is an “entrepreneurial personal story explanation” (to use their descriptor) and is situated at the entrepreneur boundary and from the subjective perspective: “The privileging of the entrepreneur’s subjective experience is clearly the distinguishing feature,

and most important strength, of the personal story exploration” (p. 94).

### The Case: Georgie Falloon (GF) and Willow Shoes

GF first recounted her story to the author in 2005 via a series of three interviews. With undergraduate and postgraduate business qualifications, and career experience in corporate middle management, GF was then 34 and her venture had been operating for five years. The follow-up interview to hear the latest installment of her entrepreneurial journey occurred nine years later in 2014: at age 42 with the firm now successfully trading for 14 years. A New Zealand entrepreneur, GF started her business Willow Shoes (<http://www.willowshoes.co.nz>) in 2000 at the age of 29 (previously working in middle management for a large-scale corporate). Frustrated by an inability to source and procure fashionable footwear in large sizes (i.e., from a size 10 upward), and aware of a significant cohort of women facing a similar challenge, GF saw a niche market opportunity worthy of pursuit and started up her own retail solution. The operation commenced as a home-based business along with what were known as “shoe tours” (where GF and a team would travel to a scheduled set of New Zealand locations bi-annually) and an accompanying catalogue-based service was launched in 2001. Four permanent retail shops in urban locations were established over the following decade (Auckland in 2002, Wellington in 2006, Christchurch in 2009, and Hamilton in 2011); in addition, the business now has a thriving online store. GF is married (her husband is a farmer with a degree in accounting, economics, and forestry who worked for large corporates before returning to the family farm when he was 37) with children (the first born in 2003 and in 2014 with three: aged ten, seven, and five years of age) and resides in a rural location in the Wairarapa region in the lower North Island (approximately 100 km or a 90-minute drive east of Wellington, New Zealand’s capital city). In 2005, she was investing around 30–40 hours a week in the business but that has reduced nine years later to around, on average, 15–20 hours per week. The firm is structured as a Limited Liability Company (with GF as the sole owner). In 2005, Willow Shoes employed (in addition to GF) two full-time-equivalent employees (FTEs) and in 2014 that has grown to eight FTEs. The business has

experienced consistent growth between the two data capture points (notable given the impact of the global financial crisis and resulting fiscal climate including extended periods of recession in New Zealand), and turnover has increased from >NZ\$500,000 to >NZ\$2,000,000. Though the management structure of the firm has remained “flat,” GF now has structured responsibilities for team members around function domains (e.g., a stock and systems manager and sales manager) and now describes her own role as being strategically oriented at a “General Manager” level. GF attributes the resiliency of her firm’s performance to a slow but steady, cashflow-funded approach to the pursuit of firm growth (averaging 15 percent per year over the 14-year life of the firm). Willow Shoes is oriented to the New Zealand retail domestic market (though the majority of suppliers are European or Asian based), but the business is currently growing fastest via online opportunities. GF’s success with Willow Shoes saw her nominated for the prestigious Ernst and Young New Zealand Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2013.

## *Narratives and Discussion*

### Identifying as an Entrepreneur

In 2005, GF identified as an entrepreneur but with the caveat that she only felt comfortable with the identity at that point in the life cycle of her firm (i.e., five years after start-up). She attributed the label entrepreneur to herself willingly on the basis that she felt that she fulfilled *her* criteria for what constituted genuinely entrepreneurial behavior: the independent start-up of a venture; the assumption of risk in doing so; and successful firm performance (“my business is reasonably serious now”) (i.e., a track record of development; and, strong intentions in terms of firm growth). She expressed reticence as to whether she would have attributed the label entrepreneur to herself any earlier in the life of her firm. She also described how, if she ever wanted to withdraw from Willow Shoes, she “would either have someone run it for me fully, or sell it and look to start another business.”

