Identity work in female led innovative creative sector businesses

This study explores the identity work carried out by three female owner managers in creative industry businesses, identified in Government reports to be a discriminatory industry for women in the UK. Through the development of narratives by the owner and other participants, observation of practice and review of online and offline materials, three cases emerged. These showed overlapping different identities developed and performed through identity work. These women presented a rational and logical persona as business leaders despite extensive use of intuition and gut feeling in both creative and entrepreneurial aspects of the business. Intuition and gut feeling were seen as inappropriate at work as they were belonging to the home sphere, emotionally based and therefore automatically unreliable. While occupying male stereotypes and avoiding the female realm of emotion at work, these women expressed femininity through their emphasis of the maternal, ‘being a good mother’ as a desired ideal being embedded in work as well as home practice.

Introduction

Identity has been used as a route to explore individual, organisational and management phenomena (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2008; Kašperová and Kitching, 2014). This focus is perhaps unsurprising, given that identity is fundamental to meaning, providing the individual with a frame of reference with which to interpret not only the social situation but also his/her behaviours, thoughts and actions (Alsos et al, 2016). While entrepreneurial identity and how it is developed has been explored across organizational and entrepreneurship disciplines (see for instance, Down and Reveley, 2004; Jones et al, 2009; Lewis, 2013), there is less research on identity and its relationship to the entrepreneurial process (Alsos et al, 2016) or to the expression of gender in entrepreneurial identity (Jones et al, 2017; Santos et al, 2016).

Rather than being defined arbitrarily by biological sex, gender is constructed by an interplay of activities which are perceptual, interactional, and micro-political within the context of time and environment (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Through these processes, what is understood as appropriate attitudes, behaviours and pursuits defining masculine and feminine are formed, which are then performed by individuals in order to fit in as members of society and be recognized as male or female (Butler, 2011; Lewis, 2013). Hence, these social processes construct gender as individuals “perform what is understood as the norm for masculine and feminine roles i.e., ‘doing’ gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 126). Performing gender is part of sense-making by the individual (Lewis, 2015) about their role in society, family and organisation in the context of culture, society and history (Mills, 2003; Mills et al, 2010; Weick et al, 2005).

Further, individual sense-making identifies multiple versions of the self, linking organisational identity with personal identities to drive decision-making and actions, fuelling motivation and commitment (Mills et al, 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, 1164). This is not a fixed self but an ongoing process, given that gender is a “dynamic concept subject to societal change” which varies over time to meet changing organizational needs and conditions (Butler, 2006; 2011). Working within an organization also impacts on individual interpretations of gender since the organisation also ‘does gender’ through the establishment and performance of rules which determine self-definitions in this context (Gherardi, 1996). These rules and their underlying values are conveyed and maintained by the way things are done, with gender meanings created, recreated and institutionalized in both formal and informal situations, both offline and online.

This process of creating and maintaining identity, of doing ‘identity work’ (Hytti, 2005; Watson, 2008), operates to create and maintain a sense of self within gendered organisational and societal contexts (Lewis, 2013). The ongoing and cyclical nature of identity work is suggested by Musson and Duberley (2007, 147) who describe it as “an active and critical process of making sense, of and for ourselves” where social and organisational context, culture and power relations limit and boundary both desired and undesired versions of self (Weick et al, 2005). Hence, identity work refers to the formation and reformation of identity, where people are “engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, 1165).

Identity work can be both conscious and unconscious (Watson, 2008; Winkler, 2018). While much identity work operates on an unconscious level, organisational and social changes, meetings and unexpected events, make the individual more aware of the tenuous and constructed nature of personal identity, requiring them to engage in conscious identity work in the course of everyday interaction (Lewis, 2013; Kašperová and Kitching, 2014). Thus “specific events, encounters, transitions, experiences, surprises, as well as more constant strains” make the individual more aware of their identity (Alvesson Amd Wilmott, 2002, 626). Conscious identity work is carried out to fit with social norms (Alvesson et al., 2008; Hytti, 2005).and to counter the scepticism or inconsistencies sensed or faced in encounters with others (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Hence, this study explores how individuals engage in identity work to shape their identities, with constructions and reconstructions of various creative and entrepreneurial, managerial and non-managerial identities in small, dynamic organizations. Limited female business ownership has been in evidence in the UK for over 300 years (Erickson, 2011; Kay, 2009). Self employment enables women to overcome dissatisfaction with paid employment opportunities, due both to male prejudice within the relevant employment sector and to the need to balance hours of employment with running a household and looking after children (Goffee and Scase, 2015; Marshall, 1995). Nevertheless, women are less likely to be running businesses, representing 20% of SME employers and 22% of UK SMEs without employees in 2016 (McGuiness, 2018, 4). Also, balancing home with paid work needs is exacerbated for some women by community expectations to fulfilled a proscribed female role and may limit the scope for female enterprise (Westwood and Bhachu, 2004). Home-work balance may also underlie recent data showing more women than men working as part time employees (McGuiness, 2018).

