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Authoring the female entrepreneur while talking the discourse of work–family life balance

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Abstract
This article illustrates the gendering of entrepreneurship as an intertwined process of gendering and entrepreneuring that can commence from the analysis of a single situated practice. The practice I explore is deemed 'authoring own-self as entrepreneur', that is, how the 'I' is authored through narrative and discursive processes, mobilized in the presentation of a public identity within a community of entrepreneurs. This is illustrated by four ways of authoring the process of becoming a female entrepreneur in relation to gender and life issues: as a firm-creator, as a coauthor of a project, as a responsible wife, as a member of the second generation. In authoring entrepreneuring, discursive resources are mobilized and edited within a narrative of identity where the process of negotiating one of the major narratives in the field (the work–family life balance) is performed. The discourse on work–family life balance is traditionally constructed in dichotomous terms, and its gender subtext is taken for granted. It portrays a supposed universality of gender conditions based on the implicit assumptions that when women work their family life is under threat, that work and family are two separate and separable spheres of activities, that it is a women's responsibility to keep them in balance, and finally that women in entrepreneurship, as in any other working environment, will be affected by the potential unbalance since their primary loyalty would be to reproduction and the home. On the contrary when female entrepreneuring is conceived as a life form, the discourse on work–family life balance is challenged.

Keywords
authoring, entrepreneuring, gendering, narrative, positioning

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an attempt to promote studies and research that consider entrepreneurship as a societal rather than economic phenomenon grounded in social, political, cultural, and ecologic realities (Steyaert and Katz, 2004; Tedmanson et al., 2012). This implies that entrepreneurship

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is explored in its context of production as a geopolitics of relations and within a texture of entrepreneurial practices situated in time and space. These spaces are political as they can be constituted through a variety of discursive practices that signal the processual identity construction (Ahl, 2012) of the entrepreneur and his or her project in the entrepreneurial community.

Nevertheless, a discourse on entrepreneurship as a multi-discursive construction is rather more controversial than was the monolithic economic discourse centered on the heroic, lonely male entrepreneur hegemonic dominating the literature of the past. That discourse has been largely deconstructed by many scholars, who have exposed entrepreneurial governmentality (Bruni et al., 2004b) and argued in favor of post-structuralist research methods in order to avoid dead-ends (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) and to present alternative 'voices' coming mainly from feminist studies (Calás et al., 2009) and ethnic entrepreneurship (Banerjee and Tedmanson, 2010; Waldinger et al., 2000). Other studies have deconstructed hegemonic entrepreneurial standpoints (Chakrabarty, 2000) and revealed dimensions interconnected with gender, ethnicity, religion, and the geographical context. Moreover, the concept of intersectionality (Essers and Benschop, 2009; Özbilgin et al., 2011) illustrates how gender, class, ethnicity, and religion interact in the construction of social categories defining how entrepreneurship is discursively constructed and situationally performed.

The possibility of exploring the multi-discursive construction of entrepreneurship originates from its conception as a processual phenomenon, as 'entrepreneuring' (Steyaert, 2007a), that is, as a process which can be studied without focusing on economic or managerial logics, but as part of society and fundamentally as a process of social change (Calás et al., 2009; Jones and Spicer, 2009; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006). The concept of entrepreneuring inscribes entrepreneurship studies in a social ontology of becoming that is common also to those practice-based studies oriented by an actor-network sensibility (Gherardi, 2012; Law and Singleton, 2013; Steyaert, 2007a). Moreover, the concept of becoming also has a prominent place in feminist studies where the positivist approach that may be named 'gender *in* organization' is contrasted with a social constructionist and processual one named 'gendering *of* organization' (Calás et al., 2014; Martin, 2003). Thus, instead of understanding sex and gender as two intertwined, stable, and usually binary properties of people *in* organizations, here sex/gender is conceived as simultaneously enacted social processes contributing to the production of institutional contexts as gendered spaces. A processual approach to gendering practices assumes the mutually constitutive outcomes of social practices: people produce and reproduce what is then reified as social structure and experienced as resources for or constraints on human actions.

An analogous movement from 'gender *in* entrepreneurship' to 'gendering *of* entrepreneurship' is underway; contributing to this debate, this article illustrates how the intertwined process of gendering and entrepreneuring can be studied as a form of life, starting from analysis of a single situated practice. The practice that I explore is termed 'authoring own-self as entrepreneur', that is, the narrative of identity that is mobilized in the presentation of a public self within a community of entrepreneurs.

Accordingly, within this framework, I explore a dimension of gendering the entrepreneurial life project connected to how the discourse on work–family life balance is mobilized, resisted, and contested. The article illustrates four differently authored narratives in which various forms of connections between work and family life are performed. As such, the traditional dichotomies between male/female and work/family life collapse when female entrepreneuring is conceived as a life project.

There is considerable debate in the work–family literature over how the balance construct should be defined (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011). This includes focusing upon: approximately equal time devoted to work and family roles; equal psychological involvement in work and family roles; equal satisfaction with work and family roles; different levels of gendered satisfaction (where

female entrepreneurs nurture satisfaction by creating work–family synergies, whereas male entrepreneurs gain satisfaction from work–family balance by obtaining family support at home; Eddlestone and Powell, 2012). While in the traditional entrepreneurship literature, work and family life have been constructed as two separate (and inseparable) dimensions which must be balanced, in the four narratives presented here, both are entrenched. A life course is described along a single dimension of flow in which boundaries and connections are flexibly drawn and various forms of connection between work and family life become possible and produce different consequences.