I wouldn’t see myself as an entrepreneur if I opened a dairy. I see myself as an entrepreneur because I’ve done something other people haven’t done . . . It’s about having an idea that stacked up. I always thought I would start something—

always! I’m proud that it’s actually successful. I’m five years down the track and that’s a milestone. It is successful in terms of growing, making a profit, and being thought of highly by customers and that’s what I’m proud of: that I created something that people like. And, I’m proud that I’ve still got my independence. I’m still me. I don’t feel like I’ve given anything up completely. . . . I don’t talk about what I do in business. I don’t go blabbing—I don’t need to be doing that. (2005)

GF identifies as consistently and comfortably with the identity of entrepreneur in 2014 as she did in 2005. What was noticeable at the more recent data collection point was the tenor of her narrative around claiming that identity: it was imbued with a greater level of confidence and vocality while maintaining the same central performance-driven definitional tenets as her earlier explanatory narrative. At neither juncture did GF articulate or assume a “female entrepreneur” identity. That is, she did not tie a perception, or adoption, of gender to the entrepreneurial identity she claimed. Though that does not mean gender was not a facet of her entrepreneurial identity, it does point to it being one she was not assuming publicly—or necessarily claiming privately. The implications of the lack of privileging of a gendered facet to her discussions of entrepreneurial identity assumption are that gender is silent, whereas the reality may be that the assumption of the identity of “entrepreneur” (but not “female entrepreneur”) is more about her personal sense of womanhood (and the roles tied to that) than gendered notions of entrepreneurship; or that GF does not conceive of a “female entrepreneur” as a distinct type of entrepreneur or identity she wishes to claim.

In 2014, GF did elaborate on her rationale for the possession of the identity (and its meaning). These articulations were largely from a temporal perspective and assumed an emphasis that was oriented around momentum, trajectory, and the future. It was evident that her identity maturity therefore reflected, in some respects, the accompanying maturity of her firm. This link between the firm life-cycle stage (or temporal dimension of the entrepreneurial experience) and the level of comfort with the identity of entrepreneur empirically echoes Rae’s assertion that being an entrepre-

neur is “a matter of degree rather than ‘being’ or ‘not being’ ” (Rae 2003, p. 12). It also illustrates that for GF, the objective assessment of the performance of her firm (and the associated metrics) were proxies for the relevancy and cogency of the identity for her at a personal level. In the elapsed time period between data collection points, the public discourses associated with entrepreneurship have not diminished in volume or prevalence either—including those specific to gendered experiences of enterprise. Therefore, though no attribution was made by GF to the broader cultural and ideological milieu in terms of her identity assumption, to acknowledge context, if not attribute to it explanatory power, is worthwhile. It also reinforces the importance of considering the establishment, negotiation, and practices of entrepreneurial identity over time (Hamilton 2014).

I’m definitely an entrepreneur- for sure. But you don’t really stop and pat yourself on the back and say look what I did. You just keep going. What makes me an entrepreneur is that I don’t stop. You’re not letting it get stagnant. You’re seeing your opportunities and constantly moving it forward. What I’ve realised is that I’ve created something that is enduring and way bigger than me. It has got so much potential. To me, an entrepreneur is someone who does something new, starts it up and is the creator. Whilst I don’t think I’ve finished I do think I’ve achieved a hell of a lot in the last 14 years—more than I would have every imagined—personally and financially (2014).

GF’s ability to coherently define what entrepreneurship (and, in turn, the entrepreneurial identity) means to her should not be underestimated. The assumption that it is an easy task is an erroneous one; clarity is not always the corollary of proximity or enactment. For example, a British study involving 24 self-employed women identified how difficult they found the term entrepreneur to coherently define (Cohen 1997; Cohen and Musson 2000), either objectively or subjectively. The sample was found to have “appropriated aspects of the enterprise discourse, while simultaneously rejecting the concept of ‘the entrepreneur’ as an occupational identity” (Cohen 1997, p. 151).

Rather, the women defined themselves as being entrepreneurial. The use of this adjective was seen as allowing them to “tap into those aspects of the discourse which they see as useful, and to leave those which they see as offensive, or irrelevant” (Cohen 1997, p. 151). It was also described as being a more “flexible” term to apply than the label “entrepreneur” and, therefore, applicable to a greater variety of situational contexts. It is likely, extrapolating from GF’s narratives, that had she not been able to define the entrepreneurial identity for herself on her own terms, and “measure up” to that definition, then she would have been unlikely to assume the identity. That is, any external definition of the identity would be less meaningful to her and would discourage her from adopting an identity that was delineated by others rather than grounded in her own experience. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, GF’s definition of what it means to be an entrepreneur draws upon many, if not most, of the derivative elements from the substantive definitions of entrepreneurship embedded in the relevant research literature (e.g., Carlsson et al. 2013; Gartner 2013; Hansen, Shrader, and Monllor 2011). It is also linked inextricably with characteristics of the firm rather than the entrepreneur herself, which again should, at face value, relegate gender to a peripheral position. However, it may raise other questions, such as could the firm-oriented focus be tied to a desire to negate any perceived impact of gender on activities or outcomes? Or, is it genuinely a gender neutral position? Either way, muting gender in the dialogue (consciously or subconsciously) highlights the potential for contradictory complexity in this case and potentially beyond.