Exploring these issues, researchers have reviewed women’s business start up and ownership to understand how they are impacted by factors that are directly related to women’s experiences at home, at work, and in the wider society (Goffee and Scase, 2015).. This study is therefore set within this context, through research carried out with three business owner-managers offering key insights into what it means to be a creative sector business leader and a woman through conscious and unconscious identity work. By observing everyday practice and by talking to female owner managers and other staff, ‘identity work’ was identified which underpinned the performance of different roles (manager, owner, creative lead etc.), while language and discourse expressed gender at work in the process of identity formation.

The choice of creative sector businesses reflects the lower participation of women in this sector seen in recent surveys (DCMS, 2017; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017). The Creative Industries were defined in the Government’s 2001 Creative Industries Mapping Document as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (DCMS, 2001, foreword). They were further defined as particular occupations (DCMS, 2016, Appendix B), i.e. Advertising and marketing; Architecture; Crafts ; Design: product, graphic and fashion design; ; Film, TV, video, radio and photography; IT, software and computer services; Publishing; Museums, galleries and libraries; Music, performing and visual arts.

Further, Hennekam and Bennett (2017) describe the economic, social and cultural contributions of the creative industries as essential parts of the economy and society in the UK and internationally. Coupled with their economic impact, the creative industries have been cited as offering equal social mobility across race and gender (Florida, 2004). Recent UK national statistics suggest a different picture, however, with gender discrimination seen in unequal pay rates and lower employment figures (Banks and Milestone, 2011; DCMS, 2016; Hennekam and Bennett 2016; Tether, 2017). The three women in our sample lead businesses against current trends – how do they manage identities as women and as creative sector owner-managers? The next section provides a context through the literature on identity, identity work and its interplay with gender research before the methodology and results are discussed.

Reviewing the literature on identity work

What is meant by identity and by identity work? Identity is a complex and multidimensional concept (Ahl, 2006; Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Ashforth and Tomiuk, 2000; Chasserio et al, 2014) which is not only subject to change but is also fluid and dynamic in addressing social, economic or organisational change (Gill and Larson, 2014; Hytti, 2005). Each person has a range of identities including a self-defined, personal and a social identity, within the bounds of perception of oneself and the perceptions of others about oneself (Alsos et al, 2016; Watson, 2009;). This does not assume that there is an innate authenticity (Watson 2008) or “a set of stable characteristics that are assumed to represent ‘the’ self of a person or a category” (Ybema et al., 2009, 305). Rather than a single set of stable characteristics, the study is based on a view of identity as fluid and changeable, performed as an ongoing process of identity work to form and reform self through individual sense-making (Hytti, 2005; Weick et al, 2005).

Firstly, the processes of identity work formation and development occur in response to experiences, perceptions of experiences and through interactions with others to understand and fit with social norms (Alvesson et al., 2008; Hytti, 2005; Lee and Huang, 2018). Hence, in constructing the self, personal perceptions and beliefs about the perceptions of others are interwoven with such social norms, historical, cultural and geographical contexts, institutional and political influences (Anderson et al, 2018). Our understanding of the present is formed and influenced by our views and reconstructed views of past experiences (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) with workplace selves potentially conflicting with desired identities, perceived family and community persona (Bourne and Calas, 2013; Chasserio et al, 2014; Collinson 2003). Individuals are shaped by the discourses around them, not as passive agents (Watson, 2008) but as interpreters, drawing on organisational stories to create a sense of self by ‘storying their lives’ (Pullen, 2006; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Secondly, the need to understand identity work in a entrepreneurship context is considered. While previous research has often investigated how identity work establishes legitimacy with funders (Gill and Larson, 2014; Kašperová, and Kitching, 2014; Lee and Huang, 2018; Navis and Glynn, 2011; Warren, 2004), this study seeks primarily to understand how identity work supports the roles of female creative business owners across their work operation. Lewis (2013) suggests the usefulness of the identity work concept to understand the self definitions of a group of women business owners. The meaning of the term ‘entrepreneur’ and activities associated with this identity changes over time and in different contexts, suggesting that having an entrepreneurial identity might also need to be supported and reconstructed over time.

Entrepreneurship is a social activity, an activity shaping and shaped by society within contexts of culture, time and space (Hamilton, 2014; Steyart and Katz, 2004). Stereotypes play a part in this to indicate the appropriate roles for male and female, with rationality male and emotion female (Santos et al, 2016). If the identity of an entrepreneur is socially constructed, then the rules and norms within society will shape what the end results should be, which socially acceptable behaviours are associated with that role and how that is further delineated by gender (Lewis, 2013). Hence, entrepreneurial identity is not only dynamic and fluid but is also essentially a work in progress rather than an end result (Hytti, 2005).