Authoring entrepreneuring as a life project implies a process of appropriating and enacting behaviors, discourses, and competent participation in a local community. It also implies connecting with historical and situated narratives in the community, developing a life project and positioning one's self and one's competences *vis-à-vis* a community. When entrepreneuring is seen as a life-world, an interdependent relationship between entrepreneuring and life is established and both are open and incomplete. So, even if individual life always takes place in an entrepreneurial social world, it will differ for those involved depending upon their situation. Accordingly, the article is based on a participative research conducted with a local group of women entrepreneurs intent upon establishing their own political representation within their entrepreneurial association. Therefore, authoring entrepreneuring is conceived, in what follows, as a process of individual and collective life project construction in which a narrative of identity is performed in relation with a researcher who acts as a co-constructor of the narrative – not just a passive recipient of a story.

The article is structured as follows: a short presentation of the theoretical framework introduces the concept of authoring one's entrepreneurial story, and from this assumption a methodology for the empirical analysis of self-narratives is presented. In outlining the research results, four ways of authoring the process of female entrepreneuring are illustrated in relation to gender and life issues: as a firm-creator, as a coauthor of a project, as a responsible wife, as a member of the second generation. In authoring one's own story, discursive resources are mobilized and edited within a coherent narrative in which the process of negotiating one of the major narratives in the field (i.e. the work–family life balance) is performed. In the next section, the grand discourse of work–family life balance will be deconstructed. This demonstrates how it reaffirms the association of women with reproduction and the home, while in situated interactions the group of women entrepreneurs collectively negotiate their experience of work–life balance going beyond 'traditional' thinking, making various forms of connections between work and family life possible. In the conclusion, I discuss how the gendering of entrepreneurial practices takes place within multi-discursive practices which are situationally performed.

Becoming an entrepreneur as a process of authoring one's own story

I approach the theme of becoming an entrepreneur within a theoretical framework that considers it as identity work and participation in cultural, discursive, and historical practices. The concept of authoring is drawn upon to stress a practice approach to identity which 'trace our participation, especially our agency, in socially produced, culturally constructed activities' (Holland et al., 1998: 40). Identity, therefore, is something that is 'done' and is 'said' (Martin, 2003); it involves interaction with others and is performed when presenting the self in situated narratives of one's story.

Entrepreneurship studies have explored stories and narratives especially since the old question of 'who is the entrepreneur?' has been delegitimized as 'the wrong question' (Gartner, 1988). Entrepreneurial identity has been widely explored, and the idea of identity as designed by

discourse has been critically discussed (Essers, 2009; Foss, 2004; Watson, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009). A new problematization of this old question may prove useful once we assume that the entrepreneurial subject is something that has itself to be explained and that the study of identity construction may provide many ways of so doing (Steyaert, 2007b). In particular, the idea of identity work (Down and Reveley, 2009; Petriglieri and Stein, 2012; Taylor, 2005) has been a pivotal point of contention around the issue of how human agency shapes self-identity in the context of wider discourses, since individuals are far from being passive in the face of discursive pressures (Watson, 2008). Identity work combines inward self-reflection and outward engagement with various discursively available social identities and discourses. It proves useful in exploring how the entrepreneurship discourse is intertwined with a life project discourse, and particularly with the discourse of the work–family life balance as it is present within a local community. I assume a theoretical stance toward entrepreneuring, gendering, and identity work which approaches them as intertwined practices and situated performances (Gherardi and Perrotta, 2014; Martin, 2006; Poggio, 2006); my analysis of how the authoring of entrepreneurial identity is enacted will use the concept of positionality.

The concept of positionality originated in gender studies (Alcoff, 1988; Davies and Harré, 1990; Katila and Eriksson, 2011), and it is used mainly to examine the problem of the production of subjectivity. For Davies and Harré, the concept of positioning pertains to social psychology, and their use of the term 'positioning' contrasts with the concept of human agency as role play. Thus, it is useful for analysis of the production of self (the narrating self) and the narrated topic as a discursive practice within the dynamic occasions of encounters.

Gender and entrepreneurship positionings in narratives are undertaken through discourses, practices, norms, languages, and values which reflect the socially constructed images of maleness and femaleness (Ahl, 2004; Bruni et al., 2005; McAdam, 2012; Mirchandani, 1999). These representations operate through a series of well-established rules, both explicit and implicit, which define gender contents relative to the male and female performances appropriate in the organizational context and broader society. By defining who should do what, the rules express the normative order inherent in the community's gender culture and moral order (Brush et al., 2009). As women entrepreneurs assume a discursive position for themselves, they also attribute – explicitly or implicitly – discursive positions to possible audiences, and they locate their discursive position within wider societal discourses – such as work–family life balance. As such, gendering and entrepreneuring can be analyzed in a highly dynamic way when affording attention to how the authoring of an entrepreneurial identity is undertaken within situated discursive practices and in relation to the life project. Nevertheless, we should not forget the social context in which talk takes place. The actual positioning of the narrative self occurs within a discourse on gendered entrepreneurship that prioritizes the masculine (Bruni et al., 2004a; De Bruin et al., 2006) to achieve stability within gender regimes and discourses within families and businesses. In identity narratives, it is possible to see specific ways of authoring gender identity which go hand-in-hand with gendered practices, through which women entrepreneurs accomplish their business ownership through 'doing' and 'redoing' gender, drawing on a complex repository of different practices (Diaz-Garcia and Welter, 2011).

