

## Danish University Colleges

### Professional entrepreneurial identity construction

Ramsgaard, Michael Breum

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# Professional entrepreneurial identity construction

## – linking nutrition and health education and business emergence

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### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

The present study investigates the construction of a professional identity as an entrepreneur in a sample of people with educational background in nutrition and health. The study examines the connection between professional identity construction and entrepreneurial business emergence using 'entrepreneurial preparedness' as parameter. This research seeks to address the following questions: What significant components or characteristics do entrepreneurs rely on in the early processes of constructing an entrepreneurial identity.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

Based in the social constructionist perspective the methodology for the present study relies on qualitative interviews with five entrepreneurs with educational background in nutrition and health. The informants were selected from a database with 38 entrepreneurs with same educational background based on criteria as scope of business, years since graduation, line of profession, and professional focus for the business. All interviews were conducted as in-depth interviews with a semi-structured interview-guide in order to create a large base of data to be analyzed. Concurrently a thorough literature review has delivered key concepts for the exploration of the research question.

#### **Findings**

Results from the study show that 'entrepreneurial preparedness' is happening rather in a continuum than a fixed sequence why each entrepreneur should be viewed as a unique individual entrepreneur constructing his/her professional entrepreneurial identity. There is no fixed or pre-described entrepreneurial identity that the prospective entrepreneur can aim for, but instead many constituting factors in the continuum that lead in direction of business emergence, creation and growth.

#### **Practical implications**

The practical implications of the results call for a better didactical relation between educational efforts and early stages of business emergence where the professional entrepreneurial identity is constructed.

#### **Originality/value**

The study is proposing a new understanding in entrepreneurship theory between 'entrepreneurial preparedness' and construction of professional entrepreneurial identity to be viewed over a continuum. This calls for a processual and continuous approach to construction of professional identity when working with this in entrepreneurship education and learning contexts.

#### **Research limitations**

A limited number of interviews were conducted and further data collection is required in other educational settings to determine exactly how professional identity construction affects entrepreneurial preparedness and vice versa.

**Keywords**

Professional identity, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial identity, entrepreneurial preparedness

**RENT Conference topics**

Opportunity development and the emergence of business ideas/ Entrepreneurship education & ecosystem

**Author**

Michael Breum Ramsgaard is a senior lecturer at VIA University College, Aarhus, Denmark. He is part of 'The Research and Development Programme in Entrepreneurship Education' at VIA University College. His research projects focus primarily on entrepreneurship education, teaching and learning.

**Contact information:** E-mail: [mibj@viauc.dk](mailto:mibj@viauc.dk), Phone. + 45 87 55 26 25, [dk.linkedin.com/in/breum](http://dk.linkedin.com/in/breum)

VIA University College offers a wide range of educational programmes in areas, such as health, social education, technology, trade, design, business and animation. As Denmark's largest university of applied sciences with more than 18.000 students and 20 research centers in addition supporting the link between professional practice and education and research.

**1. Introduction**

The present study investigates the construction of a professional identity as an entrepreneur in a sample of people with educational background in nutrition and health. The study examines specifically the important connection between professional identity construction and entrepreneurial business emergence. The objective of the study is to propose a new connection between what Cope called 'entrepreneurial preparedness' (Cope, 2005; Harvey & Evans, 1995) in association with what it means to become a professional in nutrition and health. Results from the study show that 'entrepreneurial preparedness' is happening in a continuum where each entrepreneur should be viewed as one unique individual constructing his/her own professional entrepreneurial identity.

Secondly the study examines how this is influenced during education by lectures, peers and surrounding environment. Fundamentally the study explores the link from an educational context to the "practical" entrepreneur reality outside university after graduation and what significant components or characteristics entrepreneurs apply in the process of creating an entrepreneurial self-identity.

Studies of entrepreneurial identity construction show the importance of seeing new venture creation as a complex and reflective process, dealing with the two major questions "Who am I?" and "What are my capabilities?" (Harmeling, 2011; Ollila, Williams Middleton, & Donnellon, 2012; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Factors found to be influencing entrepreneurial identity construction have been evidenced to be role models, educational experience, professional interests, demography and professional image (Bosma, Hessels, Schutjens, Praag, & Verheul, 2012; Molinero & Pereira, 2013; Muofhe & Du Toit, 2011; Pittaway, Rodriguez-Falcon, Aiyegbayo, & King, 2011; Rigg & O'Dwyer, 2012; Van Auken, Fry, & Stephens, 2006). Despite this, very few studies have investigated the impact of professional identity construction on entrepreneurial preparedness. This indicates a need to understand the various perceptions of entrepreneurial identity linking both professional identity construction and entrepreneurial business emergence in the early stages.