In 2005, GF was as articulate about what being an entrepreneur was *not* as she was on its constitutive elements. The label small business owner–manager or being self-employed elicited the following reaction “sounds like you know Doris at home knitting her little woolly socks. . . . A small business owner could be making no profit and just plodding along; whereas, an entrepreneur I sort of see as someone whose sights are absolutely set on achieving something bigger.” Though this is, in part, a humorous dismissal of the label, GF contrasted these assertions with her earlier points about what an entrepreneur is (comparatively speaking). However, she did reveal that (at that point in time) she adapted the

descriptor she adopted for herself externally depending upon whether she wanted to amplify (“glam up”) her achievements or downplay them (moving between entrepreneur if the intention was the former, and small business owner if it was the latter). She specified that, though both are technically accurate, they convey vastly different impressions externally and are imbued with considerably different meaning, and saliency, at a personal level. She identifies with being an entrepreneur; it resonates with both her experiences and her intentions. Perhaps counter to her easy adoption of the entrepreneur label, GF has deliberately pursued a “low profile” approach (“I usually downplay myself—that’s typical”) in terms of her firm. She had not pursued media coverage, awards, or any other deliberate profile and symbolic capital building strategies (De Clercq and Voronov 2009). Rather, she has preferred to let the quality of her products, service, and firm overall speak for itself. In parallel, she has required very little investment in marketing strategies such as advertising, and the firm thrives on word-of-mouth referrals and loyalty driven, repeat business to build a customer base.

### The Leader Identity

GF sees no separation between the constructs of leadership and entrepreneurship at either a conceptual, practical, or identity level. Her view is that the two are intertwined: you are not an entrepreneur without being a leader, and the very best entrepreneurs are those who cultivate and enact both skill-sets and identities (i.e., are entrepreneurial leaders). She was definite about the constituent parts of her leader identity, again deriving solidity in her identity from an ability to define and maintain constancy in terms of those definitional parameters.

I’m both—a leader and an entrepreneur—I step between the two. I think you have to merge the two to be an entrepreneur. You have to be someone that people want to be—want to follow. You don’t have to be loud to do that because I’m not that and because of developing in an emerging market I very much always had this strategy of stay under the radar. To a degree we’re still like that but we’ve popped our heads out of the water a bit more. . . . As time has

gone on and the business has been successful I’m OK about standing out. Until you’ve had that success you don’t go around raving about yourself—not until you’ve achieved that. (2005)

GF’s micronarratives around leadership demonstrate the pervasive importance of values and authenticity; both in terms of her entrepreneurial leadership style and practice (Hmieleski, Cole, and Baron 2012; Jensen and Luthans 2006). Authenticity is well established as a driver of leadership behavior and, similarly, it is oft quoted as a motivator for venture start-up (Lewis 2013). That is, an entrepreneur feels he or she cannot be their “real self” or get a sense of their true “possible self” as an employee in a work environment controlled by others and over which they have little control (Farmer, Yao, and Kung-Mcintyre 2011). Often this pursuit of personal integrity both in terms of who they are (and want to be) is played out as a transition to working for themselves and creating an environment where others (i.e., employees/followers) can be authentic also. This notion of firm as reflection of self is not a new one, nor are the arguments about the utility, or not, of the permeability of the boundaries between self and firm (Verheul, Uhlaner, and Thurik 2005). However, it is said to be a particular antecedent path to start-up that resonates strongly with women, and especially those who have transitioned from a corporate background (Adkins et al. 2013). Though GF did not link her values to gender when narrating her priorities, it is plausible to suggest that they are not un-related and that if probed may also relate to other participative identities and roles she inhabits by virtue of her sex.