The focus here is upon how the authoring of identity is 'done' in situated discourses regarding entrepreneuring and life issues, assuming that an entrepreneurial project is part of a life plan within the pervasiveness of the discourse about work–family life balance. Moreover, the study of entrepreneuring and life issues is particularly relevant for family businesses, small firms, and women entrepreneurs as entrepreneurial practices and family issues are deeply embedded (Dyer and Handler, 1994; Jaouen and Lasch, 2013; Kisfalvi, 2002). Qualitative research grounded in non-positivist research traditions is broadening the field of entrepreneurial studies by including

processual and contextual dynamics (Anderson et al., 2014; Gherardi and Perrotta, 2014). Those using a life history (Mulholland, 1996) or narrative approach (Dawson and Hjorth, 2012) have analyzed entrepreneuring activities as an element and feature of the life course rather than a discrete and distinct activity. And the so-called 'lifestyle entrepreneurs' (Henricks, 2003; Tregear, 2005) are defined in relation to a discourse that privileges life issues (personal interest, a desired living environment, keeping the business small, alternative criteria for success) and for women entrepreneurs within a discourse of work–family life balance.

Research context

This study on the process of becoming an entrepreneur was conducted by interviewing 70 craftswomen belonging to an Artisan Association, covering all sectors, and one specific geographical area Trentino, Northern Italy. The researchers involved in the project explored how to obtain better knowledge of the biographies of these entrepreneurs; a group of women from the Association supported a participatory research project (Lykes and Coquillon, 2007), and emerged as representative of small artisan firms in the area;[1] a culturally homogeneous group and a community under construction.

The enterprises involved in the research project operated predominantly in the services sector with a minority in manufacturing and artistic crafts. Most of the sole proprietors owned businesses in firms classified as 'sundry services' or 'beauty care', while in sectors such as wood processing, building installations, and construction, the majority were partners. This replicates the traditional gender distinction in professional choices. In terms of size, more than half had fewer than five employees so were micro firms.[2] The majority of the women were married, 12 were single, and the remainder cohabited or were separated/divorced. Most of the women had at least one child largely beyond the age of requiring constant care. It is important that in this study, the focus was not only understanding who the women entrepreneurs were but also how they achieved a work–family life balance. Thus, objective knowledge was matched with a subjective knowledge of how the women co-constructed the world in which they lived.

The area in which the research was undertaken is in the mountains without a nearby metropolitan conglomerate with a traditional culture in terms of gender relations. The dominant discourses in the local entrepreneurial culture are constructed around the idea of the family business. Women were positioned as 'helpmates' whose waged work was considered secondary even if such discourses were countered by different ways of conceiving the gendering of business and life. In framing their motivation for a participation in a research project regarding how work and family life balance, three basic assumptions were tacitly accepted: (a) work and family are separate (and separable) domains, (b) they pose conflicting demands, and (c) it is the woman's task to keep them balanced.

Collecting narratives

All the narrative interviews were conducted in the artisan's workplace where production processes were discussed. An open protocol was utilized to elicit a narrative of entrepreneuring as a form of life which invited the interviewees to recount how they learned their crafts, what they considered their most important skills, and how they had become entrepreneurs. This type of narrative interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewee's lived world with respect to the discursive practices used to interpret the described situations and the use of linguistic categories. The willingness to participate in the research process was crucial for 'reflection' rather than 'information' to emerge. This approach drew on the assumption that language is creative in giving form to reality

and on a reflexive assumption that narratives are co-created within mutual discourse (Cunliffe, 2001); thus, several group feedback sessions were organized which gave interviewees and the research group the opportunity to meet. All the interviews, which lasted between 90 and 180 minutes, were audio-taped and professionally transcribed.

Interviews analysis and presentation

The interviews were interpreted with focus upon how language filters experienced realities (Ybema et al., 2009) and how these realities have commonalities within the social world of entrepreneuring. Understanding meaning is achieved through analysis of language; relating to relationships between interviewee, text, and researchers, rather than preexisting schema (Czarniawska, 2004). When describing the research results, the first section outlines four types of authoring presented with the aid of brief interview excerpts.[3] The second section focuses upon how the work–family life balance discourse is presented, negotiated, and resisted, both in the interviews, and in the collective group discussions. In order to illustrate how each authoring is the product of situated discursive practices, the focus of the following presentation is on the place of the business within the life project and upon whether the sense of how the 'I' is authored has an effect upon the whole narrative performance.

Authoring a life project as women business creators

In positioning the narrative subject as 'women business creators', the main discursive resource mobilized was that since childhood, they had cultivated a particular passion for entrepreneuring. So, the women had attended vocational school and then gained work experience as an employee or apprentice or – if it was economically possible and the occasion presented itself – they had immediately started their own businesses. Passion was, therefore, the first and main discursive topic:

> *Passion*.[4] I've always had this passion since I was little, probably because I had two aunts who were hairdressers. So I grew up surrounded by this kind of work and already when I was at middle school my intention was to do this work. (D25 hairdressing)

In the popular representation of entrepreneurship as an open and meritocratic socioeconomic space, entrepreneuring capacity is portrayed in terms of opportunity-seeking behavior in which the image of what an entrepreneur is or should be (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011) is cast in terms of the heroic male entrepreneur (Ahl and Nelson, 2010). Despite the normativity of the masculine discourse informing entrepreneurship, the positioning of the self in the narratives of the women business creators did not reflect this. Instead of opportunity seeking, the main motivation was passion for a kind of work inscribed within a female register; for many, the need to support the family, often a large one, was the main stimulus for seeking an income.

