

Forging an entrepreneur – gendered ideas and ideals

Forging an
entrepreneur

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the gendered ideas and ideals attached to an imagined ideal Entrepreneur in a post-industrial rural community in Sweden. While research has not yet clearly explained how the ideal entrepreneur is constructed, the result, i.e. the gendered representations of entrepreneurs, is well-researched. Previous results indicate a prevalent portrayal of entrepreneurship as a predominantly masculine construct characterised by qualities such as self-made success, confidence and assertiveness.

Design/methodology/approach – Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in a community that is attempting to re-brand itself through garden tourism. Through inductive reasoning, this study analyses the gendered ideas and ideals regarding the community's imagined ideal Entrepreneur who is to help the community solve its problems.

Findings – This study finds that the community forges the Entrepreneur into an imagined masculine ideal as holy, a saviour and a god and is replacing its historical masculine ironmaster with a masculine Entrepreneur. This study develops forging as a metaphor for the construction of the masculine ideal Entrepreneur, giving the community, rather than the entrepreneur himself, a voice as constructors. From social constructionism, this study emphasises how gendered ideas and ideals are shaped not only by the individual realities but more so in the reciprocal process by the realities of others.

Originality/value – The metaphor of forging adds an innovative theoretical dimension to the feminist constructionist approach and suggests focusing on how the “maleness” of entrepreneurship is produced and reproduced in the local. Previously, light has been shed on how male entrepreneurs perform their identities collectively; the focus of this study is on the social construction of this envisioned Entrepreneur within a rural community. The development of forging thus contributes as a way of analysing entrepreneurship in place. The choice of an ethnographic study allowed the authors to be a part of the real-life world of community members, providing rich data to explore entrepreneurship and gender.

Keywords Gender, Ethnography, Entrepreneur, Masculine, Post-industrial, Rural, Tourism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

We need an old-timer that can run this business. We need an old man to believe in and that we can trust. An older person that has routines: An experienced entrepreneur. – Respondent 1

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Some scholars have been especially helpful in our work with finishing this paper. Firstly, the authors would like to thank Prof. Johan Gaddefors for his work on an earlier idea for this paper. Secondly, they would like to thank Dr Natasha Webster for her comments and for making us question our paper and in turn making our argument stronger. The authors would also like to thank Dr Richard Ferguson for steering us towards the metaphor of forging.

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This statement was made by a man who owns a large business in a rural post-industrial community in Sweden, which has been drained of investments and inhabitants since the ironworks closed in 1930. As in many other “depleted” communities, hopes have now been set on tourism to attract new inhabitants, businesses and visitors (cf. [del Mar Alonso-Almeida, 2012](#); [Haven-Tang and Jones, 2012](#); [Komppula, 2014](#); [Wilson et al., 2001](#)). In this community, developing a garden at the former ironworks estate became “a solution” to the perceived challenges and problems. At the centre of this solution stands an imagined ideal Entrepreneur [1] – and it is this imagining we focus on in this paper. We consider an ideal actor who is imagined as saving the community, moving it out of its problematic situation and supporting its development. The Entrepreneur was repeatedly portrayed with similar attributes in the stories of various business owners, planners and officials we met and interviewed during our ethnographic study of the community and entrepreneurship there from a gender perspective. These recurring stories made us curious to investigate how the gendered ideas and ideals emerged and resulted in an imagined ideal Entrepreneur.

To explore the stories, we turn to social constructionism, placing particular emphasis on gendered ideas and ideals, not only shaping our individual realities, as previously discussed by [Ahl \(2002\)](#) and [Berglund and Johansson \(2007a\)](#) but also in the reciprocal process of co-construction and gendered images being shaped by the realities of others ([Dulini Anuvinda Fernando, 2012](#); [Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017](#)). Therefore, our purpose in this paper is to explore the community’s construction of an imagined Entrepreneur. The guiding question in our study is: How does a rural post-industrial community construct an ideal Entrepreneur?

Exploring gendered ideas and ideals is not new in research on entrepreneurship. Many studies have examined gendered representations of entrepreneurs in media, research and the public. [Pettersson \(2004\)](#) found a discourse on an industrial district in Sweden characterised by an ideal masculine entrepreneur centred on the ability of men to build their own companies through being “self-made”. Studies of media representations show that the masculine construction of entrepreneurship is a narrow stereotype, excluding the feminine and women ([Hamilton, 2013](#); [Jernberg et al., 2020](#)). When asking female and male students about an ideal entrepreneur, the ideal is a man carrying masculine attributes, such as not being timid or shy ([Meyer et al., 2017](#)). Furthermore, studies on research have found that the social constructions of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship are masculine ([Ahl, 2004, 2006](#); [Berglund and Johansson, 2007a](#)). Much mainstream research thereby constructs the entrepreneur as a *he*, leaving *she* to be an antithesis of the entrepreneurship norm ([Ogbor, 2000](#)). This ideal entrepreneur is often described as masculine, rational, power-seeking, competitive and controlling ([Ahl, 2006](#); [Berglund and Johansson, 2007a](#)). He is considered strong rather than weak and active rather than passive ([Ahl, 2004](#)).