Thirdly, there is an interplay of gender with entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identity. Ahl (2006) suggests that the enterprise discourse practices are based on a prevailing masculine ethos. Further, Giazitzoglu and Down (2017) propose that entrepreneurship is performed to meet perceived masculine norms; those not meeting enterprise discourses of growth and dynamism dismissed as ‘lifestyle’ businesses in much of the literature (Bridge et al., 2009; Storey, 2016). Additionally, Lewis (2013, 263) suggests that women business owners have agency in “creating an enterprise persona, even if it is at odds with the dominant identity of the buccaneering, growth-focused entrepreneur”. However, business creation is a social activity (Ebbers, 2014), where entrepreneurs shape their behaviours in relation to how they perceive themselves relative to others and to how they are perceived in society (Alsos et al, 2016).

This social activity does not diminish when companies grow. Firm start up and its operation post start-up both involve considerable social interaction be it with employees, external bodies and others impacting the firm, e.g., funders and loan managers. Through these interactions, social values, norms and rules are transmitted, together with appropriate behaviours. Individuals also engage in communicative and cognitive processes to craft self-narratives that create a ‘coherent, distinct and positively valued’ identity, suggesting that “during everyday interaction, individuals enact identity work by drawing on an array of available discursive resources” (Gill and Larson, 2014, 521); where discursive resources include discussion of concepts, expressions, and other linguistic devices presenting past, present and future activities as accounts and self-narratives as a route to interpreting and explaining experience (Kuhn, 2006).

Similarly, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of strategies and actions are determined by prevailing institutional beliefs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) which vary over time but have as their role, supporting company survival and defining organisational legitimacy (Scott, 2007. Institutional theory also suggests that organisations transmit internal rules through similar processes, where “traditionally … various groups and organizations better secure their positions and legitimacy by conforming to the rules and norms of the institutional environment”, i.e., the formal and informal rule sets and taken-for-granted assumptions governing organizations and the individuals within them (Bruton, 2010, 422). These mutual understandings are critical within small firms, given their reliance on informality in all aspects of their operations.

To sum up these different strands, it seems that each new context might mean that the individual has to learn a new identity, together with its values, roles, norms and behaviours; the individual therefore has a repertoire of social identities to fit different contexts with appropriate behaviours to match each role (Chasserio et al, 2014). Also, identities require performance from the individual, (Butler, 2006) to meet perceived cultural norms or social needs (Steyart and Katz, 2004; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Giazitzoglu and Down (2017).  By adopting related norms, the individual fits into a society or an organisation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) and portrays a new social identity (Chasserio et al, 2014), which may or may not be compatible with previous social identities. These might include the private – the daughter, the parent, the spouse – as well as the economic and social – the entrepreneur, the company owner – together with others, such as the political – party affiliation, organisational affiliation etc. with gender embedded in the way identities are formed (Ahl, 2006; Chasserio et al, 2014).

Considering this, the study focused on identity work and the identities expressed by female creative sector business owners, a sector with lower numbers of female employees, lower numbers of women in senior roles and lower female income levels. In 2016, women occupied 45 % of jobs in creative sectors (compared with 49.6 per cent in UK employment) (DCMS, 2016). In 2017, the UK design industry employed over 50% more people than it did in 2011 but is still nearly 60% male. While the creative industries experienced a “jobs boom”, with employment growing at four times the rate of the UK workforce as a whole, this has not led to improved gender equity, especially in senior and managerial roles (ibid, 2016).

Figures for women in architecture show worse conditions, with consistently lower pay for equal work, e.g., salary discrepancies of up to £55,000 between female directors and their male counterparts, and widespread discrimination in the workplace and on site. Female architectural assistants were paid £1,800 less than men doing the same job, project architects £3,000 less, associates £2,000 less, and female directors were underpaid by £12,700, Across all levels of architectural practice, women were in agreement that their place in the architecture world had yet to be accepted (The Architecture Journal, 2016). This is notable, given that the three women in the survey had architecture in their backgrounds (and two of whom had architecture related businesses).

The next section therefore explains the methods selected to understand the identity work of three women, who had backgrounds in art and architecture and led established creative firms. These are unusual women, both in their background and in the creative industry enterprise; our study aimed to explore their perspectives to offer new insights into identity work.

Methodology: exploring narratives and identity

Approach

In exploring identity work, the study is based on the range of narrative and discursive practices performed in relation to the social environment suggested in previous research (Steyart and Katz, 2004; Watson, 2009). This earlier work characterises identity as changing and changeable (Watson, 2009) and as both constructed and performed (Butler, 2006). Therefore, as suggested in earlier studies (Gill and Larson, 2014; Jones et al., 2006; Warren, 2004), understanding identity and identity work naturally signalled a qualitative approach, including the formalised collection of a series of narrative accounts, because people's experience of life “takes the form of narratives in which they (re)tell experiences and make sense of them” Jones et al (2017, 4).