The second linguistic resource used for authoring an identity as 'the business creator' is an urge to express creativity that links to freedom in entrepreneuring:

> *Expressing creativity*. My experience is this: I worked for 10 years in a private firm. I worked in * * * I did the same job as I'm doing now, but obviously as an employee. Then, I touched bottom with this experience, and I said to myself: Do I go on working like this or shall I find something else? Because staying there seemed a bit reductive compared with what I wanted to do. There I did the work, but with the restrictions imposed by the department head. I mean … my job is creative, so in the end if I do it is because I feel it.

> If someone restricts you, it's like saying to an artist: 'Paint me a picture but I want it done in a certain way'. The result is obviously not the same. (D3 graphic design)

In the narratives of the female business creators, there was an urge for creativity but also a wish to stay in connection with the family tradition. Indeed, for many of the women, the family is the place where the craft was learnt. The reason for starting up a business was the wish to fulfill a passion cultivated by the parents, but which they had not been able to put into practice:

> *Continuing a family tradition*. My mother started weaving in the 1950s. Then, the industrial fashion arrived and everything was lost, nobody wanted these things any more, and my mother stopped weaving. To learn this work, we [she and her sisters] brought the loom down from the attic. In short, we decided to learn this work at least to do something different. At the beginning, though, there was no real desire to do work that might become a craft, a business. The initial interest was just to learn this work of ours, which was the family's. (D52 textiles-attire)

In this case, note the divide between public (the business) and private (the family) is blurred and how, in authoring a life project, the boundaries between the two are discursively constructed as continuity with the female knowledge stored within the family. In authoring their stories, the women business creators used the discourse of feminine emancipation, mobilizing the theme of passion for the craft but also of economic necessity, creativity but also autonomy, pioneering but also preservation of family know-how. We can understand this positioning better when we compare it with approaches to authoring the stories of others.

Authoring a life project as co-authoresses of a two-person project

A second authoring of the entrepreneurial identity is found in the positioning of the women entrepreneurs where the first person singular (the narrating self) is replaced with a 'we' denoting the wife and the husband. These were two-person projects because the woman developed the business idea jointly with her partner such that the complementarity between roles and activities was a strength. For this reason, these women are termed 'co-authoresses'.

Balance between the couple was achieved mainly through an arrangement whereby the husband was responsible for production and so, technical aspects – the 'hard' dimension of the business – while the wife managed the administrative and accounting side. Other aspects for which the wife might be responsible were customer relations (but only if she had technical knowledge about the product), fulfillment of workplace safety requirements, and staff training. Hence, the two-person project sheds light on the traditional gender distinction whereby technical matters are male concerns and administration and care are female ones. The founding of the firm was described as a response to a series of contingent factors such as the husband's previous experience as an employee and his idea to set up the business:

> *Partly by chance and partly on purpose*. My husband worked with elevators. So he started by chance. He was an electrician at a firm in * * * [place] and he read the small ads in the newspaper. We were already engaged, and he saw a vacancy for a * * * [job description] at * * * [place]. And he said: 'Let's go and see. You come too'. And I said: 'Yes, let's go'. We went to see and the next month he started to work at * * * [place] And I joined him 1 or 2 months later. I'm a surveyor, so for me it was a completely new field. And so we both began learning this work, and that's how we started. By chance really, from an advertisement in the newspaper. And then we decided to set up on our own business. 'If you give me a hand we can do it [referring to what her husband had said]'. So I quit my job, and I completely abandoned my career, my

previous work, because [in the firm] I immediately started dealing with the administrative side. (D2 building installations)

The co-authoresses described strong investment in the growth of the firm, recounting its phases of development:

Doing it together. I did administrative studies, and now I work in the administration office. I started working as an administrative clerk at a firm, then I met my husband, and he had just started the business. He said to me: 'Come on, let's get it together' … I've never held back [laughs]. I've also done radio and television repairs. If they needed help, I went to lend a hand, I learned all the resistances, you recognize them from the colors, and therefore all the colors, the values. I had to lend a hand, that's how it was then. If you don't have good will … so now I deal with the administrative part and with the customers, and I know what we sell. (D17 building installations)

The co-authoresses, therefore, performed a narrating self-characterized by close synergy with the partner; they claimed the subject position of 'entrepreneur' for themselves – since they shared a common project – but in a relation of complementarity and within a gendered division of labour. The sharing of the ideal of the firm is the strength of many small firms where a couple decide jointly what projects to develop and to rely on each other's abilities. Consequently, both felt their roles in the firm were recognized:

Sharing decisions. There's a great deal of discussion. Now we're making a major investment because we're constructing new industrial sheds and new offices. This is an investment that will give a definitive step change to the firm, because we're talking about an investment of * * * [amount]. We're building everything, and the marketing, everything necessary for the step change. But it's all planned together. We've discussed what is better, my ideas, his ideas. We talk to the outside, to the technicians who advise us. So it's a constructive discussion. Which isn't easy to find. I see loads of women like me, but they don't have a role in the business. They work, but they don't work at a decision-making level. (D15 wood processing)

We can better understand the positioning of the co-authoresses when we compare their narratives with the stories told by those entrepreneurs who described their participation in the family business in terms of behaving like a responsible wife.