There has however recently been a considerable interest amongst entrepreneurship scholars in identity construction (Nielsen & Lassen, 2012; Ollila et al., 2012). In these studies participants in entrepreneurship programmes are seen as active agents in construction of entrepreneurial identity but it is not necessarily the positions provided by the entrepreneurship programmes or educational context (Hytti & Heinonen, 2013).

What motives lies behind choosing a career path as an entrepreneur? This question is well considered within entrepreneurship research (Chan et al., 2012; Gibb Dyer, 1994; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Muofhe & Du Toit, 2011; Pihie & Akmaliah, 2009; Schein, 1984; Sherman, Sebora, & Digman, 2008) but the particular linkage between the educational context and the real work-life setting is sparsely explored. This study reveals findings about the complexity of learning processes which have and still has huge focus from many scholars (Collins, Smith, & Hannon, 2006; Cope, 2005; Minniti & Bygrave, 2001; Pittaway & Cope, 2007b; Pittaway & Thorpe, 2012; Souitaris, Zerbini, & Al-Laham, 2007). However key topics about transformation of knowledge and experiences from one system (education) to another (work life) is still seen as a paradox where elements and support systems in both “worlds” could be improved. Much educational effort is today put into a closer connection between university and business eg. in case- or project work, and the results in the current project indicates that learning outcome from these processes supports the professional entrepreneurial identity construction.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Research in entrepreneurship education deals with the central question whether entrepreneurs are born or made, and thus the important question whether entrepreneurship can be taught (Hannon, 2005; Henry, Hill, & Leitch, 2005). Amongst scholars there seems to be vital evidence and consensus that it makes sense to work with entrepreneurship in an educational setting (Blenker, Dreisler, Færgemann, & Kjeldsen, 2008; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Venkataraman, Sarasvathy, Dew, & Forster, 2012) and also the impact of teaching on business emergence has found eligibility (Fayolle & Gailly, 2012; Mwasalwiba, 2010; Pittaway & Cope, 2007a).

Hannon introduced the notion between teaching “...*about, for or through entrepreneurship...*” (Hannon, 2005) which has been seen as an important guideline for educators when planning entrepreneurship courses and activities. Research addresses many of the complex problems related to entrepreneurship education (Bager, 2011; Bruyat & Julien, 2001), and in this paper the coupling between professional identity and development of new businesses is in focus.

I start out by reviewing literature within professional identity which draws not only on entrepreneurship research but also studies about development of teachers’, nurses’ and other occupations’ professional identity. Secondly I conjoin Cope’s’ notion of ‘entrepreneurial preparedness’ with the terms about nascent entrepreneurship. These two main concepts are interesting to bind together in order to explore new grounds for facilitating the work around professional entrepreneurial identity construction in the early phases. Therefore it seems apparent to include debates around general identity construction (social science) and also career development (vocational science) (Chan et al., 2012; Hirschi & Fischer, 2013; Pihie & Akmaliah, 2009) since these elements often occur in professional identity development. I round up the

literature review by applying research about entrepreneurship into more general educational contexts and learning theories to the general research question in focus for this paper.

## 2.1 Professional identity

Professional identity is defined as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006; Slay & Smith, 2011). Becoming professional is a process of reflection and socialization (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Jones, Latham, & Betta, 2008), and some even uses the notion 'identity customization' (Pratt et al., 2006). Kullasepp refers to the term 'dialogical becoming' (Kullasepp, 2008) where construction of a professional identity is *"...a complex developmental process which trajectories are based on the work of a number of internal (personal) and external (social) factors."* (Kullasepp, 2008 p7).