However, how this representation comes about – how this ideal entrepreneur becomes constructed – is still under-researched. From [Giazitzoglu and Down \(2017\)](#), we know that male entrepreneurs perform their identity in relation to each other. But what about the people and community around an entrepreneur? We take stock of this and explore how a rural community socially constructs an imagined Entrepreneur. As such, we depart from post-structuralist feminist theorising, which interprets gendering processes and practices as the product of power relations that have emerged from historical processes, dominant discourses, institutions and epistemological arguments ([Calás et al., 2007](#); [Calás and Smircich, 1996](#)). Gender is thus considered to be a linguistically, historically, culturally and politically constructed process and practice that is distanced from an individual’s personal experiences. Thus, gender is not only about men and women but also about perceived norms, behaviours and perceptions of what is feminine and what is masculine, as well as how femininities and masculinities are shaped ([Calás et al., 2007](#)).

Gendered representations of male entrepreneurs have been researched in different spatial places, such as entrepreneurial masculinities in suburban contexts ([Smith, 2010, 2013](#)),

concluding that a “bad-boy” identity becomes evident for the male entrepreneur, featuring masculine characteristics such as risk-taking, a “player” mentality and applauding dominance (Smith, 2010). Research has also found entrepreneurial masculinities in the agricultural sector reflecting findings on masculine features like risk-taking, self-control and a wish to be rational, professional and profit-seeking (Brandth and Haugen, 2000; Bryant, 1999; Dessein and Nevens, 2007; Laoire, 2002).

Focusing on a specific community gives us an opportunity to investigate whether there are new or additional qualities, ideas and ideals linked to the masculine character of the imagined ideal Entrepreneur in this rural, post-industrial community. In the opening quote, we see that the imagined ideal Entrepreneur has certain qualities. He – the Entrepreneur is clearly portrayed as masculine – is an experienced individual who has routines, is old, experienced and trustworthy. The fact that the Entrepreneur is portrayed as masculine is not surprising, as it corresponds well with other researchers’ findings that the entrepreneur is generally viewed as a masculine individual performing entrepreneurship on his own (Ahl, 2006; Hamilton, 2013; Jernberg *et al.*, 2020; Pettersson, 2004; Ogbor, 2000; Webster and Haandrikman, 2017). Nonetheless, research on male entrepreneurs, from a gender perspective, is still lacking (Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017; Smith, 2022).

This paper contains an ethnographic story of masculine ideas and ideals, answering the call from Giazitzoglu and Down (2017) and Smith (2022) to focus on male entrepreneurs and their construction. As is customary in ethnographic studies, we follow inductive reasoning, where our analysis not only answers initial questions but also poses new questions, which we further investigate (Johnstone, 2007). Following, for example, Berglund and Johansson (2007b) and Bruni *et al.* (2004), the empirical story is in focus, and the theoretical explanations and development have followed. For this reason, we start by introducing and explaining our ethnography. We present our inductive research method (Roos and Gaddefors, 2022) and how our research led to a focus on the ideal Entrepreneur in the community. We then tell the story of the community and how the Entrepreneur became gendered. We develop the metaphor of *forging*, drawing inspiration from the historical legacy of iron forging within the post-industrial community under study, as this allows us to discern notable distinctions in the portrayal of masculine qualities and ideals, adding to previous research.

Our ethnographic approach

This study is based on some of the results from a four-year-long ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographic fieldwork works well to explore gendered ideas and ideals, as gender is constructed and shaped within the context of broader societal realms (Bruni *et al.*, 2004). Ethnographic fieldwork focuses on understanding culture through the relationship between the individual and the collective (Brannen, 1996). It involves both ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) and observations (McDonald, 2005) in different variants and with different weights (Roos, 2021). Ethnography also means that the researcher is immersed in the field to some degree, with a focus on capturing the everydayness of people (Van Burg *et al.*, 2020). Taking guidance from Wigren (2007), we will focus our paper on the following three disclosures about our ethnographic fieldwork: (1) entering the field and developing relationships and interactions with informants, (2) sites visited and excluded and (3) evaluation of information.

In 2015, the first author began ethnographically studying the community, focusing on gender and entrepreneurship (see, for example, Roos (2017, 2018) and Roos and Gaddefors (2022)). This community was chosen due to its transformation of industrial structure from farming and manufacturing to tourism. Previous research highlights gender performance variations during such transitions (Heldt Cassel and Pettersson, 2015). Therefore, we selected this community to explore potential shifts in gender constructions in relation to

entrepreneurship. In hindsight, what made studying this community particularly interesting was that it recruited a person they hoped would fill the centre-stage position of an imagined ideal Entrepreneur. Local community members consciously typecast, searched for and eventually recruited the imagined Entrepreneur to work for the municipality developing the garden at the estate. The recruit was a gardener who is quite famous in Sweden for developing a well-known garden in another place. He had family in the community, and he had been characterised as an “entrepreneur” in other places, which, in tandem with the need and wish for an Entrepreneur, might explain his recruitment to the community.