As in Fletcher (2006, 422), a social constructionist approach was adopted to identify “how entrepreneurial identities are talked into being and are performed through interaction with colleagues, business contacts, family, institutions, material objects, physical entities and language rather than the private sense making of particular individuals”. Similarly, Hytti (2005) identifies the benefits of narrative research in studying identity as it gives voice to human agency and imagination, within the interplay of self and its social context. Narrative research stories are a process of narrative interpretation, such that, what is being spoken and how it is said are both of interest. In this way, things do not merely happen and take place but their meaning is depicted in the stories that we tell about these events.

Sample

Three companies were selected to provide a purposive sample, within the UK Creative Industries sector, in order to provide rich narratives within a specific context through shared sectoral characteristics (Kreuger et al, 2000) as a ‘thick’ sample providing the richness that ‘thin’ samples do not (Drori, 2009). This use of small sample case study research has a long pedigree in identity studies (Cohen and Musson, 2000). Small creative companies with female owner-managers were approached from an initially large overall sample, to undertake six months of intensive participatory research, with three months each side of this to build relationships beforehand and to reflect on findings afterwards. All companies fell within the UK 'Creative' classification and all owner-managers had creative industry and architecture in their previous career, given the difficulties women face in these sectors. Their individual details are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Data collection

Data was collected and recorded via qualitative methods through two simultaneous stages, the development of narratives through repeated semi structured interviews with owner managers and with other staff and through participant observation. During the initial stage, an introductory meeting took place at each company to engage all company members, explaining the nature of observation, the interviews and the aims of the study. This was followed by additional discussions with other company members as well as the owner-manager.

To encourage reflection, we conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews, asking questions about the day-to -day, about past experience and future hopes and expectations. This follows earlier research using interviews to build narratives in order to analyse the construction of social identity (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Johansson, 2004; Lewis, 2013). Observation of daily practice, internal meetings and interaction with customers was combined with interviews forming narratives together with other sources of information, both online and offline, such as reports, websites and marketing materials, providing both useful contexts and extra cues for discussions.

Detailed case studies were developed. Through repeated contacts, selected critical intuitive decisions were traced, examined, re-examined and explained, generating a considerable quantity of rich, text-based narratives. These were supported by: daily participant communication, researcher attendance, at critical meetings and their audio recording, and weekly structured communication with the company. Deep relationships developed between researchers and participants, supporting trust and engagement within discussions.

Analysis & discussion

A series of ‘life story’ narratives were collected (Hytti, 2005; Warren, 2004) from 3 owner managers to consider their motivations, perceptions and development at different stages in their lives, but also from other participants - staff, family members, customers and suppliers - where they form a context. All participants were asked to consider how they achieved what they felt to be key activities, how things were done, were planning or gut feeling drivers in the process? In this way, individuals used “interpretive repertoires when articulating their experiences” (Gill and Larson, 2014, 530).

For each company, a modified grounded theory analysis was carried out, generating themes as they emerged from the transcripts and observation notes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We also coded to highlight moments where participants defined themselves and articulated related goals and/or confusions or tensions, gathering these as themes which could be compared to previous research on what it means to be an entrepreneur, a female entrepreneur, a creative entrepreneur. From this, three summary narratives emerged, with owner-managers anonymised, as agreed in initial stages.

**Anna in Company A**

Anna runs a small family-run rural enterprise which had been inherited by her husband from his father, 9 years earlier. She and her husband are co-directors but she takes a lead on the business side as her husband “doesn’t like making the big decisions - he makes creative decisions and he doesn't want to be involved in 'ah, we've not got enough money today'”. Managing the business, the budgets and marketing, planning and keeping to plans were also something she took responsibility for “His approach isn’t ever ‘oh well we can't do that' …it's always can do! Blow the cost, we'll just do it, you know?”

Her husband agreed, explaining that “It grates a little bit having to make decisions based on cost” but appreciating her work given that “Many good ideas go by the wayside because people don't know how to carry them to market and how to make them work and who to sell them to and everything else.” This was also seen as her role within the firm.

Creativity as a concept, a process and ‘being creative’, as a key part of ‘who you are’ was discussed at length. Anna felt that it was a creative business with the business side necessary for survival and growth while, by contrast, her husband felt that they had been forced to go down the business route since “…the aesthetic considerations of proportion and scale in design come naturally - what doesn't come naturally is thinking about and making money.” He expressed resignation over the impact of ‘business decisions’ on the creative process – while still aware that in order to pursue the sort of creative work that he finds highly satisfying, the company needs to remain viable.