I’m not a limelight person. I always wanted to create a business that was good to work for. Whilst I had a great idea, if I could create a place where it was great to work as well it would just hum. . . . everything you do is a positive message to those who surround your business—whether it’s suppliers, customers, staff, or family and friends. It’s about building a culture. For as long as I’ve been doing this I’ve been totally genuine about the way we do business and believe that has had financial gain. I don’t think every single decision is a profit based decision. My values drive

decisions. It's about authenticity. I would never want to be seen as cut throat—never ever. I don't want to make decisions that compromise relationships. Respectful relationships pay dividends and have done over the years. . . . You've got to be motivated, have a vision, knowing what you want to do, and be disciplined. You've got to be able to get excited about it and get people excited around you, and have a lot of self-resilience—you definitely need that—you haven't got people leading you or telling you that you're doing a great job—you're giving that to everyone else all of the time! (2014)

With the leadership aspect of her entrepreneurial identity now being given greater prominence due to the positioning of her firm in its life cycle, and the associated performance improvements, GF describes being keen to lead in a way that creates a culture and a set of values in the firm (Darling, Keefe, and Ross 2007) and that allows others to make choices that enable them to work in as personally fulfilling a way as possible (whether that is building in the flexibility to accommodate family related matters or other priorities such as capacity building via formal study). The longitudinal character of the data revealed this shift in terms of the potential for the firm to foster flex in accommodating "life priorities" (i.e., from GF herself at the first data collection point, to latterly an emphasis on making accommodations for her team—many of which linked to gendered expectations). Furthermore, it was clear that it was occurring, in part, as a function of GF's own role recalibration to a more strategically oriented view of the firm that allowed her to think more long term and holistically about the firm (i.e., in terms of culture not just operations). GF attributed this in part to the relative slack present now that systems were built and well integrated; she has more time to invest in this form of entrepreneurial leadership (as opposed to just "the business nuts and bolts").

I've always had to be a leader but it is an even bigger part of what I do now. It's on my mind anytime I'm with anyone in the business or with suppliers. It's about demonstrating that you've got vision and demonstrating that you've got next steps

in your mind. It's about driving change and bringing people in to that. It's about focus. It's about delivering and the way you go about it. Staying level headed and going about it with your values intact. You've got to demonstrate competence but with a measure of excitement. You have to give people confidence that there is someone making the right decisions for the business. . . . I'm genuine. I can demonstrate that I have vision and direction—that there is a future. People feel safe and that they can rely on me. I always get the sense my staff respect me. I'm honest—there is nothing about me that is dishonest—I would never do anything dishonest. People really like that—they respond to it. I am an open person—there is a sense that you can come to me. (2014)

GF's entrepreneurial leadership enactment relies heavily on communication (Gupta, MacMillan, and Surie 2004) and a regular schedule of visitations to the business locations. She narrates the very conscious choices she makes in terms of communication to ensure that she is not perceived as being either "out of sight" or "out of touch." It requires a concerted balance of strategic authoritative leadership (to ensure the vision of the firm is enacted and "followers" have the strong sense of "being led") via an approach that is deliberately tempered with a style of communication that ensures she is still perceived as being approachable ("no matter what"). She expresses a desire to discourage dependency on her in tandem with the scaffolding of independence via staff capability building practices.

### A Gendered Identity

As opposed to creating tension with other roles in her life, the identity of entrepreneur is one GF finds empowering and that has assisted her to reconcile other changes, transitions, and expectations in her life in a more positive way (Chasserio, Pailot, and Poroli 2014). For many women, and particularly those who have chosen (or needed) to opt out of successful career trajectories to pursue motherhood, the impact of the loss of that occupationally oriented identity can be profound, affecting their feelings of self-worth and dislocating them from previous identity-related markers

(Duberley and Carrigan 2013; Leung 2011). GF verbalized how she obtains a feeling of “status from the fact that I have got this business” and especially when she was at a stage in her life “where lots of women are struggling to figure out what their identity is, so I’m very lucky. I’m surrounded by mothers who have had good careers who cannot continue.”