The first visit to the community was organised by a business strategist at the municipality who directed us to different business networks in the community. In this way, we were introduced to many business owners, other networks, planners and officials. We observed meetings, conducted interviews, took part in local development talks, engaged with people and the community on social media and kept track of events happening in the community through local and national news. Through the ethnographic approach, we gathered material from different people and forums (cf. [Johnstone, 2007](#)). We spent a total of 43 days in the community over four years (2015–2018), which included nearly 200 h of fieldwork and direct interaction with more than 75 people. We observed 25 meetings with different networks and performed 44 individual semi-structured interviews and observations (cf. [Czarniawska, 2007](#); [McDonald, 2005](#); [Spradley, 1979](#)). These sources are presented in [Table 1](#). These specific sources are an outcome of the ethnographic fieldwork; as [Wigren \(2007, p. 390\)](#) states, “there are always meetings, incidents and discussions that the ethnographer will miss, simply because s/he cannot be everywhere at once”. We are not trying to present a complete picture of all the processes surrounding gender and entrepreneurship within this community. In essence, we gathered stories about businesses and life, opinions and future aspirations from local business owners – men and women, owners of both small and big businesses and of different socio-economic classes.

The interviews focused on three descriptive ethnographic questions ([Spradley, 1979](#)): (1) Tell me about yourself, (2) Tell me about your business and (3) What is happening in the municipality? After one of the questions was answered, we posed follow-up questions that aimed to contrast, clarify and develop the discussion, resulting in the interviews taking on a more conversational and friendly tone rather than adhering to a strict interview protocol (cf. [Spradley, 1979](#)). When we asked the third question – about the municipality – the answers usually involved storylines about the local tourism concept, the garden and the gardener there. We developed an understanding of the community being engaged in a process of re-branding itself as an entrepreneurial community. At the forefront of this change was the garden tourist concept and at the centre of that concept stood an imagined ideal Entrepreneur. The gardener is a prominent person in the stories surrounding the businesses and societal spheres of this community, and we had an opportunity to look more closely into how he was constructed as a (masculine) entrepreneur and how the community members constructed gender in relation to entrepreneurs through their stories about him. Thus, even though we rarely asked directly about the gardener, information and stories often came forward in the interviews and observation.

This continuous, not researcher-driven, talk about the garden and the gardener sparked our interest to explore the community’s construction of an imagined Entrepreneur. We came to experience a sort of “walking-around approach” where our study object became the person we did not have substantial contact with. Instead of shadowing an individual ([McDonald, 2005](#)), we thus shadowed the ideas and stories surrounding an ideal individual Entrepreneur. In line with the ethnographic method, we let the conversation flow. We did not change our method in the field after the idea of this paper emerged. Instead, we continued to be aware of the municipality’s interest in the garden and the gardener, and we made certain to make notes about it when we observed something of relevance in the field.

| | | Interviews and individual observations | | Observations in Network 1 | Observations in Network 2 | Observations in Network 3 | Observations in Network 4 | Observations within the municipality organisation | Reflections |
|----------------------------------|---|--|------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|---|-------------|
| Amount | 44 | 2 | 5 | 12 | 6 | 7 | 76 events on record | | |
| Content | Stories about you, your business and the community | Organising and developing the local shops | Community development network | Female business network | Joint meetings between business and the municipality | Visit to the garden and the municipality office | Both individual and collective content | | |
| Involved people | Business owners, volunteers, parents and municipality officials | Business owners and municipality officials | Invite-only group of entrepreneurs | Entrepreneurs in different stages of their business | Representatives from the business networks and the municipality | Employees, municipal politicians and officials | Different people, but for the most part, business owners/entrepreneurs | | |
| Sex composition | Women and men | Women and men | Women and men | Women | Women and men | Women and men | Both sexes are represented | | |
| Source(s): Author's own creation | | | | | | | | | |

Table 1.
Sources in the ethnographic fieldwork

Anonymity is difficult to uphold in an ethnography, especially within a community (Walford, 2018). As previously stated, this community has also been previously studied by one of the authors as well as other researchers. Nonetheless, to those we interviewed and did individual observations with, we disclosed that we would not use their name nor the name of their business. This was a way for us to gain legitimacy and trust with the informants, two cornerstones of an ethnography (Johnstone, 2007). In meetings, a “gatekeeper” introduced us and thus allowed us to observe and make notes (Walford, 2018). As such, the respondents are anonymised in our paper. We have also anonymised both the community and the gardener in our study for ethical reasons of confidentiality. We do not focus on the gardener *per se* but the imagined ideal Entrepreneur, and as such, we will call this phenomenon “the Entrepreneur” in the remainder of the paper. To protect those involved, we have anonymised the data to the best of our ability.

We imported all interview transcripts, field notes, reflections and digital data to NVivo. In this software, we coded everything related to the Entrepreneur and the garden. After that, we followed the usual steps of qualitative data analysis (cf. Jack *et al.*, 2008; Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019) as we went back and forth between the material, its coding and our evolving theoretical framework. These steps included focusing on “who said what” and “what was said”. Following previous work on gender and entrepreneurship research, we then analysed the gendered ideas and ideals instilled into the imagined ideal Entrepreneur by comparing the qualities within him to previous findings on the masculine features of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship (cf. Ahl and Nelson, 2014; Foss, 2010; Pettersson *et al.*, 2017), see Table 2.