Several studies have tried to identify factors that influence the professional identity amongst individuals. In a recent study Molinero and Pereira grouped factors into categories and at the same time described what way they strengthened or weakened the conception of professional identity (Molinero & Pereira, 2013). They relied their categories on 16 articles chosen in a thorough literature review summing the categories up to: **A)** Role models through social experience (family, friends, media, other role models), **B)** Educational experience (previous, degree accessibility, degree characteristics, **C)** Congruence with profession and professional interests (personality, intellectual capacity, values), **D)** Demographic characteristics (age, gender, geography) **E)** Professional image (social status, profession prestige, possibilities to have a future job), and **F)** Professional experience (Molinero & Pereira, 2013). These categories can be used as a guideline when analysing respondents in our interviews and understanding if the conceptual framework for constructing an entrepreneurial professional identity differs from that of the traditional professional identity.

The specific research on entrepreneurial professional identity has in numerous accounts tried in the same way to categorize factors leading towards taking the step and becoming an entrepreneur (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008; Anderson & Warren, 2011; Down & Warren, 2008; Garud, Schildt, & Lant, 2014; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Jones et al., 2008; Obrecht, 2011; Ollila et al., 2012; Ollila & Williams Middleton, 2013; Vesalainen & Pihkala, 2000; Warren, 2004; Watson, 2009a) This has been studied both in terms of identity construction (Nielsen & Lassen, 2012), venture creation (Bager, 2011; Sánchez, 2011; Shook, Priem, & McGee, 2003), narrative approaches (Downing, 2005; Hytti, 2003; Hytti, 2005), and nascent entrepreneurs (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Liao & Welsch, 2008; Middleton, 2013; Obschonka, Silbereisen, Schmitt-Rodermund, & Stuetzer, 2011).

The process of creating a professional role as entrepreneur includes how the graduate connect experiences and information from the educational context, that helps them identify or develop new products and the resources needed to start a new venture (Sánchez, Carballo, & Gutiérrez, 2011). Again this is highlighting the paradox about the graduate defining him or herself as an entrepreneur which does not automatically imply stepping into a pre-fixed role or identity but moreover involves a negotiation with other concurrently held identities that can be evaluated through reflection (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008).

Particularly the pre-startup-phase is relevant to the present study since in the nascent phase where *"...people's self-conceptions, intentions and eventual need to find alternative career-options have the most central effect on the start-up decision"* (Vesalainen & Pihkala, 2000, p 105)

## 2.2 Entrepreneurial preparedness

Jason Cope proposed a dynamic learning perspective in 2005 in order to build a sufficient conceptual framework that could help explain how entrepreneurs learn. He based his findings on three interrelated elements: **1)** Dynamic temporal phases, **2)** interrelated processes, and **3)** superordinate characteristics (Cope, 2005). Nonetheless, entrepreneurial learning still remains poorly understood (Cope & Watts, 2000; Deakins & Freel, 1998; Rae & Carswell, 2000), since these three elements haven't been researched further in depth. Harvey and Evans suggest that *"...each individual approaches the learning process with a unique range of accumulated skills and abilities..."* (Harvey & Evans, 1995). Similar to the thesis about construction of professional identity (Molinero & Pereira, 2013) Harvey and Evans state that in preparation for entrepreneurship the individual must assess *"...their personal/psychological attributes, their stage of career and personal life-cycles, a skills assessment inventory, and the goals and level of motivation..."* (Harvey & Evans, 1995, p 342). They define the term 'entrepreneurial preparedness' as *"...a concept that encapsulates the immense complexity of accumulated learning that individuals bring to the new venture creation process..."* (Cope, 2005, p 378; Harvey & Evans, 1995). The concept has similarities to what others call 'anticipatory socialization' (Gibb Dyer, 1994; Starr & Fondas, 1992) which is defined in terms of the overall previous experiences and learning that prepares an individual for a career in the entrepreneurial field (Starr & Fondas, 1992).

Cope and others explored the notion of trigger events as part of entrepreneurial preparedness (Cope, 2003; Liang & Dunn, 2007; Morrison, 2000; Rae, 2013) in order to explain the 'the moment' where conscious mental awareness about the entrepreneurial decision. These moments are described as 'learning episodes' as periods of experience subsequently seen as influential in forming attitudes to life and work and at the same time constructing identity (Rae & Carswell, 2000; Rae, 2013). Morrison on the other hand suggests that *"...the process of entrepreneurship initiation has its foundations in person and intuition, and society and culture..."* (Morrison, 2000, p. 59). Having a cultural perspective Morrison conclude that entrepreneurship educators need to be more aware about differences between entrepreneurs rather than using unified, globalized homogeneity view on entrepreneurs as a focal point.