While still primarily offering print and framing services, particularly specialising in non-standard sizes, such as oversized and miniature frames (which had been all the business had done before they inherited it), they now also offer consultancy, graphic design and fabrication for logos, signage and promotional materials for other businesses. They have expanded the company profitably to include a wide range of creative services, currently describing their practice as the provision of expert visual solutions for business. Recent high-profile clients include a major international pharmaceutical company, where their expertise in art consultancy was employed to provide a new visual concept for existing office spaces.

When they were together for discussion, she and her husband expressed some difficulty in integrating an artistic sensibility with the necessity to ensure that their business makes a reliable profit. They did agree that she makes decisions about the business, the family and the creative output. Her husband only makes ‘creative decisions’ and is not interested in business decisions or financial constraints, which are perceived to impinge on the creative process. In avoiding contact with what he described as the ‘hardnosed’ requirements of the business as much as possible, his defines himself as an artist. She, on the other hand, defines herself as an artist who leads as a business owner.

Both interviewees spoke comfortably and animatedly on the subject of ‘gut feeling’ as an essential part of their business. The use of ‘gut feeling’ was readily admitted, but with caveats and signs of embarrassment and guilt, as if this is not a legitimate means of making decisions. Through discussions, self-justifications were offered for using gut feeling, but there were doubts as ways of working which foreground ‘gut feeling’ might be a weakness in the business. Risks were identified in terms of reputation and professionalism; although gut feeling was the ‘creative spark’ in the business and it fuelled innovation, it was also seen as inherently risky. Both participants had difficulty in articulating decision-making within the creative process. They explained, “gut feeling’ is the creative essence of the company because that’s how we approach it” but were worried that customers might see this as unprofessional, despite them strenuously justifying it as built on knowledge, expertise and experience.

Anna’s leadership of the firm and her management of her husband, appreciating his creative talent and allowing him the space to just focus on being an artist, meant that while he only recognised one identity, she described three social identities directly, the business owner, the manager, the creative artist and indirectly showed a fourth, occupying a nurturing and caring role mothering and supporting her spouse and applying these to family and non-family members of the firm.

**Barbara in Company B**

This small company has 4 employees and is run by a woman with a strong educational and experience background, who describes her work as creative interpretation between architecture and product design. With specialisms including project management, 2D and 3D conceptual design and space planning, the business targets commissions in public spaces, such as street furniture, visitor centres and commercial premises. Barbara explains that their working practice is responsive, flexible and proactive. She describes herself in business terms and in management terms, “We've got a lot of flexibility… I'm building a team that have multidisciplinary skills. I want designers who can do a number of things.” The company is described by her and by other staff as an empathic and customer-centred business, which provides creative solutions to meet a client’s needs via in depth research and development processes which build team members in the process. She emphasises that this requires a balance of empathy with the customer and “reining in” personal needs to be artistic or creative.

Barbara states, “The two absolute non-negotiable threads in my business are: one, you’ve got to think about the user and the second is ‘wear the client hat’ - every time you're looking at something you're about to present - put yourself in their shoes. What are the things that they're interested in? Even if that's at the detriment of some of your creativity, if you have to strip something back then strip it back.”

Similarly, she takes a lead role in managing creative projects to a budget to meet agreed time and customer expectations. “While you sometimes wish you could have done things differently at the end of the day there's not an open-ended wallet - there's a budget and it's usually reduced rather than enlarged”. As in Anna’s case, gut feeling comes into play as part of this process, although Barbara was keen to justify what she saw might be interpreted as a potentially risky reliance on emotion and intuition to be instead a function of the quality of knowledge and expertise gained through long experience.

“The more experience you've had in the sector, the more rapidly you get to the end result - because you pull into play all these background influences and all the experience you've had… It's like you're eliminating at the first stage the things you know won't work - even if the client's telling you they will! So …. ‘gut feeling’ …..yes, but I think it's backed up by knowledge and experience.”

Gut feeling also meant you instinctively knew when something would not work, in business or creative terms such that you knew when you entered a situation that things were not right and this was based on emotion. “You walk in somewhere and you have a feeling about something and that feeling comes from the pit of your stomach, no logic applied… **It's an emotional thing…**”

However, despite the gut feeling being described as “emotionally based and therefore potentially unprofessional”, she described using ‘gut feeling’ regularly in her work. In some ways it seems that she perceives her business itself as a creative product – something over which she has significant control and personal impact. She describes herself as an intuitive and creative person with responsibility for leadership and management as a business owner.

While gut feeling and intuition might be embedded in the creative side, however, she emphasised that planning and budgeting were very important in delivering a project to meet customer needs. Also, experience meant a proven track record of getting ‘gut feelings’ right – usually over years of research and practice – so intuition could be followed with some confidence, making the necessary connections from problem to solution swiftly and effectively. While stressing the creative nature of her work, she also strongly emphasised the ‘serious business’ of designing.