This analysis was made in tandem with the writing of the text; hence, we emphasise this by going back and forth between material, codes, analysis and writing in a way inspired by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This paper holds a particular instance of going back and forth (Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019), as while we coded and analysed, the Entrepreneur and the tourist garden emerged as a solution for some challenges or problems within the community. However, the problems were not clear, so we went back through the material and searched for these perceived problems. What came out was a story of problems related to rural development, but we also found more of the envisioned role of the garden and the Entrepreneur as solutions to the challenges.

In this paper, we therefore analyse the community’s construction of the ideal Entrepreneur. We view the community members’ stories not as opinions about the gardener as a person *per se* but as constructions and assumptions about the needs and expectations placed on the imagined ideal Entrepreneur by and for the community. The quotes and extracts we use from the community are taken from the broader ethnographic story. As such, the quotes we use illustrate stories in the community in the best possible way.

| Quote | Analysis of gendered ideas and ideals | Comparison to masculine characteristics of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in previous studies |
|---|--|---|
| “There were great expectations that he would be this saviour who would also promote the community. So, a huge load was put on him as a person.” (Respondent 4) | The community can place expectations on entrepreneurs The Entrepreneur is seen as a saviour The Entrepreneur is supposed to promote the community The things the Entrepreneur is supposed to do can be imagined to be done by an individual | The Entrepreneur as an individual (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007) Saviour qualities as strong, active leader (Ahl, 2006) The Entrepreneur can save the community (Bensemann <i>et al.</i> , 2018) |

Table 2.
Example of analysis **Source(s):** Author’s own creation

Our ethnographic story

Our ethnographic story takes place in a rural post-industrial community in Sweden that is addressing many of the problems faced by other rural areas in the country. In this part, we present these perceived problems as well as the solution, which, in this community, was the establishment of a garden. At the forefront of the establishment was a gardener who, in time, has become the ideal imagined Entrepreneur of this rural post-industrial community.

Rural post-industrial community

The community studied in this paper was, historically, dependent on the iron industry and a particular local ironworks for jobs and development. The ironworks closed in 1930 due to increasing automatisisation in the iron sector, and thus, a new era for the rural industrial community began. In the mid-twentieth century, a plastic factory producing snowmobiles and boats was established and successfully developed.

Nevertheless, in the 1990s, young people began emigrating and investments declined. The community began to perceive depopulation, an influx of foreign immigration and a lack of successful businesses. A quote voicing this is, “We need those who pay taxes. Foreigners and people on social welfare we get as “add-ons”. But we cannot only have those moving to the community” (Respondent 1) [2]. Adding to these problems, the municipality organisation is also very concerned about different rankings. For example, once a year, a survey goes out to a proportion of Sweden’s business owners, resulting in the ranking of the business climate in each municipality. At one of the meetings with Network 4, the chair of the municipal executive board (Respondent 2) expressed pride in the municipality’s improvement in the national rankings. This accomplishment was noteworthy, considering the major, costly renovation of the school, the high level of foreign immigration and the challenge of students not wanting to attend school. It illustrates the importance of these rankings for the municipality. These problems of the community and rural development in general described by the community are manifold. The community started to consider tourism as a solution to the problems experienced, and establishing the garden was one of the cornerstones for bringing in more visitors.

Tourism became and is seen as the potential solution to the various problems perceived in the community. The focus on tourism originated from a wish to develop the community and a belief that tourism could bring new inhabitants to the community. Tourism was seen as potentially bringing a renewed sense of place to the community and showing the advantages of the community. “We need the tourists to stay” and “The garden draws people, and then we need to expand with more activities” were voiced during an observation with Network 5. As such, the hope was that tourism would solve complex societal problems. In all of this, entrepreneurship was given the role of reconnecting the community’s historical legacy with the future by using the old ironworks estate. A forest industry company purchased the historical estate in 1887, and the iron mill closed in 1930. The forest industry company relocated in 1990, and in 1996, the municipality took over ownership of the ironworks estate that included numerous old industrial buildings, some land and an impressive but timeworn mansion. In 2000, the municipality decided to establish a garden at the old ironworks estate. Two years later, the municipality started a foundation to govern the garden and develop the estate into a tourist attraction.

Establishment of the garden

Four men – a gardener, a designer, a marketer and another man (who left the project early and is not mentioned in the empirical material) – were recruited in 2000 to lead the transformation of the estate. This specific recruitment and the development of the ironworks have been investigated previously (cf. Berglund *et al.*, 2016; Gaddefors and Cronsell, 2009), albeit not

from a gender perspective. The gardener had connections to the community, as he spent his childhood summers there visiting his grandparents. Likewise, the marketer had a summerhouse in the community. An element of authenticity, through the men having their “roots” in the community, seems to have had some importance for their recruitment.

The four men were also recruited for their prior entrepreneurial experiences. The gardener was already quite famous in Sweden for running another well-known garden, including a commercial garden with biodynamic cultivation and a garden café. These experiences also allowed the gardener to give talks and participate in various events related to gardening. He had written books on gardening and attracted media attention, and after he was recruited, he moved to the community. For these reasons, the gardener fit well with the community’s desire to do “something big”, something that attracted tourists and would transform the estate and the worn buildings. The marketer and the others involved did not have the perceived “star quality” the gardener had, and they never played anything other than supporting roles. Respondent 3 even said that the gardener is the community’s “own Bruce Springsteen”, indicating that the other three, if anything, played the role of the E Street Band, supporting the rock star. Eventually, the others dropped out of the project, silently and in the shadow of the gardener. The other three men were rarely mentioned in the ethnographic fieldwork. If they were mentioned, it was in the sense of “the other three” or with surprise, in that they remember that more people than the gardener were involved in the beginning. Hence, we found silence in our empirical material just as important as what the people voiced. In the eyes of the community, the other three are not important when constructing the solution: neither to the garden nor the ideal Entrepreneur.