## 2.3 Identity construction

The issue about identity construction is also addressed in the more general identity literature in social sciences where the concept of identity has been theorised extensively revealing two trends **1)** Self-identity, and **2)** Social identity (Kasperova & Kitching, 2012; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012).

Identity work in entrepreneurship research has recent years become a qualified and important topic (Down & Reveley, 2004; Down & Warren, 2008; Downing, 2005; Harmeling, 2011; Hytti, 2005; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012). Down and Warren demonstrates how clichés are used by aspirant entrepreneurs to *"...secure a robust useful, and achievable sense of entrepreneurial self-identity..."* (Down & Warren, 2008 p4). They base their paper on the narrative practices related to the unfolding of an entrepreneurial identity. Prior debates in social sciences has led to *"...consensus that identity is not located in the personality of the individual, but instead is constituted through interaction between the individual, society and culture..."* (Down & Warren, 2008, p 5) which is similar to Morrisons findings. This leads to the important discussion whether the entrepreneurial identity is mainly based on the discourses and cultures around venture creation (Down & Reveley, 2004; Downing, 2005; Thompson & Downing, 2007) or as Down and Warren put it: '...skilled

cultural operators...’ (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013) that can take action into their own hands (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006).

The key question in the narrative perspective is how entrepreneurs use narratives to establish and support themselves as entrepreneurs (Cohen & Musson, 2000; Rae & Carswell, 2000), and also how these constructs are legitimated in the culture or work life, is an ongoing debate (J. R. Mitchell & Shepherd, 2010; R. K. Mitchell, Smith, Seawright, & Morse, 2000; R. K. Mitchell et al., 2002).

Mitchell represents the cognitive discipline stating that entrepreneurs in different cultures share the same type of cognitive scripts and that these cognitive scripts are different from that of non-entrepreneurs. (R. K. Mitchell et al., 2000). Entrepreneurial cognitions are in this respect knowledge structures that individuals use to make assessments or decisions about their entrepreneurial career (R. K. Mitchell et al., 2002).

Therefore it is useful to explore what motives the individual graduate may have in an important career transition going from university to a professional work life as an entrepreneur. The identity construction process about becoming an entrepreneur may undoubtedly lead to reflections where the individual assesses and judges whether or not to proceed with an identity construction as a future entrepreneur.

It is also acknowledged in this part of the literature on entrepreneurial identity work that entrepreneurs are manipulating viewpoints of the entrepreneurial self-identity to achieve outcomes and goals for their new ventures. (Down & Reveley, 2004; Down & Warren, 2008; Downing, 2005; Warren, 2004). When this perspective is coupled with the term ‘entrepreneurial preparedness’ (Cope & Watts, 2000; Harvey & Evans, 1995), we see that the individual graduate may approach the entrepreneurial process with a unique set of accumulated skills, abilities and expectations (Molinero & Pereira, 2013) but also a narrative construct of the entrepreneurial professional identity that holds fragmentary and unfinished, maybe even inconsistent narratives (Somers, 1994).

## **2.4 Career transitions**

When dealing with professional identity in research it seems relevant to take career theory into consideration since important decisions about pursuing the dream of starting your own business are made in the shift from the expected career choice to that of being an entrepreneur.

The notion of career is several places defined as *“the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time”* (Chan et al., 2012, p. 73; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). In a large study in Singapore Chan et al. found that entrepreneurship, professionalism, and leadership serves as three key capacities in a subjective/person-centered framework for career development in what they call *“...an increasingly boundary less work context”* (Chan et al., 2012). Career is seen as something quite different from vocation or occupation (Chan et al., 2012; Obschonka et al., 2011). You are in other words expected *“...to unfold a career over a lifetime, shaped by environmental opportunities and constraints, personal aspirations (including motivations, efficacies, and intentions), abilities, and experiences.”* (Chan et al., 2012, p 73).

In this perspective you are always developing and progressing your career. A key question in vocational research and career development theory could be: How well is entrepreneurship encompassed as a career option along with more conventional career choices?