Barbara also explained that success depended on others, including family, buying into the value of your ideas and your business, with the necessary efforts having to be taken to ensure this. Family also needed support and attention, so the move from home to a dedicated studio 5 years earlier had helped in separating home from work but she was still very much embedded in home life, with her children familiar with all aspects of the business. She defined herself as an expert, together with being an artist, business owner, entrepreneur and communicator and wife, and talked through the effort needed to do that while being a ‘good mother’.

**Clare in Company C**

Clare worked for other companies until her pregnancy led to redundancy. She took this as “a clear signal” that the larger practices were not places for women “doing inconvenient but ordinary things like being pregnant”. While bringing up her children, she set up her own all-female business and followed this with a profitable franchise operation based on a successful business model, to cater for other women. Clare also developed an office at home, and visits clients in their own homes to discuss interventions to their (already designed) living spaces. The process observed with customers formed a conversation, a negotiation, both between Clare and the client, and between the client’s ideal specification and the specific set of constraints and challenges of a given space.

The business is described as very client-focused, supporting and facilitating clients to solve their own design problems, rather than foregrounding her creativity. Intuition and empathy were discussed and observed in her interactions with clients; finding ways to understand their needs and make suggestions about how they might be best served. Her process renders decision-making techniques, including both “rational and gut feeling”, visible to the client in real-time, during her consultations at their homes. This is articulated both in conversation and the drawing of plans: “I do all the drawing with the client, so they can see and that’s probably ‘gut feeling.’” The process involves not just visualisation but embodiment, she was observed to walk through proposed changes, acting out the different possibilities as a means of illustrating and developing an idea. More time is spent discussing with the client than it is in drawing.

While she considers herself an experienced specialist in home developments / extensions, interior design is a newer, side-interest, and as such both requires and is permitted to involve ‘creative’ and ‘imperfect’ processes. Despite this foray into play, she stressed how very systematic her approach is both to business and to client needs. She describes gut feeling as a bridge in the gap between understanding the extents of the design problem and finding its solution. This often happened not consciously thinking about the problem, or when physically removed from the sites most conventionally associated with ‘work’ because it relies on instincts and emotions: “I usually have these moments in the shower. I can’t do it at my desk.” Still, she was keen to stress that relying on gut feeling was not to be recommended, not the whole story and that it was planning and systems that were important. Gut feeling, was after all, based on feeling, so inherently not to be trusted.

In the same way seen and described with Anna and a Barbara, when carrying out work with customers, Clare and her staff take a supportive role, stress empathy and use nurturing language to describe the process. Participant observation with a customer bore this out, as did her comment “I think it shows that it was a shared process.... it's nurturing that situation to something quite personal”..

As owner-manager, Clare misses the interaction with other architects and designers which she enjoyed earlier in a large practice but considers her entrepreneurial journey to be worthwhile and necessary for her as a woman. She felt that architecture was an industry with problems, giving as an example, the equal numbers of men and women studying architecture, with only 17.5 per cent of architectural professional body members being female and in the workplace. Her understanding of the discrimination within architecture led her to feel that she needed to inspire other women and open up opportunities for them, through her the all-female practice and the female franchises. She defines herself as a leader, a business owner and a serious architect and is also proud of her identity as a single mother, supporting her children’s development, being a good mother and embedding those values in what she does while growing the business.

**Discussion**

The three narratives were elicited to gain different insights into identity work in small creative companies. There were three different pathways to business ownership: Anna through inheritance, Barbara to develop autonomy by developing creative space for her ideas and Clare as a response to actions taken against her as a woman. All three show the same multiple identities in daily practice (see Table 1). The first emphasis was on their expertise. They define themselves as experts, derived from knowledge and learning gained by long experience. Unravelling this further, however, shows that the basis for this is primarily in the artistic / creative heart of their business. They see themselves as artists and as creative. However, they also define themselves in terms of the business and there are inherent contradictions in being simultaneously the rational business leader and the creative artist, requiring continual redefinition of self as identity work.

All three businesses have grown and increased profits via owner-manager decisions. Anna makes all the business decisions, despite her husband’s co-ownership. Barbara and Clare set up and run their own businesses. From these perspectives, they are entrepreneurs although none use the term directly. Martin (2006) suggests that women business owners not only treat entrepreneurship as gender-neutral but also actively collude in concealing its gendered nature. Here a more mixed picture emerged. Neither Anna nor Barbara commented on gender discrimination but Clare actively highlighted the problem of gender disadvantage in architecture. Both Anna and Barbara compromised their activities to occupy the entrepreneur role while meeting perceived social norms in being a ‘good mum’; being recognised as a good mother was equally important to Clare, who juggled business start-up and growth with bringing up three children as a single parent. Their roles entailed day-to-day support for family members to whom they felt they owed the same consistent empathy as they did with their customer base. Their descriptions of daily practice together with observation of it, stressed the empathic, sympathetic, nurturing and maternal (see Table 2 for observation of the three business owners with customers and other staff indicating how identity is performed as part of everyday practice).