The transformation of the ironworks meant that the estate was partly restored and developed, mainly into a garden with a greenhouse, a restaurant, offices that local businesses could rent, a conference centre and a welcome centre. In addition to being an attraction in and of itself, the garden was to become a springboard for other tourist businesses and entrepreneurship in the community. Together, the new businesses were slated to revive the history and nature of the area and make the community visible to potential people moving to the community.

Restoration of the estate and establishment of the garden was made possible by low rent from the municipal foundation, obtaining loans with the estate as security and projects that could be funded with support from the European Union. Through the gardener’s contacts, renowned architects and artists were hired for a small portion of the usual cost. In a short time, the garden gained acclaim and had a couple of successful, promising years in terms of the number of visitors, and it was praised both nationally and internationally.

However, in the last few years, developments have not been so positive, and recently, the municipality has needed year-end financial assistance to keep the business afloat. Three reasons have been that (1) the tourist season for a garden is short, while the staff needs to be paid salaries year-round; (2) the costs of maintaining the already developed parts of the garden are spiralling; and (3) there are high costs associated with further developing the garden. The municipality organisation started providing loans and subsidies because it saw the benefits of the garden in terms of job opportunities, attracting tourists and the garden’s perceived ability to bring about social changes. In the next section, we put the spotlight on the imagined Entrepreneur at the garden and his perceived ability to make the garden a success.

Imagined entrepreneur

The individuals interviewed and observed in the rural community had opinions and ideas about the Entrepreneur and the garden. Sometimes, the opinions were more positive and, at times, more negative. However, it is worth noting that there were no opposing “camps” in the community that argued for different kinds of ideals and ideas around the ideal Entrepreneur.

Instead, the same person could construct different versions of entrepreneurial ideas and ideals at different times and in different situations.

In their stories, the community members literally named the Entrepreneur a saviour. When asked about the expectations for the Entrepreneur when he came to the community, two business owners made the following statements: “There were great expectations that he would be this saviour who would also promote the community. So, a huge load was put on him as a person” (Respondent 4). Another business owner said something similar:

The gardener is the gardener. There is no one else who can be more of a saviour than the gardener. He is just like that. So, if you never heard him before and then attend a talk with him, then you'll be enthusiastic [3] about the garden. And you may think it's awesome with roses and anything that he's talking about. So, he is a very charismatic person who really sells this [garden] (Respondent 5).

The community thus described the Entrepreneur in a quasi-religious manner as someone who is almost superhuman and has superior powers of persuasion. This description argued for his worth and kept everyone believing in him with grace. The construction of the maleness of the Entrepreneur is obvious in the element of the construction of the Entrepreneur as a saviour.

Community members not only spoke of the Entrepreneur as a saviour but also used strong religious language in other ways to construct the Entrepreneur. He was also referred to as someone holy and someone you cannot and should not, touch: “But, in any case, he is holy; you must not say anything bad about him, you cannot do that” (Respondent 6). Furthermore, referring to the recent financial downturns, Respondent 4 said the following: “He was a god. Then, of course, he fell from that pedestal, which he did not climb up himself, but there are always others putting him there.” The masculine connotations of “God” and holiness are obvious within monotheistic Protestantism, which dominates Sweden and the community. We thus take the maleness of the Entrepreneur as another quality to be constructed because he is viewed as a saviour and a holy god.

The relationship between the entrepreneur and the entrepreneurial project was observed in the community under study – certain business owners went so far as to say that the Entrepreneur *is* the garden. “I think many people still think that the garden is nothing without the gardener. He is the garden and gives the garden status. I believe so, in any case” (Respondent 7). The Entrepreneur is not only the entrepreneur behind the garden but also an embodiment of the garden. It is worth noting that the Entrepreneur was not the only one who developed the garden — as mentioned previously, several other people were also involved. He is, however, the one who stayed on for the longest time, the one people cared about and uplifted; hence, he left a strong imprint on the business.

The historical legacy of the ironworks, and perhaps even more so, the ironmaster, is closely linked to the envisioned ideal Entrepreneur. His persona involves being a masculine individual who takes care of and develops the community. For example, during an observation with Network 2, a person voiced, “The industry is not the future for [the community]; we are not going to attract a large new manufacturer. Tourism is the new thing”. Since the garden is at the forefront of tourism in [the community], expectations are placed on what it is supposed to bring to the community. The garden, with the Entrepreneur as the front figure, is expected to have the same role. Our reflection concerns financial capability and job opportunities, similar to the historical businesses at the site.

The negative trends in the finances were also discussed in a workshop we held with Network 3. When two people discussed this, Respondent 8 said, “We need someone who can do that, with commitment”, “That” in this sense was the financial aspect. The Entrepreneur should have the ability to make the garden financially thrive.