I know since I’ve met people here (a lot of women here don’t work) that it takes them a while to figure out who I am . . . and the fact that I zip off to Auckland now and then just sounds just way too glamorous. They don’t realise I work my arse off when I’m up there so I can come back and be a Mum. . . . It is a very comfortable choice. There is no tension or conflict because I think there is as much value in either identity. I feel that I get the best of both worlds. I get this sense of value and worth by having my company (which lots of women lose). (2005)

GF has moderated the external portrayal and communication of her entrepreneurial identity in her local rural community and has observed that women, in particular, struggle to “place her” if she is more overt about her business activities than if she is not. She attributes this to them attempting to reconcile her business persona with the other ways she contributes within the community and, perhaps, an inability to accept them both as being true and accurate reflections of her as a person. It is important to stress that this identity bifurcation (Pronin, Steele, and Ross 2004) is something GF encountered rather than something she enacts or is implicit in her own identity construction. In contrast, there is no such fracturing in her own sense of self in identity terms; rather she has constructed a cohesive and integrated entrepreneurial leader identity that sees very few transitions (gender driven or otherwise). GF’s primary acknowledgment of gender in terms of her narratives occurred in relation to discussions around motherhood (which appear very strongly linked to her conception of womanhood). Her conscious, or subconscious, separation of gender from other identity facets may imply: that she imposes a gender-driven separation of role-related elements of her life (e.g., entrepreneur and mother); or, the contradiction inherent in the

separation facilitates a greater sense of satisfaction and integration in both identity domains (home and work); or, the relevance of gender to her sense of self relative to her entrepreneurial behavior holds less utility than one might assume (other than as a tool for explaining how tensions between roles and identity domains are reconciled).

Notable exceptions to GF’s lack of emphasis on gender in her narratives were those related to performance outcomes and perceptions of success. She elaborated on her belief that male and female entrepreneurs value different outcomes in terms of their entrepreneurial activities (both at the level of the firm and the individual) (Gorgievski, Ascalon, and Stephan 2011). She attributes this to the different meaning attached by each to their purpose in being an entrepreneur, and the ways in which they choose to enact that choice (i.e., at the level of strategies, practices, and decisions). Though accounting for difference by virtue of gender, GF did not attribute such difference to motherhood, noting that she would still have been doing things differently to a male counterpart irrespective of whether she had children. In her experience, male entrepreneurs are more prone to an “at any cost” approach to firm performance, and she did not feel (in her experience) that female entrepreneurs share in that attitude. She stated unequivocally that there were some compromises she was simply never going to be prepared to make and that those compromises were not related to responsibilities associated with motherhood, clearly stating that to attribute them to a care-giving role was simplistic. However, she did relate her experience of the empowerment of the adoption of an entrepreneurial identity relative to the occupational or career identity loss that often faces many women who opt out of that identity constructing space to raise children (Ekinsmyth 2011).

I don’t feel like I’ve got to prove anything. I haven’t had to trade one for the other. . . . Sometimes one will get in the way of the other—if it does I just get less sleep so I can do both. The kids are at school now so I can muck my week up a bit more. . . . I feel like I’m ten times the person I would be if I hadn’t done it. I haven’t had to compromise who I am to be a Mum. Some women once kids go to school it’s really hard for them. They

love their kids and they love being a mother but it isn't enough. . . . I think the outcomes that I value are different for me than a man. A man (and I'm generalising a bit!) they just want bigger-bigger-bigger, more-more-more, millions and trillions of dollars. Whereas, for me there is some compromise in that that I'm just not prepared to make. I'd do things differently and at a faster pace if I didn't have kids, but I'd still take a different approach to a man. They really don't have any idea in general about the extra responsibilities that fall on women who work. (2014).

GF's experience was that the assumption of one identity and role (that of entrepreneur) was beneficial to the other (that of mother) and that being an entrepreneur had made her a better mother. Her primary attribution of this advantage was not the typical assertion that it gave her more time with her children via work flexibility (Carrigan and Duberley 2013), but rather because she was being authentic and successful and not compromising her sense of self in order to be a mother. Ultimately, GF's experience has been that being a mother fed off her feelings of fulfillment as a person and the grafting of becoming a successful entrepreneur and the associated crafting of that identity ultimately made her a better mother because of the associated perceptions of satisfaction and achievement. This is a narrative contrary to many that are recounted (either empirically or anecdotally via media discourse) that women who start-up ventures do so to accommodate care-giving-related responsibilities and that a business is fitted in around that greater priority (Wall 2013). Those stories speak to the primacy of the mother role and the identification of the business start-up role as being dominantly utilitarian rather than meaningful. As GF asserted, she was always going to create a business as it was an origin ambition for her. Therefore, for her, one role/identity (entrepreneur) empowers her to do better in another (mother) and possibly others. As a result, she attaches no greater or lesser worth to either; rather, she values both equally as part of who she is. Though it was not her primary reason for becoming an entrepreneur, she has always been transparent in her narratives about the primacy she gave personal goals relative to business goals (i.e., both sets being devised in concert and her

personal goals featuring dominantly in her original business plan).