Insert Table 2 here

Previous research has emphasised the gendered nature of entrepreneurship, observing how the performance of entrepreneurship is embedded in social contexts which produce and reproduce gender and gender relations (Bruni et al., 2004; Phillips and Knowles, 2010; Bourne and Calas, 2013). Performance of gender may be signalled in types of dress or demonstrated by acting in ways deemed appropriate for that gender in society (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Westwood and Bhachu, 2004; Lewis, 2013;). Here the observation of these women with staff and customers showed them occupying socially acceptable roles (Martin, 2006); they were empathic, sensitive to others needs, nurturing and likely to accommodate family needs within the company. Their persona in each case is stereotypically maternal, nurturing and caring, simultaneously supporting and maintaining the family status quo while growing businesses in sectors which do not welcome women.

The maternal aspects echo the study by Chasserio et al, (2014) in their suggestions that traditional social identities for women in western cultures are primarily related to the private sphere: mother, wife, sister, or daughter. Women take on these social identities by adopting specific roles and tasks considered to be feminine (notably nurturing and caring roles, maintaining family life and supporting the husband or partner) to follow and fit specific social rules and norms (Westwood and Bhachu, 2004). As a result, women adopt masculine social identities where required, while at the same time maintaining their traditional social roles and accompanying responsibilities (Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009). This is seen in the attitudes in each firm to ‘gut feeling’.

Gut feeling and intuition are often used interchangeably although the generally accepted definition is that gut feeling is the action taken through intuitive decision making (Agor, 1990; Hayashi (2001). Further, intuition is defined as a “source of knowledge distinct from a more logical, analytical or rational mode of reasoning” (Baldacchino et al, 2015, 216) requiring , “immediate apprehension in the absence of reasoning” (Evans, 2010, p. 313). Intuition is associated with knowing without necessarily knowing why (Khatri and Ng, 2000 ) and with seeing coherence in complex information (Betsch and Glöckner, 2010; Huang and Pearce, 2015)

A link between emotion and intuition is suggested by Dane and Pratt (2009, 40) who define intuition as “affectively-charged judgments” (Epstein, 2010) while Sadler -Smith and Shefy (2004) suggest that as well as affect, intuition is expertise. The emotions, response implied in this view of intuition underlies suggestions that being a female will be positively related to action in situations where individuals lack knowledge and/or experience (women’s intuition) (Huang and Pearce, 2015). However, despite intuition supporting more rapid decision making, it is potentially suspect – such that “employees at all levels may not be predisposed to openly admitting to colleagues, superiors, or subordinates that they might be basing their actions on their gut feelings”.(Sadler-Smith and Sheff, 2004, 80)

While all three used gut feeling in both creative work and business operation, all three downplayed it and offered repeated justifications for its use, reflecting Sadler a Smith and Shefy 2004). Here the stereotypes of what is appropriate within roles and within genders came into play. Gut feeling was associated with the emotional and mysterious nature of intuition and therefore was at odds with the rational and systematic persona they felt it was very important to project in order to be credible as business owners. As Barbara commented, “it’s emotionally based and therefore unreliable – unprofessional”. Identity work was required to portray the rational, professional systematic business owner to customers, staff and family, while acknowledging and controlling the less reliable creative persona with its emotional and non-rational basis.

In previous research, the invisible, masculine nature of the entrepreneur has been seen in many contexts (Ahl, 2006), with the entrepreneur and business owner basing activities on planning, the rational and the systematic. Narratives of the ‘individualised’, ‘heroic’, masculine entrepreneur, marginalizes the voice of female entrepreneurs (Anderson et al, 2018; Lartey and Hamilton, 2011, p. 222). These three women showed the embedded nature of these “heroic” narratives in terms of entrepreneurship, with the rational and systematic stressed and gut feeling characterised as emotion-based and therefore risky. Here, the uncertain nature of gut feeling and the unreliability of emotion are part of the feminine stereotype as part of those naturally feminine traits which women are expected to show (Banks and Milestone, 2011)

In addition, Bourne and Calas (2013) further suggest the interoperability of work and home spheres, seen in the permeable boundaries between work and home seen in these three cases. Anna’s home situation transfers directly to the workplace. She protects her husband from the ‘hardnosed’ aspects of business ownership both at home and at work. Clare uses her home as her base and visits customers in their own homes. Barbara has set up a studio separate from her home to engage with clients but work transcends the boundaries between the two. Her family are impatient with her absorption in a project at home. The view of home is also a view of what is appropriate at home. Gut feeling and intuitive decisions occur away from the office and at home for Clare, where they are seen as fitting the emotional nature of family life. Where gut feeling, emotion and intuition spill over into the workplace as day-to-day practices, these are seen as inappropriate and much identity work is carried out to ensure each owner retains a professional business owner identity (Lewis, 2015)