Authoring a life project as responsible wives

The way of authoring their identity as a woman who joined her husband's firm highlights the traditional gender relationship previously described in regard to the trajectories of the co-authoresses: administration is the woman's responsibility. The authoresses of this trajectory are here called 'the responsible wives' who join the husband's or partner's firm some years after its start-up. The responsible wives usually joined the husband's firm either because they had lost their previous jobs or because they found them impossible to manage because of the workload imposed by the domestic 'double shift'. The responsible wife sometimes not only had to do her own work, but also to manage the administrative part of her husband's firm while taking responsibility for family care:

The helpmate. I started here because I married the owner of the firm. My previous job was different because I'd worked for 20 years at a bank. Yes, completely different. Then my husband needed a hand because the firm had grown. I also had family problems because I had three small children. So I resigned after 20 years, and now I only deal with [her husband's] business. (D57 construction)

Entry into the firm by the responsible wives was attributed to the opportunities stressed by their husbands; their contribution to its growth concerned not the technical side, for which the partners were solely responsible, but the administration:

> *Male and female in the firm*. There has to be two of you because you can't do it on your own. According to me, it's a very good match: the female part and the male one, at least in this sector, because it's strictly male work. I could learn how to go and take measurements at the construction site, but if I know how to take measurements on site, I must also know how to go with them into the workshop: it's not a female job! The female part of this work is on the other side. It consists in organizing, in seeing, in looking ahead, in discussing. (D67 metal joinery)

Moreover, the lack of full identification with the husband's business project was stressed by the prospects that the responsible wives envisaged for the future. They foresaw detaching themselves from the business by delegating as much work as possible to a trusted employee or to their children, even though some of them thought about creating their own businesses in which to put their accumulated experience to good use:

> *Not for ever*. In 5 years' time, I hope to be retired. I know that for my husband it will be a problem. He's already a pensioner but his business is his life. For him, it's very difficult to let go because it gives him so much satisfaction and he feels fulfilled in his work. Sometimes I wish it was a bit different, but it's all right as it is. We hope in our son, but children may have other [aspirations]. My husband is more traditional, while my son goes more for innovation. (D37 building installations)

The following narratives have a similarity with authoring as a responsible wife, since the family business is once again the context of the individual choice to take part in it or leave it for another project.

Authoring a life project as the second generation who join the family firm

Firm succession is a critical generational passage, and it is experienced in different ways. The identity work of those women who decided to join the family firm – here called the 'second generation' – exhibited two patterns: in the first, 10 female entrepreneurs were fully accepted by the family headed by the father; in the second, five female entrepreneurs struggled to gain visibility in the firm because the intergenerational transfer was less harmonious. The two scenarios are presented separately.

Authoring a life project in continuation

A distinctive feature of the positioning of the narrative self is that, before joining the family firm, these young women took the opportunity to gain experience outside the family context:

> *Exploring the alternatives*. I wanted to go down a completely different road! It was one of those classic moments of intergenerational transfer when someone says 'I absolutely don't want to do the same work as my mother'. So I went to the technical institute for surveyors. A completely different school. In the end, I had to give in because I really liked [the mother's] work, so I started to study fashion styling. I attended my mother's school, I learned to sew, and then I carried on from there. (D8 textiles-attire)

The second generation women often presented themselves as fully immersed in the life of the firm but this positioning was in relation to the male figure:

Following in the father's footsteps. I'd never go into the administrative sector, which my mother runs. At most, my sister will take it on. I'll do what my father did – and so contacts with clients, production. He follows me in that, he's teaching me everything. (D12 graphic design)

Authoring a life project in difficult times

A different narrative self was positioned by five female second-generation entrepreneurs who – marked by the failure of their fathers to recognize their real usefulness for the firm – had to struggle to gain visibility and therefore, found their entry into the firm long and difficult. They authored their path as being managed by a 'father master' who refused to include them in strategic decision-making and in innovation of the business:

Conflicting views. I wanted to take the computer into the office and do the accounting on my own, but my father didn't want to know about it. So in the end he didn't even give me the satisfaction of having my abilities recognized. But I felt strong; I was determined to go forward. (D51 construction)

The five female entrepreneurs whose life project as second-generation members was undertaken in relation to 'difficult times' are interesting because they illustrate – without need for long commentary – how the gendering of the firm and of the families is enacted. A case illustrates how the brother, having taken over from his father, recognized the work of his sister with no acknowledgment from their father. Accordingly, he decided to use her valuable, and by now broad, experience of the business by making her a partner:

Acquiring responsibility. When I worked here and there wasn't my brother, he [the father] wanted to sell it [the firm]. I said: 'No, I've worked here for ten years! Then my brother arrived and I'd already been working here for twelve years. We were all waiting for this younger brother, who was a surveyor, and in the end he ran the firm. He worked for four or five years side by side with my dad. Then dad retired and left the business to my brother, and we became partners. I'm the administrator'. (D51 construction)