Entrepreneurship has risen over the last centuries both in research and practice (Bager, 2011; Blenker, Korsgaard, Neergaard, & Thrane, 2011; Blenker et al., 2012; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Venkataraman et al., 2012) but what kind of attitudes effects the career choice of becoming an entrepreneur? Henderson and Robertson identifies namely three broad approaches to the choice: **1)** Trait theory (common links or capabilities, **2)** Social development (factors as risk, family, education and training, and perceived job opportunities, and **3)** Structure opportunity (stronger focus on family, school peers and work climate) (Henderson & Robertson, 2000). Later developments followed especially the employer-side of the career choice which was argued to be based upon career a) socialization, b) orientation, and c) progression (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Gibb Dyer, 1994; Henderson & Robertson, 2000). Gibb Dyers model of entrepreneurial careers has been thoroughly discussed since its introduction but for the purpose of this paper it holds important value:

**Figure 1**  
**A Model of Entrepreneurial Careers**

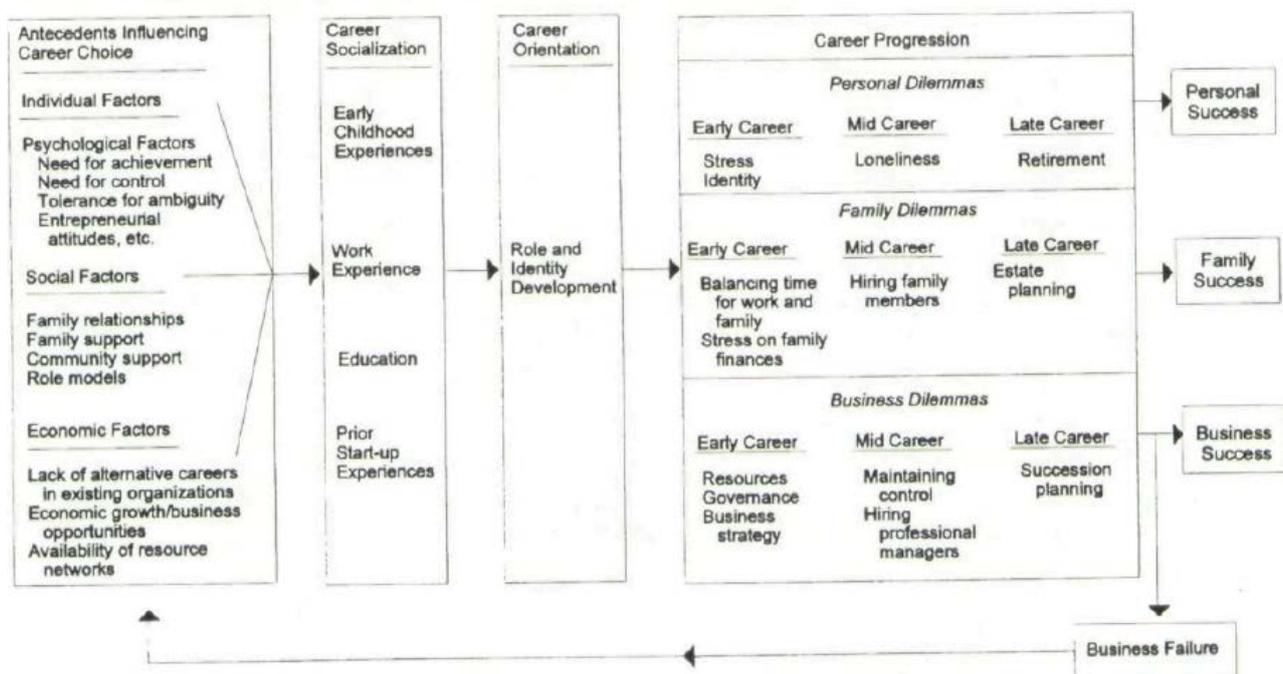


Figure adapted from (Gibb Dyer, 1994)

The decision of applying an entrepreneurial role to your professional identity is by Gibb Dyer presented as happening in two stages. In the first stage the general entrepreneurial role is recognized as a valid choice related to building and starting up a business, whereas the second stage relies on the specific orientation towards an entrepreneurial role and identity as an entrepreneur (Gibb Dyer, 1994; Henderson & Robertson, 2000). This indicates some of the complexities explained earlier about professional identity construction processes and indicates some sort of continuum for entrepreneurial identity construction.