These women chose self-employment, attracted by the possibility of independence and ﬁnancial opportunity rather than being ‘pushed’ into self-employment from bad jobs or unemployment (Wall, 2015). The success of each business relied on these three women taking a lead to grow the business. They did this by securing contracts through their reputation, knowledge, contacts and skills with considerable investment in client relationships through initial contacts, through projects and afterwards (Wall, 2015). These risks were also shaped by gendered assumptions about their roles and the expectations of others round them (Baines and Wheelock, 2000; Phillips and Knowles, 2012). Anna, for instance, saw it as her role to protect her husband whose role was strictly creative; Clare felt it was important to open up opportunities for other women, to lead in this and used the heroic image within her description of this (Lartey and Hamilton, 2011). All this required continuous identity work to maintain work and home identities to meet perceived social norms and to create and maintain the rational professional persona they felt essential to show as business owners. This was exacerbated by their business sector and its emphasis on creativity which they felt might be associated with the unreliable, intuitive and the non-rational rather than the ‘serious business’ of design.

Conclusions

This study showed the identity work necessary to maintain multiple identities in the everyday practice of the three creative sector business owners. In doing so it contributes to the literature on identity and identity work while offering new perspectives on the everyday practice of being a business owner in the UK creative sector. The narratives show, for instance, how the maintenance of a ‘business owner’ identity required them to present themselves as systematic and logical rather than intuitive, in order to fit current societal stereotypes of how a business owner behaves, despite the importance of the intuitive and creative to their businesses. Hence as gut feeling is felt to be emotionally based, its incidence in the business is excused and suppressed despite its essential basis in the creativity, so that the owner could fit a rationalist model which they felt was expected by others. Each business owner defined themselves as an expert and an artist with lengthy justifications for their leading businesses, through accounts of previous experience, business knowledge, and learning.

While they were developing businesses and creating and maintaining relationships with customers, they stressed their compliance with the rational, masculine discourse (Katila and Ericsson, 2013; Hamilton, 2014) but did so by embodying appropriate feminine stereotypes (Banks and Milestone, 2011). Hence, their identity as women within the confines of masculine stereotypes emerged through their accentuating the maternal, with nurturing and empathy described as characterising their relationships with external and internal contacts and fundamental to business operation. The maternal role emerged in each case as a bridge between the ‘feminine’ and the ‘business-like’, with ‘being a good mother’ spilling over home-work boundaries. These women juggled multiple roles through identity work, both consciously and unconsciously, to meet different needs each day, showing how they managed the interplay of work and home, private/ personal and professional, emotional and rational, in a sector that still discriminates against women.

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| **Table 1 – Owner-Managers taking part** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Owner** | **Sector** | | **Years in sector** | | **Company role** | **Family** | | | **Work role** | | **Identities claimed by participant** | |
| Anna | Print, framing services - non-standard consultancy, graphic design & fabrication for logos, signage and promotional materials | | 15  Art & architecture | | Co-director with husband | Married with teenage children, who she engaged in parts of the business | | | Lead decision maker | | Expert, Artist, Sales & Marketer Budgeter | |
| Barbara | Architecture & product design | | 21  Art & architecture | | Sole owner | Married with children whom she supported with business advice | | | Lead decision maker | | Expert, Creative Innovator, Business plan and Marketer | |
| Clare | Interiors, architectural designs | | 18  Architecture | | Sole owner | Planning marriage, with small children | | | Lead decision-maker | | Expert, Architect, Artist, Entrepreneur | |
| **Table 2 Identity work – observed behaviours and gut feeling** | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | | **Language with customers, observed and described by interviewees** | | **Language with staff, observed and described by interviewees** | | | **Behaviours with customers, suppliers, staff** | **Underpinning persona, work and home** | | **Gut feeling and intuition** | |
| Anna | | Nurturing, empathic | | Protective, supportive | | | Leading  Championing | Maternal  Supportive spouse | | Used in business & creative work, felt to be risky but justified by rational business identity | |
| Barbara | | Nurturing, empathic | | Empathic, supportive | | | Leading  Managing | Maternal | | Use downplayed in business & creative work, identified as risky, unfounded, emotional but justified by experience | |
| Clare | | Nurturing, empathic | | Inspiring supportive | | | Leading  Challenging  Inspiring | Maternal | | Used in business & creative work, identified as based on emotion and intuition and therefore risky but that justified by experience and qualifications | |