### Identity Work

In terms of identity work, GF spends very little time developing or projecting an identity to an external "audience" beyond those of her own staff. Therefore, her external identity workspace (Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010) cannot be conceived of extending much beyond her own firm and the associated network of relationships that entails (e.g., suppliers). This limiting of what constitutes the external domain appears not only congruent with GF's motivations and goals for being an entrepreneur but also reflects her relaxed adoption and stable perception of an entrepreneurial leader identity. GF's narrative implies a level of self-containment, and her internal identity regulation and moderation is further emphasized by her reticence in terms of engaging with any broader discourses of entrepreneurship, including any of a gendered nature. GF does not immerse herself in any entrepreneurship-related networks or collectively oriented activities (something that many entrepreneurs do to build social capital and to sustain identity work) (Downing 2005). However, as evidenced by her narratives, this has not affected the scale of her ambitions in relation to her firm in terms of growth and performance, or her assumption of the identity of entrepreneurial leader. Rather, her descriptions reinforce that for GF, her assessment of independent objective proxies of success (often via tangible firm performance data) are more sustaining to her sense of identity than any "identity work" she may do in the external environment.

The relatively insular nature of GF's external outward facing identity work (Watson 2009b) may have been limiting for some. However, it appears to have had the advantageous by-product of resulting in a form of ideological armor for her against broader popular and media discourses relating to entrepreneurship (including those gendered in nature). It is not unreasonable to suggest that many entrepreneurs embedded in her particular dynamic may have chosen to seek out collectively oriented entrepreneurship fora informed by such discourses to participate in (even peripherally). However, it appears that one reason GF may have rejected or resisted such a need is due to the stability of her self-identity in terms of its

entrepreneurial dimension. She is emphatic in terms of its definitional parameters across a temporal span of almost a decade, becoming both more nuanced and confident in terms of her expression of it. The essence of the identity was consistent and her methods of identity maintenance similar. Aside from the more recent public portrayal of her entrepreneurial identity via her success as a finalist in the 2013 Ernst and Young New Zealand Entrepreneur of the Year, GF has largely shunned any type of profile-generating publicity either for herself or the firm; this has not changed throughout the span of longitudinal data available (i.e., greater success has not altered her approach).

This “low profile” approach to leading via entrepreneurship appears to be a direct corollary of GF’s values-driven approach (Gupta, MacMillan, and Surie 2004). In practical terms, the decision was related to securing a position in an emerging market, and attitudinally it related to her belief that actions speak louder than words (i.e., succeeding was more important than talking about succeeding). Either way, those choices had significant implications for the form and character of her identity work. A significant portion of identity work in terms of social identity is posited to occur “facing outwards” (or externally) and, though oriented to the social rather than self-identity of the entrepreneurial leader, does have a reinforcing effect on the former (Watson 2009b). Given the limited extent of GF’s external engagement in terms of her entrepreneurial identity (and external projection of that identity), it prompts a reconsideration of the role of “outward facing” identity work in her case. Aside from the personal and business rationales, there is one additional factor to be considered: that is, her relative distance in terms of geographic proximity to the various locations in which her business is situated (for only a relatively short period of time in the life cycle of Willow Shoes has GF resided in a joint location). This is coupled with the fact that her domestic residence is also isolated, in that it is a rural location comprising a small farming community. This requires a particular strategy in terms of entrepreneurial leadership, but similarly it both enables and constrains certain traditional understandings of identity work. For example, the relationship between identity work and boundaries has been problematized in a variety of different ways (Knapp et al. 2013); however, the reality for GF is that the arrangement of her

particular work form is such that the boundaries between domains are physical and spatial in nature and that the tangibility of these has implications for her identity work.