A particular story was recounted by a female entrepreneur who, because her father had not considered her suitable as manager of the family firm, decided to take it over as a challenge. As a consequence, she received absolutely no help from her father. By contrast, she received strong and practical support in managing the administrative part from her mother:

Taking over the firm. I started to do business 1 year after my parents had decided to close down the firm. They wanted to sell it, but they couldn't find a purchaser, or at least not for the price that they wanted. I was doing something completely different. I'd never bothered about the firm. Or better, I'd thought about it during the summers, like all the children of artisans, doing something but I'd never actually worked in the firm. I decided to try rather than throw the firm away. I thought: 'I'll give it a go'. I knew the technical work but nothing about management, because I'd previously worked in many fields but always as an employee. As soon as I entered the firm, my father left, for better and worse. For better because otherwise we would have had dreadful rows; for worse because I would have perhaps learned faster, and I would have done less work. However, in one way or another, I started by forming a partnership with my mother. (D69 graphic design)

Authoring one's own project as a member of the second generation involves coping with the previous business idea and negotiating one's own path within family relations and the wish to innovate.

Table 1. Authoring of the identity narratives.

The narrating self as:	Number of narrative interviews	Discursive resources mobilized
Business creator	30	Passion, expressing creativity, continuing a family tradition
Co-authoress	15	Partly by chance and partly on purpose, doing it together, sharing decisions
Responsible wife	13	Male and female in the firm, the helpmate, not for ever
Second generation	15	In continuation: exploring the alternatives, following in the father's footsteps In difficult times: conflicting views, acquiring responsibilities, taking over the firm
Total	70	

Table 1 is designed to help the reader visualize the ways of authoring self-presentation performed in the narrative interviews, the corresponding number of interviews, and the main discursive resources used in the process of authoring entrepreneuring as a life project.

Negotiating the discourse of work–family life balance

The discourse on work–family life balance continues to reaffirm the association of women with reproduction and the home. It implies an unbalanced relationship and suggests women's primary responsibility in bringing it back into balance. While at the beginning of the research, it was taken for granted, its ideological character became clearer to the participants when the research was underway and the women reflected upon their own experiences as entrepreneurs. In order to reveal the implicit assumptions on which such a discourse operates, some vignettes from the interviews were selected and proposed for discussion in the group. The first stimulus for discussion came from how the subject position was mobilized in the self-other relationship, as in the following excerpt:

> *Non-absence for maternity*. I too have had a child! But I came into work. Two days later I was already here. That other woman [an office worker] stayed at home for 2 years. I went home on Saturday, and on Monday morning I was in the office! Because that's the way it is for those of us who work, there's no pregnancy at risk for us. (D2 building installations)

The difference between entrepreneurs and other women is constructed around the idea that employee can enjoy all the advantages of maternity leave, while 'being there' at the workplace represents the logic of practice for women entrepreneurs. The group discussion raised doubts about the fact that the discourse on balance was premised on the assumption that the workplace and home were separated, as in the case of employees who could not bring their children to the workplace or take work home. The discussion on how women entrepreneurs author their identity as difference from employees in relation to maternity leave and to absence for illness (as in the following excerpt) highlights how the issue of absence or presence was handled as a specific practice in the community. The meaning of being there is illustrated through the following quote:

> *Non-absence for illness*. To tell the truth, the work has helped me get over my health problems. I even got over a heart attack. In * * * [year] I was taken out of here with a heart attack. When I left hospital, the next day I was here. (D17 building installations)

The duality of the meaning of being there – as the workplace that cannot be left, and as work that helps in healing – was discussed as ambivalence in what presence means and how it relates to the discourse of work–family life balance. Also the separation between being there and being elsewhere was challenged by the following vignette:

> *Working from home*. That period [birth of the child] was rather complicated! Because we brought the computer home [laughs]. I remember that I had the caesarean, and the day after my husband came [home] with three tax forms to be compiled. Between one feeding and the next, the nappy changes, I had to do all the estimates, manage the deadlines for the end of the month, payments and the presences, the pay packets. So maternity wasn't a good experience for me. I mean, I was on maternity but I never left work to be a mother. I always had deadlines to meet. (D4 construction)

The discussion prompted by this example of what we named, 'working from home', was supplemented by many stories that presented what the group called, 'parenting from work', that is, how children were at home also in the firm, doing their homework or playing while the mothers were working, and how also the employees took part in looking after the children. The separation between home and work was rather blurred. The ambivalence between the rights of other workers regarding maternity facilities (sometimes voiced as 'the right to stay at home') and the rights to bring children at work was discussed and negotiated in terms of what is distinctive of the work–family life relationship for women entrepreneurs. In this regard, it is interesting to give voice to the younger generation of women who do not see much conflict between work and family life; rather, they prefer to negotiate their presence in terms of strategies for having both. One strategy is

> *Somebody who can back you up*. It's true that if you have children to look after, you need time. And when you work alone, you don't have any time. I sometimes start working at eight in the morning and finish at eight in the evening. That's why trust is important. It's very important for there to be people around who can back you up. With the second child I never closed the salon. (D10 beauty care)

The other strategy considers the family network as a unit that simultaneously manages the family and the business:

> *The family network*. Speaking as a woman, some days I'd feel calm about starting a family. As an entrepreneur likewise, because I am a family member in the firm. Because if you have this desire [to have a family], you must find people you can trust. (D14 design)