Work values and intentions is another aspect of career transitions and development of a professional entrepreneurial identity (Krueger Jr, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000; Krueger & Carsrud, 1993). Hirschi and Fischer argue that work values are useful predictors of career intentions (Hirschi & Fischer, 2013). Specifically they

found a positive association between 'openness to change' and entrepreneurial intention in line with prior research proposing "...that entrepreneurs are characterized by higher change orientation, low uncertainty avoidance, an acceptance of financial insecurity, and positive attitude toward risk.." (Henderson & Robertson, 2000; McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; J. R. Mitchell & Shepherd, 2010).

Dutton et al. argues that work life is "...a pervasive life domain and a salient source of meaning and self-definition" (Dutton et al., 2010, p265). Through work you form, transform and modify both their internal identity and external professional identity (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006).

## **2.5 Education context and learning**

Summing up professional entrepreneurial identity construction has a valid place in educational settings and learning processes since students all-ready work with their professional identity and career.

A prime reason why entrepreneurship education has met resistance at universities is according to Bager the dominant narrow understanding of entrepreneurship education (Bager, 2011). The field of entrepreneurship can also be looked upon and qualified in a broader perspective, namely as facilitator for university-business relationships, cross disciplinary learning activities and build entrepreneurial mind-sets rather than just new venture skills (Bager, 2011). Based on Gibb, Bager argues that entrepreneurial behaviours, skills and attributes must be nurtured by planned pedagogies and exposure to entrepreneurship experience (Bager, 2011; Gibb & Hannon, 2006).

This is one of the prime questions for the study which will be presented in the following.

## **3. Approach and methodology**

The sample for the qualitative study consists of a selected group of professionals with a nutrition and health background. From a database with 38 professionals the sample of graduates were selected based on criteria as scope of the business, length of existence and prior work experience from the professional field. A qualitative approach is used to explore major topics to be analyzed. The preliminary data presented here derives from the qualitative interview study but only three of the five interviews are included in the paper due to time constraints.

Based on Kvale's notions of designing qualitative interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) the aim of the study is to highlight the complexities in linking experience and knowledge from an education to the actual day-to-day work life as an entrepreneur in that particular field.

Working with the dynamic qualitative approach from Maxwell (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Maxwell, 2012; Maxwell, 2009) the research question in focus is: What significant components or characteristics the entrepreneurs apply in the process of creating an entrepreneurial self-identity. All interviews are in-depth interviews (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) with a semi-structured interview guide in order to create a large base of data to be analyzed. After transcription of the interviews the data was coded focusing on key terms addressed in the literature review in order to investigate the link between knowledge and experience in the university setting and the experiences and expectations in the life as an entrepreneur.

Three of the five interviews are included in this paper and the remaining will be included at a later point.

#### **4. Discussion of results and findings**

Common for all participants is, that they have a clear and well defined purpose for the company. From the database with 48 businesses with owners or founders with a Bachelor's Degree Programme in Nutrition and Health, the interview persons were selected based on scope of business and other criteria as explained earlier.

One example of a clear value proposition is:

**A:** "We cook company lunch programs and also food for banquets for private customers or companies. That is our main task."

**B:** "I would like to inspire people in general to live a healthier life – that is probably the foundation for my work life. Whether it is as self-employed or fulfilled in other ways doesn't matter that much."

**C:** "To go out to pedagogical institutions and implement food and meal policies and guidelines, do speeches, lunchbox events...that's where my drive is at the moment."

Commenting on the actual reason for starting a business has different answers:

**A:** "My partner is educated as a chef and I'm a bachelor in health and nutrition. We just discussed that it could be funny to start something up together...so in some way it has always been inside me, but it strengthened when I met my partner and we started talking about creating a business together."

**B:** "As soon as my contract ended with my job, then we talked about opening a shop downtown. In the meantime the management and lease of this canteen became available which we won. That was the beginning."

When asked about motivation some describe it as drive or spirit which fits with Gibb & Dyers figure about entrepreneurial career development.

A prime focus for this paper is the connection between educational settings and real-life context as an entrepreneur, where entrepreneurial preparedness is seen as a vital parameter in order to understand what is happening in this learning process. What kind of constituting elements does the entrepreneur rely on from the education when looking back?