GF reinforces the efficacy and meaningfulness of her entrepreneur-leader identity by evaluating its effectiveness relative to the satisfaction of her staff in terms of key values and associated culture. She related a number of anecdotes in this regard, and though informal in nature, they prove that she has found such mechanisms to be insightful and nonintrusive barometers of how her team (as opposed to her firm) are faring under her leadership. This type of values-driven feedback loop not only speaks to her authenticity rooted approach, but also acts as another form of identity work. It illustrates both the surety of her identity, and its perception by her staff (in that she is willing to “test” it), as well as her willingness to evolve that identity (and its associated practices) should the proxies she has identified begin to appear skewed in a negative fashion. Ultimately, her “knowing” that she is respected in no more quantifiable a measure than her sense-making via responses and behaviors is more of a reinforcement for her identity stability than any external feedback loop that might exist in an environment beyond her firm. This is not to say that GF seeks evidence that is more likely to be confirmatory of the identity she has crafted thus far, but rather that the saliency of any feedback for her is amplified if it is contextualized. Unusually, perhaps, she derives greater resources for her resolve about her identity and its centrality (Fauchart and Gruber 2011) from her current “real self” than any notion of a possible or ideal self that may be portrayed in, or via, a wider societal discourse (Wieland 2010). Possible selves, and the role of discourse in stimulating conceptualizations of the potential in parallel with the actual, being one of the more positive interpretations of the role discourse can have in terms of female entrepreneurship. However, as discussed earlier in the paper, GF reportedly remains somewhat impervious to such forms of discourse acting as any form of discursive resource to inform her identity generation.

## *Conclusions*

In examining GF’s lived experience as a female entrepreneurial leader, the objective of this paper was to explore from an identity work perspective the development of her



entrepreneur-leader identity. The paper is also somewhat novel in terms of the longitudinal observations possible, and the opportunity to capture narrative, intent, action, and consequence over a span of nearly a decade; in so doing, a number of conclusions that make a modest contribution to understanding in this particular topic arena can be drawn. For GF, the enactment of her identity as an entrepreneurial leader appeared (over time) to be comfortable, consistent, and clearly defined. The enactment of the identity (i.e., *how* it was brought to life) also appeared more of a priority to her than its achievement or maintenance. Whether this was a critical influence in the smooth integration of the identity across multiple domains (including limited, if any, identity compartmentalization) was less clear; especially as the particular organization of her work-home domains may also have been a contributory factor. GF built her entrepreneur and leader identities synergistically, and inseparably, because that is how she conceives of them; each an embodiment of the successful performance of the other. Over the span of data available, it became evident that the proportion of time tied to what might be described as the functional activities associated with each has recalibrated (i.e., as the firm has matured and less intensive resourcing is required in terms of business operations from GF's perspective, a greater proportion of time can be attributed to "entrepreneurial leadership" rather than "leading entrepreneurship"). Gender was a distinct thread through GF's narratives, but it never emerged as an active constituent element of either active identity creation or projection. There was acceptance that gender moderates behavior (though not intention) in terms of entrepreneurial performance and the form of decision-making (if not its rationale). However, this was not due to the role of "mother" as many other narratives of female entrepreneurship have indicated (in many respects much of GF's identity narrative was gender-neutral).

GF's identity work was minimal in a relative sense, and its dominant characteristic was its gender neutral and bounded focus. She was impervious, if not resistant, to broader entrepreneurial discourse (gendered or not), and her greatest identity resource emerged as being the constancy of her own perception as to what being an entrepreneur means. Her identity work was relational, but in an atypical fashion in that it was delimited by her immediate firm

environment, and this appeared to amplify its effectiveness as an identity work mechanism (rather than constrain it). GF's identity work was predominantly action driven (rather than talk or discourse) in either the internal or external sphere, or what Rae (2004) described as "identity as practice." In a fashion, her firm became a type of identity workspace (Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010) and one that was more empowering than a traditional occupational workplace. The notion of a "start-up" as an identity workspace is not an idea that has been pursued via empirical research previously, but one that may be deserving of traction, particularly given that, for GF, it appeared a resource as much for the development of self-identity as it was for social-identity (Watson 2009b). This may be linked to the fact that her identity as an entrepreneurial leader was not crafted elsewhere and then transplanted; rather, it was "built" in tandem with her firm. A form of identity reinforcement (if not regulation) that authenticates identity development as the firm passes through its life cycle. The data evidence this was the case for GF, and as a result, a number of advantages have transpired including: a lack of identity transition issues (or identity tension), high identity centrality, and significant internal congruence between identity perception and manifestation (in relation to both entrepreneurship and leadership).

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