Also, the Entrepreneur's involvement in the garden was somehow supposed to solve the problem of the community's drop in national rankings. These different national rankings

score several factors, such as the municipality's service for businesses, access to employees with relevant expertise, availability of a lake view, the number of days fathers take parental leave, and children's school grades. In hindsight, it is impossible for the Entrepreneur and the garden to have a substantial effect on these variables. In a quasi-religious manner, the Entrepreneur is put on a pedestal to be adored and worshipped. The entrepreneurship at the garden, performed by the Entrepreneur, is seen as redeeming the community from the perceived problems by attracting new people to the area and giving the community a new sense of life.

Early in the research process, the first author participated in a debate in one of the business networks where the topic was who best would run the garden. Among the 11 participants was a male business owner who made the following remark (also cited in the opening paragraph of the paper): "We need an old-timer that can run this business. We need an old man to believe in and that we can trust. An older person that has the routines: an experienced entrepreneur" (Respondent 1). However, some of the other men in the group posed the counterargument that the whole community needed to be engaged in running the garden. Still, Respondent 1 pushed his argument by saying that "it needs to be an old-timer to believe in". Respondent 3 spoke up and said that an oldster was the wrong way to go. Instead, he felt that a young girl, "or maybe a boy," would be the right way to go. Respondent 1 opposed this, repeating that the head of the garden needed to be an older male with routines – an experienced entrepreneur. Thus, the discussion ended in the continued construction of a masculine Entrepreneur, even though it was debated.

Gendered ideas and ideals in the rural post-industrial community

The problems of community and rural development described by the community are manifold and ascribed to rural depopulation. In many ways, their problems seem like those that other rural communities face (Bensemann *et al.*, 2018; Johnstone and Lionais, 2004; McKeever *et al.*, 2015). Tourism became the potential solution to the various problems perceived in the community, which was not unique to this post-industrial rural community (cf. Hedfeldt, 2008). As such, the hope was that tourism would solve complex societal problems (del Mar Alonso-Almeida, 2012). The ideal Entrepreneur was given the role of pursuing these changes, even though societal change (especially regarding gender) is a slow micro-process (Roos and Gaddefors, 2022). In all of this, entrepreneurship was given the role of reconnecting the community's historical legacy with the future by using the old ironworks estate (Anderson and Gaddefors, 2016).

Post-industrial areas, like the one in which the studied community is located, have a specific kind of social structure (Hedfeldt, 2008). With a dominating employer, such as an ironworks, a particular kind of worker culture is present. This culture implies a strong relationship between worker and employer, where the employer not only provides work but also housing. The area is characterised by a patriarchal culture, where historically, the male workers, the masculine work, the ironworks and the male ironmaster were highly valued. We find that even though the community is actively seeking to move away from being an industrial community and attempting to re-brand itself as an entrepreneurial community, a similar gendering is taking place through establishing garden tourism and constructing the Entrepreneur. Thus, even though the ironworks in the community closed and the community seeks to attract new businesses, new inhabitants and more tourists by establishing a garden, the gender characterisation seems to have stayed intact (Forsberg, 1998). In this community, engaging in re-branding itself as entrepreneurial has thus implied focusing on one establishment (the garden) similar to the familiar model of one large employer (the ironworks). Here, another masculine individual (the Entrepreneur) replaces the masculine ironmaster, who was responsible for jobs and housing. Similarly, we find that the imagined

Entrepreneur is viewed as capable of taking care of and developing the community and taking it out of its problematic position. The redemption aspect of the Entrepreneur is considered one of the authorising beliefs in entrepreneurship discourse (cf. [Ogbor, 2000](#)). Interestingly, we note that one individual is thereby viewed as potentially able to solve complex and extensive perceived problems, ranging from young people emigrating from the community to a lack of businesses, and he is expected to do this by developing the garden and thereby drawing new businesses, inhabitants and tourists. Because of the region's historical legacy, the imagined Entrepreneur in this community becomes even "more masculine" than other researchers have found in media and the research discourse.

Our ethnographic approach with a local community has allowed us to find somewhat different masculine features than those found in previous research. At the outset of our study, we ascertained that the imagined ideal Entrepreneur is viewed as masculine and an experienced individual who has routines, is old and is someone who can be trusted. That the Entrepreneur is portrayed as masculine corresponds well with the findings of others, who also saw the entrepreneur as a masculine individual, performing entrepreneurship on his own (cf. [Ahl, 2006](#); [Webster and Haandrikman, 2017](#)). There is a notion that a successful entrepreneur does entrepreneurship when they immerse themselves in a business, no matter the personal cause or struggle. [Ozkazanc-Pan \(2014\)](#) describes such a man as one who places the business higher than anything else in life: neglecting family and friends, basically working 24 h a day, sleeping a minimum number of hours and never having the feeling of being finished. This is a strongly masculine practice, as women are associated with and responsible for the everyday care of the home, family and children. Male entrepreneurs are allowed to do all this while still being considered successful and content, with supportive family in the background. This hard-working, individualistic notion of entrepreneurship seems so deeply rooted in the community that it does not need to be explicitly stated that the Entrepreneur and his role at the garden is for an individual person.