**B:** "I've had both project management and entrepreneurship courses during my education. That was positive even though it only lasted 4 weeks...If it wasn't for this, then I don't think I would have had the courage to do it. Now I had the tools for business plan, registration etc."

**A:** "Well, I remember that I participated in an elective course about entrepreneurship over a couple of days. There came various self-employed to tell about their way into it. That initiated thoughts and dreams about becoming one my-self."

Same person comments the experience as super inspiring. So for some various triggers helps for one part initiating thoughts that entrepreneurship might be a valid and attractive career path. Albert Bandura's work on self-efficacy can show useful here since an effect says becoming an entrepreneur requires success experiences, role models, social persuasion and positive emotional states (Bandura, 2012; Bandura, 1977).

These sources can be viewed on a leverage or continuum where things can shift one way or the other. This meaning that a potential entrepreneur needs to meet several different role models – it is not enough to just meet one successful person since there has to be some kind of fit for it to be integrated in the prospective entrepreneur's professional identity development. In other words professional entrepreneurial identity construction is not some predefined elements that we expose the entrepreneur for but rather a myriad of many different factors where some will be part of the identity process for one person but maybe not for the other. This call for differentiated teaching approach and in line with this paper: A differentiated identity approach.

Something two of the interview persons elaborates on:

**B:** "If you had an idea...I remember having quite a lot of ideas whilst studying. It could have been really interesting if I had followed some of them – also even though it failed, but then I could have learned a lot."

**C:** "Actually here we found out that we were covering too many things at the same time....we didn't have time for everything, and Anne also needed a job elsewhere at the same time as starting the business."

So the continuum is reflected if we compare the different businesses since some are far ahead from the beginning and others need a formal job to start with before going full time with the new venture.

Heraclitus of Ephesus was a Greek philosopher, known for his doctrine of change being central to the universe. He is known to have said: No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.

What kind of professional base does the entrepreneur activate in his or her business?

**A:** "The planning of menus and I also often think in health terms around the food. And the off course leadership that covers all sorts of areas. Also economics since I'm responsible for administrative work and to check if the finances are ok. I think there are many things that I draw on from the education...I think you learn the basic knowledge."

**A:** "It is satisfying for me to be self-employed. It is nice to have a positive influence on other people's health. For instance I remember a dinner delivery to an engineering company where many of the workers were men. None of them liked fish which was part of the weekly menu, but it actually ended with them liking it."

**C:** "We had a module about laws, interventions and innovation...I can't remember if you could choose extra things besides that...I seriously thought that this is never going to be me. We worked with ideas and projects, but it didn't interest me much back then."

In relation to this the individuals also assesses their capabilities and competencies in the dialogical process of becoming an entrepreneur:

**C:** "...you have to find the essence of who you are and what your core competencies are...that could have been elaborated during the education to be better prepared for now where we have to sell our services and products all the time."

Future potential for the business is also something that is important for the owners:

**A:** "Our main buyer would very much like us to take extra costumers because they have companies on the waiting list. But we have to say no since we have a hard time keeping up. We have to expand and buy new ovens and hire more people in order to accomplish that."

And finally the experience of peers and their support for the entrepreneurial process:

**B:** "If you are really eager about your project and fight for it, then the study environment can support you. I remember the social support and activities with fellow students whom were highly engaged in things."

The study shows the importance of creating grounds for identity reflection in the educational setting. The different entrepreneurs from the case all state that much further support and mentorship in the process of developing an entrepreneurial identity is needed.

Often the graduates have sought this support from other arenas as family, friends and fellow entrepreneurs from other fields. Both Kullasepp (Kullasepp, 2008) and Dutton et. al (Dutton et al., 2010) proposes models for positive identity construction Both of these models identifies several factors that might influence graduates professional identity construction. But the educational arena is failing to describe how this is to be implemented in a didactical setting where focus is put on how these factors might contribute in strengthening or weakening the professional entrepreneurial identity.

The main part of the interviewees implies that care for this process is something to put more focus on. Significant lectures, specific entrepreneurship or project management courses can initiate thoughts on creating your own business after graduation. But if the graduate has the feeling of no support the decision might be postponed or rejected.