A final point for discussion offered to the group concerned the idea that the firm is also an object of love, or jealousy, and a site of strong emotions. Two vignettes were discussed. They describe moments of great difficulty – due to the lack of support and understanding from a partner – which at times caused a closedown of the business or a breakdown in the relationship with the partner:

> *Closing the business*. Did my husband help me? Not much, in the sense that he obstructed me. First he made me set up the laboratory in the basement so that I could stay at home. But you can't live just on laboratory work, you have to move around if you want to earn more. I was always away, and he told me: 'Make them pay you more, you're always out, when I get home you're never here'. Sometimes when I went to * * * [place] he said: 'But your son is only little'. (D30 restoration)

> *Closing the relationship*. It's a real hassle [the relationship with her husband]. On the one hand [he's] fascinated with my passion, on the other he's completely jealous of it. We're separated, and our problems started when I began to put my soul into the salon. He felt neglected. I don't know whether or not this situation is weird, but I've probably got more satisfaction from my work. I don't know how to put it. I

> mean, I've grown as a person here, I've lived, I've travelled, it's given me so much. It's given me much more than he has done. Because he sometimes couldn't accept all my movements. At first he was a help, he was a great boost for me, because I was afraid of not making it. But later he almost seemed a hindrance. So I had to decide what I wanted. (D10 beauty care)

The discussion had the effect of prompting awareness that the discourse on work–family life balance was imposed on the entrepreneurial experience by virtue of a portrayed universality that extended the condition of dependent work to all forms of work and work contract. Moreover, what is commonly considered as 'balance' privileges family over business, implicitly denying a legitimate place in a woman biography to the passion for her own activity. Conflict, and not only harmonious balance, became issues for discussion and negotiation.

Nevertheless, the most important effect was awareness of how work and family were practices intertwined in the biographies of this group of entrepreneurs and how issues presence/absence from work could be considered differently, for example, by proposing to the association the creation of a directory of temporary substitutes for a maternity leave, or sick leave or for gaining time for other activities. Other innovative initiatives were begun, in the field of school and entrepreneurial culture, the aim of which was to create continuity between education, entrepreneurship, and renewal of old crafts.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the article has been to enrich the processual approach to entrepreneuring by linking it to the gendering of entrepreneurial practices. Entrepreneuring is conceptualized as a specific social world in which entrepreneurs dwell, made up of an array of activities, people, knowledge, equipment, and concerns. Entrepreneuring and gendering may be considered as intertwined practices happening at the same time in the same spaces, and 'done' in situated interactions by the same actors, material arrangements, and discourses. Hence, entrepreneuring and entrepreneurs are co-constituted by activities and discursive practices and neither can exist without the other.

To illustrate how the practicing of gender and entrepreneurship are entangled, a single point of entry was chosen – the discourse on work–family life balance – since it is one with which I was asked to arrange a participatory research project with a group of women entrepreneurs seeking to establish an interest group within their entrepreneurial association and location. The discourse on work–family life balance is widespread in contemporary society; its gender subtext is taken for granted. It portrays a supposed universality of gender conditions based on the implicit assumptions that when women work, their family life is under threat, that work and family are two separate and separable spheres of activities. As such, it is a woman's responsibility to keep them in balance and that women in entrepreneurship, as in any other working environment, will be affected by imbalance since their primary loyalty is to reproduction and the home. The agency that this discourse displays has been presented in two ways. First, it has been illustrated in situated narratives of self-presentation in which the way of authoring one's own story represents identity work performed in order to take one's proper place in the entrepreneurial community. In authoring a narrative of identity as entrepreneur, a situated discourse linking business and life issues is performed; in situated narratives, work and family are not separated but in effect, presented as a single life project. Therefore, we should see entrepreneuring as a form of life.

The discourse on work–family life balance is, therefore, challenged by comparing the personal experiences of entrepreneurs with situated discourses which contrast with the de-contextualized discourse present in society at large. In the former case, the boundaries between work and life issues are mobilized while authoring a narrative of self-presentation; in the latter, the negotiation

of those boundaries is done in relation to the specificity of entrepreneuring. In resisting and challenging the discourse on work–family life balance as a dichotomous construct, new linguistic artifacts were elaborated. The meaning of 'being there' as a bridge between the two opposite categories, the idea of 'working from home' and 'parenting from work', the overcoming of the opposition between family and work with the idea of family network and 'somebody to back you up', and the idea of choice between 'closing a business' and 'closing a relationship' for representing female freedom in entrepreneuring.

When we compare the four ways of authoring, the becoming of the entrepreneurial self in relation to family contingencies and the place occupied by the firm in the life-project, we can deduce that

> Those women who position themselves as business creators mobilize discursive practices that construct the firm as a love-object around which a life-project has been built. This mode of authoring the relationship among individual life-planning, the family, and social relations exhibits a discourse centered on emancipation.
> Those who position themselves as co-authoresses of the firm mobilize discursive practices in which the couple's life-planning concerns both the firm and the family to an equal extent.
> Those who position themselves as responsible wives are authors of a life-project in which the role of the female entrepreneur is incorporated into the family role.
> Finally, those who position themselves as the second-generation author their stories as daughters, positioning their narrative self within intra-family generational conflict and its resolution. Firm and family, thus, become the places for negotiation of a plurality of belongings between continuity and breakdown in business and family practices.