Furthermore, the ideal Entrepreneur is portrayed as able to build the garden by being "self-made" ([Pettersson, 2004](#)), which also brings an aspect of pride to the garden, as it is built on expertise in gardening and through internal growth of a successful business ([Mulholland, 1996](#)). Moreover, we find that the Entrepreneur is expected to be immersed in his business, as also found in previous studies ([Berglund and Johansson, 2007a](#); [Ozkazanc-Pan, 2014](#)). The Entrepreneur is even so closely constructed with the garden that he is seen *as* the garden. According to [Berglund and Johansson \(2007a, p. 92\)](#), "Entrepreneurship appears to be unthinkable without the idea of the entrepreneur". This phenomenon of imagining an entrepreneur as part of entrepreneurship is reflected in the development of an entrepreneurial imagining in this community.

While these findings confirm previous research, we also find new qualities, ideas and ideals linked to the maleness of the imagined ideal Entrepreneur in the community; these qualities are different from those found previously. The community constructs the ideal Entrepreneur as someone holy. The masculine connotations of "god" and holiness are obvious, but new in relation to the maleness of entrepreneurship. We also find that the imagined ideal Entrepreneur includes the quality of being a saviour. A saviour has many of the qualities of masculinity, which [Ahl \(2004\)](#) recognised as linked to the masculine essence of entrepreneurship: A saviour is strong in the sense that *he* withstands danger and destruction, active in the sense that *he* brings about salvation, and a leader in the sense that *he* is the one to bring salvation to his followers. The masculine quality of being a saviour is also strongly linked to this rural post-industrial community, as the community perceives itself as being in great need of being saved from its challenges and problems through the development of garden tourism, a strategy in which the imagined Entrepreneur takes centre stage. It helped that the gardener had a family connection with the community. This "rooting" in the community seems to have given the imagined Entrepreneur an aspect of authenticity and

was viewed as a guarantee that the community could trust him. In addition, the gardener moving to and living in the community may have enhanced the perception of rooting and feelings of trust.

The expectations of the Entrepreneur stand in contrast to the (also masculine) character seeking quick profits and growth through takeovers (Mulholland, 1996) or the rational, power-seeking, competitive and controlling masculine character (Ahl, 2006; Berglund and Johansson, 2007a). The ideal Entrepreneur in the community is also very far from being constructed as a “bad boy” who takes risks, has a “player” mentality and applauds dominance (Smith, 2013). We will now explain how our forging metaphor can illuminate these expectations placed on the Entrepreneur.

Forging as a metaphor in social constructionism

With our paper, we seek to develop theorising based on social constructionism by putting particular emphasis on how constructionism is not only about constructing our own reality (cf. Ahl, 2002; Berglund and Johansson, 2007a) but also about constructing and being constructed by the realities of others (Dulini Anuvinda Fernando, 2012; Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017). Giazitzoglu and Down (2017) discuss how entrepreneurs perform masculinity through conversations, behaviours and rituals at the local pub. It is a tale of how men perform their identity in front of, and with, other men. The men position themselves and perform their identity by building a hierarchy, focusing on success and distinguishing themselves from other entrepreneurs. As such, it is a case of one person performing together with other people.

However, what becomes especially interesting in this paper is how a person is constructed through the realities of others. This is different from the approach taken by Giazitzoglu and Down (2017), who focus on how male entrepreneurs perform their identity in tandem with other males. The entrepreneurs negotiate their masculine identity with each other, and the person takes a prominent role in this relationship. The same kind of negotiation is found in Dulini Anuvinda Fernando (2012), where the negotiation strategies of Sri Lankan women are observed. From a social constructionism perspective, the social contexts influence how people make sense of the world and choose to navigate these contexts. As such, people and their contexts continuously interact.

This is where forging emerges as a suitable metaphor for how the imagined ideas and ideals of a person are constructed through the realities of others. Forging, among other things, means to form something (such as metal and pieces of iron) by heating and hammering (Merriam-Webster, 2020). In the old ironworks in the community, iron would be poured into a mould to be fixed into the desired shape. The metaphor of forging appreciates the post-industrial community and its historical legacy of the ironworks.

Previously, we see this argument about who constructs realities made by Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff (1991), who bring up the metaphor of the organisation as a theatre, where the leaders (leaders, managers and entrepreneurs) are on the stage and the organisation, and its surroundings, is the audience. They point out that if the leaders do not share the visions, enact archetypes or embody the emotions of those in the organisation, their reality will be their own, constructed just for themselves. A successful leader performs the expectations and norms of the audience in a well-tuned manner. This performance becomes the construction of reality for the organisation. In this paper, using the metaphor of forging, we focus on *how* this construction happens.

Forging as a metaphor has been used previously in relation to gender to discuss identities. Gioni (2015) uses it to discuss how girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina became forged into the same mould with a mission to “civilize” Muslim girls. In this context, the mould was the expectations and ideals for a proper mother. Similarly, the book edited by Hasan (2019) brings

up different ways in which people construct their identity in relation to their surroundings, especially their religious traditions. Most interestingly, it is about how people negotiate their identity in a non-negotiable culture with fundamental religious commitment overriding all other possible identities. The mould by which people's identities are forged is thus being negotiated. Linking back to the stage proposed by [Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff \(1991\)](#), [Walser \(1993\)](#) wrote about heavy metal music's construction of masculinity. [Walser \(1993\)](#) emphasises that heavy metal's construction of masculinity is not limited to the musicians themselves. The audience, primarily young males, actively participate in the performance of masculinity by identifying with the music and its themes. They may use heavy metal to assert their masculinity and identity. The musician's stage fantasies, where the result of the mould – the performance – often involve both the musician and the audience adopting traditionally masculine traits such as aggression, dominance and rebellion.