This leads me to propose continuum in relation to 'entrepreneurial preparedness' since no pre-fixed plan can tell whether or not an individual will choose the career path as an entrepreneur. Much more it is a question of exposure to a manifold of factors that might lead in the entrepreneurial direction. In the Oxford Dictionary continuum is defined as: A continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, but the extremes are quite distinct. So the two extremes could be viewed as professional entrepreneurial identity or no entrepreneurial identity. In between these two points exists a wide range of possibilities for coupling your professional identity with entrepreneurial elements.

In could also be considered whether entrepreneurial identity can be seen as a latent concept of a person's identity. Similar to genetic research where it has recently been shown that genes hide latent potential which under the right circumstances can be evoked and nurtured, it could be a valid point that entrepreneurial professional identity lies latent within us all and (Vesalainen & Pihkala, 2000) and must be nurtured in a differentiated learning approach.

## **5. Value and implications**

The present study has focused on one educational context namely that of nutrition and health at a University College in Denmark. Further research must be put into how these findings might look in other educational settings. However the importance and urgency of linking education and practical work life close

together maintain. In the university of applied science this is the main agenda, but with the group of students wanting to become entrepreneurs it is often seen as a difficult and complex task.

1. If “learning by doing” still has validation in the entrepreneurial processes (Cope & Watts, 2000; Pepin, 2012) it is relevant to ask: How can we prepare students better for a life as an entrepreneur? What features of the entrepreneurial professional identity can be learned prior to starting the venture? Cope also asks “How do different forms of prior experience interact with one another to shape an individual’s level of entrepreneurial preparedness?” (Cope, 2005). Can there in any way be constituted a better link between learning from and in entrepreneurial practice, e.g. with internships in own business or mentorship with successful entrepreneurs? (Parilla & Hesser, 1998; Piihl & Philipsen, 2011; Piihl & Rasmussen, 2014)
2. Also a central element around reflection processes needs to be worked more extensively on in the educational context. Schön’s notion of the reflective practitioner (D. Schön, 2001; D. A. Schön, 1992) seems relevant to incorporate when the objective is to nurture reflective processes about becoming an entrepreneur (Jack & Anderson, 1999). In education we mainly work with learning, reflection and change which in the reflective practitioner is also seen as the main goal. If this notion is coupled with knowledge from entrepreneurship research eg. entrepreneurial preparedness we will in the future be better able to constitute reflection processes that contribute to the creation of an entrepreneurial professional identity.
3. Lastly the complex task of facilitation of identity work needs to be updated with the more recent and applicable findings about identity work in general (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Cerulo, 1997; Musson & Duberley, 2007; Rigg & O’Dwyer, 2012; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009) and in the concept of this paper also the notion of professional identity creation (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Kullasepp, 2008; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012; Pratt et al., 2006; Watson, 2009a).

Within this area lies many still uncovered areas of research that can help us create better educations that in much higher degree have relevance for the practical and professional world of graduates. One area to look further into is that of pedagogics and didactical implications (Blenker et al., 2012; Neergaard, Tanggaard, Krueger, & Robinson, 2012) and also the works from Jack Mezirow on transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990) where identity work is an integrated part seems evident to incorporate (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1997).

Entrepreneurship seems today to be a potential career path for only relatively few individuals, why it gives reason to investigate this topic much further in future research. Work values and entrepreneurial intention is one important aspect of this examination. Especially in the field of nutrition and health it is relevant to broaden the attraction and variation in self-employed job opportunities and possible professional entrepreneurial identities within this particular field since there seems to be a quite narrow perspective on job opportunities.

The literature review showed that professional identity is constructed through dialogical and customized processes where both internal and external factors influence. Coupled with the term ‘entrepreneurial preparedness’ this study highlighted the complexity of the accumulated learning that individuals bring to the new venture creation process.

I propose a new understanding of entrepreneurial preparedness where the concept of continuum is considered a central aspect in order to explore the constituting factors or elements over time when constructing a professional entrepreneurial identity. In the early stages the general entrepreneurial role is recognized as a valid career choice, whereas the second major stage relies on the specific orientation towards an entrepreneurial role and identity as an entrepreneur. But in between lies many important entrepreneurial enablers that needs further attention in research.

Furthermore the topic should also be explored at more levels, being both an organizational and a societal level. The field of entrepreneurship research holds numerable questions to be explored and in particular the educational perspective that would take didactical and pedagogical interventions and teaching into view would be interesting.

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