The situated discursive practices that author the becoming of the female entrepreneur as co-authoress, responsible wife, or second-generation daughter mobilize a work–family life discourse as continuity and not separation, thus gendering entrepreneurial practices as complementary to reproduction and home centrality. At the same time, when the possibility of discussing situated performances of identity emerges, then the ideological character of the discourse of work–family life is criticized and spaces for negotiation on how the gendering of entrepreneurial practices may be done differently are open to scrutiny. On the one hand, the de-contextualized discourse on work–family life may be resisted when its gender subtext comes to light and the prioritization of home over business or work becomes an issue for discussion. On the other hand, the gendering of entrepreneurship and its contextual nature become another issue for discussion when the experience of being an entrepreneur, and being a woman, is grounded in the local reality of the family business, where being a wife and a daughter is an integral part of being an entrepreneur. In resisting the discourse of work–family life balance, the meaning of 'work' is displaced and substituted by the meaning of 'being there', as the presence in the firm, the ambivalence of this tie, and difference from employees. Within this discursive space, other strategies for differently gendering entrepreneurial practices are envisioned and proposed for collective action. For example, the business owners who could not close their shops when they wanted to take maternity leave, or had health problems, proposed the creation of a directory of possible temporary substitutes. Women working in family businesses reframed their responsibility for family life in terms of a network of business–family duties with the task of 'backing up' the entrepreneur (and not seeing her as the helpmate). Many other reframings of the relationship between being an entrepreneur and a woman were set up and later implemented within the Association once the leading group had abandoned the discourse on 'balance' to think about how entrepreneurial practices are gendered and may be gendered differently.

A processual approach like that adopted in this participatory research methodology made it possible to illustrate that an entrepreneurial identity is not something that one possesses; rather, it is a process of becoming, undertaken in the course of a life project, situated in time and space, and designed by the choices made in historical and cultural circumstances. Entrepreneuring as a life project is the outcome of a process of authoring one's story, writing one's own narrative, and using ready-made narratives.

When presenting the research results, we privileged the subjective point of view through stories that presented the way of authoring the narrative self in relation to the world being narrated. However, when drawing conclusions, it is also necessary to stress the opposite point of view and to mention how other narratives and other discourses pertaining to an identity are cultural products. These are narratives that we encounter because others have recounted them to us; we have seen them in films or read them in novels; we have assimilated them through the dominant discourses that we take for granted. A final consideration concerns certain narratives definable as 'external' (Watson, 2008) present in, and constitutive of, the narratives that we have presented. They are visible as narratives on gender and entrepreneurship inasmuch as they are culturally discursive practices situated in a historical time and a culturally homogeneous geographical place. In fact, the narratives that we have analyzed were collected from a community of speakers within a local culture, and they performed power relations in being both inclusionary and exclusionary. They signaled which entrepreneurial profile was part of a discourse and which was excluded from it. Hence, the prevailing discourses acted as gate-keeping devices (Kelan, 2009) in that they supported ways of being, acting, and presenting the self with which individuals must conform in order to gain legitimacy. The four ways of authoring the female entrepreneur, and the discursive practices upon which each rested, embedded contextualized ways of being that were produced and reproduced through institutionalized pressures.

The way in which gender relations entered the identity narratives of female entrepreneurs in this area of Northern Italy as presentations of self (Goffman, 1990) is indicative of the cultural processing of relationships not only between women and men, but also between gender and entrepreneurship. In essence, multiple antagonistic discourses on gender and entrepreneurship were mobilized in the self-presentation narratives. The firm was a love-object and a life-project within which gender relations were negotiated. Yet, at the same time, gender was a cultural construct that assigned a primary (or co-primary) role to the woman in the family, and an ancillary role in the firm or its activities (in administration rather than production). What was taken for granted is that gender in entrepreneuring is male in both the firm and the family.

Finally, it is noted that the academic or dominant discourse on entrepreneurship, in which the categories of economic action, risk, and enterprise are usually employed to describe the firm, are almost absent from these narratives. A possible explanation for this fact concerns the very small size of the firms, or the scant socialization of the women into the entrepreneurship discourse. Nevertheless, a critical interpretation of the phenomenon highlights that the dominant character of the entrepreneurship discourse is not so dominant, and that when one explores alternative, and often marginalized narratives, they challenge the dominant gender and entrepreneurship discourse.

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Notes

1. The sample interviewed consisted 58% entrepreneurs in the services sector, 22.9% in manufacturing, 15.7% in the artistic sector, and 2.9% in both services and manufacturing. Of the entrepreneurs interviewed, 52.9% said that they had founded the business, 37.1% had entered the firm through flanking family members, 5.7% had inherited the firm, and 4.3% had purchased it.
2. In all, 61.4% had fewer than five employees, 20% between 6 and 10, and 12.9% between 11 and 20.
3. The authoring of identity as women creators of their businesses was done by 30 interviewees, while 15 assumed a position of co-authoress of a business project; 13 authored themselves as a 'responsible wife'; 15 positioned themselves as belonging to the second generation of entrepreneurs. The interview extracts state the interviewee's reference code and her occupation.
4. The title in italics represents the category that we used for coding the interviews, and the main discursive resources used for authoring a narrative of self-identity (see also Table 1).

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