To add theoretical knowledge to the relationship between stage and audience – mould and smiths – we focus on *how* this construction happens. This is done through an ethnographic study in a community where the smith, the mould and the result – the forged iron – are especially evident.

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper has been to investigate the gendered ideas and ideals resulting in an imagined ideal Entrepreneur. To fulfil this purpose, we develop forging as a metaphor to develop the feminist post-structural approach to constructing gender ([Calás et al., 2007](#); [Calás and Smircich, 1996](#)). The metaphor of forging is a way to explore how ideas and ideals around gender and entrepreneurship become constructed in rural communities. The in-depth ethnographic study of a community allowed us to listen to, hear and take seriously an unexpected aspect of the stories communicated in the interviews and observations.

We add an element of “the smiths” to the process of “pouring iron into the mould”, which can be compared to [Walser \(1993\)](#) and [Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff \(1991\)](#), who bring forth “the audience” in the construction process. “The smiths” in this article are the members of the rural community, and their mould is the site where this forging happens. The community's perceived issues and expectations for the ideal Entrepreneur are the iron poured into the mould by these smiths. The final product, the forged iron, is the imagined ideal Entrepreneur shaped to fit the community. Because we add the community to the construction process in the form of “the smiths”, we can investigate potential qualities, ideas and ideals linked to the masculine characteristics of the imagined ideal Entrepreneur in this community.

We find that forging allows us to identify masculine features that differ from those found in previous research. We determine that the community forged an ideal Entrepreneur who is to solve the specific problems of this community. In this sense, he is seen as someone holy, a god and a saviour who replaces the historical ironmaster at the local ironworks. This forging is quite specific to this community. Still, however unique the community may think the imagined Entrepreneur is, the analyses reveal that, in terms of gender, the ideal is quite stereotypical. The ideal Entrepreneur is a “self-made” individual absorbed with his business, characteristics also found by, for example, [Webster and Haandrikman \(2017\)](#), [Pettersson \(2004\)](#), [Mulholland \(1996\)](#) and [Ozkazanc-Pan \(2014\)](#).

The mould in our community seems to be just as rigid and set as the examples of [Giomi \(2015\)](#) and [Hasan \(2019\)](#). What differs is the focus of the research process. While [Giomi \(2015\)](#) and [Hasan \(2019\)](#) focus on how people construct their own realities through negotiation, trying to tame the mould and negotiate the result – the forged iron – we instead shed light on the pouring by the smiths, meaning how the ideas and ideals about the Entrepreneur become a reality in this community. No matter the identity work by the gardener, the gendered expectations, ideas and ideals are set by the smiths in the community.

Our study also adds a novel aspect to the study of gendered entrepreneurship by investigating the community's whole process, from imagining, typecasting and searching for, to eventually recruiting a person. This comprehensiveness is unusual because most entrepreneurship research study entrepreneurs who emerge and are self-appointed. In contrast, this community consciously recruited a famous gardener, who (it was hoped) would fill the centre-stage position of the imagined ideal Entrepreneur because of his imagined "star-like" qualities and prior entrepreneurial experience. Without a doubt, our ethnographic approach enabled us to capture and make sense of the entirety of this entrepreneurial process.

Based on our results, we suggest that further studies need to investigate whether a similar pattern is observed in other rural and/or post-industrial contexts. For example, one could look at the maleness of ideal entrepreneurs, or the masculinities of male entrepreneurs, in these similar communities. We are adding our voice to those of scholars before us, suggesting that research takes further notice of men and masculinities (Ahl and Nelson, 2010; Ashe and Treanor, 2011). Doing so would imply not only researching men entrepreneurs as *men* entrepreneurs but also focusing on how masculinities are produced and reproduced within entrepreneurship, and in particular spatial places. We welcome further attempts to uncover how gender and entrepreneurship are intertwined at the local level.

Policies are also part of the forging of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, and policy makers must reflect on what discourses are present when shaping policy. Because different assumptions are accepted in different contexts, policy must be locally anchored into different contexts (cf. Ozkazanc-Pan, 2014). While this is easy to say, it might be hard to implement in practice. However, the first step could be to organise and engage in collaborations between different actors in society, emphasising local actors where the policy will be enacted (Roos, 2018). Based on our findings, we believe that policy, as a developmental tool for society, needs to challenge assumptions that otherwise go unquestioned.

Notes

1. By naming the ideal imagined Entrepreneur with a capital E, we stress that the socially constructed image was not directly linked to the actual person recruited to the community.
2. We acknowledge that this statement is racist and that it is highly problematic that some individuals in this community perceive "too much foreign immigrants" as a problem.
3. This is a translation of the Swedish word "frälst", which has two meanings. It is to be euphoric and exalted about something, and to be saved by God, to become religious about a certain thing.

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