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### **Identity, enactment and entrepreneurship engagement in a declining place**

#### Abstract

We examine entrepreneurship practice and identity work in a rural small town in New Zealand. Once prosperous, the town suffered economically and socially as old industries closed. Recently the town was rejuvenated, at least in part because of the entrepreneurial endeavours of Linda. Our findings demonstrated conflict between her entrepreneurial identity and local sense of place. We theorise Linda's entrepreneurial identity in her business practice, where she experienced controversy despite economic success. We argue that a complete understanding of identity and entrepreneurship practices requires attention to social and spatial processes, not just economic processes.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial identity, small business practice, depleted community, rural, New Zealand, legitimacy.

# **Identity, enactment and entrepreneurship engagement in a declining place**

## ***Introduction***

Our purpose is to examine identity in action and context and interested in understanding how an entrepreneurial identity is accomplished (Ahl, 2006), used (Hytti and Heinonen, 2013) and received (Down and Reverley, 2004). Coupland and Brown (2010;10) admonish us study ‘identities on location (in context)’, whilst Morris et al (2016) argue for the importance of context in all entrepreneurship research. We believe that this will benefit our understanding of entrepreneurship in practice. To achieve this, we examine identity processes in small business practices; enacting identity. We see enactment as engaging with people and place; which offers a useful mechanism for observing if, and how engagement confers legitimacy (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). Gruber and MacMillan (2017) propose an identity perspective allows one to move beyond traditional views embedded in economic rationality. Conceptually, we view entrepreneuring as more than an economic function (Anderson, 2015) understanding enterprising as socially situated (Watson, 2013) and socially enabled (Hamilton, 2014). Consequently, entrepreneurial engagement with place is our unit for analysis. We follow Gill and Larson’s (2014) account of entrepreneurship research turning towards exploring the situated experiences of entrepreneurship, where meaning-making informs entrepreneurial identity (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004; Hjorth et al., 2008).

The context is a rural small town in New Zealand. Once prosperous, the place suffered badly when old industries vanished and Stanton became rundown and depleted (Johnstone and Lionais, 2015). Recently the town was revitalised, arguably through the entrepreneurship of an ambitious woman who set up new businesses and encouraged others. This entrepreneurial engagement in context provides an interesting and theoretically informing situation. It appears

a convincing ideal typification of entrepreneurship; heroic entrepreneurship overcomes adversity to seize opportunity; place is renewed and begins to prosper again as jobs are created. Yet whilst some local narratives endorsed this entrepreneurial work, others demurred; ‘she may be a national hero but she is not our hero’. Through establishing why these local narratives jibed at approving Linda’s actions, we are better able to understand entrepreneurship as a place bound, spatial phenomenon.

Our contribution builds from the literature recognising entrepreneurial identity is a social process (Alsos et al, 2016) to show how it is also spatial. Accordingly, contextualising identity processes leads to a richer understanding of entrepreneurship itself. Larson and Peterson (2012) describe how place is often treated as the context in which interactions occur, a container for, rather than a component of interaction (Berg, 1997); scholars seldom explore the impacts of place. However, as Johannisson pointed out so long ago (1989), entrepreneurship happens in places. For Gill and Larson (2014), place both shapes and constrains the possibilities for constructing an ‘ideal entrepreneurial self’. We demonstrate that not only do entrepreneurs do identity work, and work their identity, they ‘work’ place too. Place thus contextualises, informing identity, identity work and the entrepreneurial process. Accordingly, we contribute by demonstrating the role of context in enacting an entrepreneurial identity and the role of place in attributing legitimacy to identity. We add to identity theory by demonstrating a novel dimension, the role of context in entrepreneurial identity processes. Thus, our contribution is to synthesise the increasing recognition of the importance of context (Welter, 2011) with established work on the nature and process of entrepreneurial identity (Leitch and Harrison, 2016). As Berglund (2008) puts it, identity involves interacting with the world.

Questions about entrepreneurship in a place, or for a place (McKeever et al, 2014) provide a rich conceptual field to examine identity in context. Hytti (2005; 595) explains how ‘emphasis has been shifted towards understanding entrepreneurship as a social and spatial practice that

gains new meanings in the different times and places', but adds 'we need to produce research that is strongly rooted in the context'. The paper combines the explanatory dimensions of context with the instructive concepts of identity to offer a fuller understanding of entrepreneurship in place.

Our rationale for examining contextualised identity processes is because place is the "fundamental means by which we make sense of the world and through which we act" (Sack, 1992; 1). Larson and Pearson (2012) explain how attention to place provides insight into how the material, geographic world shapes the ways in which people socially construct their identities. We argue that identity and place intertwine in the experience of belonging (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009a), but are not always in harmony. Entrepreneurial identity is earned through actions, performance, but the sense of belonging is created through cultural, social constructions along with local interactions, personal experiences and individual beliefs (Anderson and Gaddefors, 2016). Consequently, places are where identity is enacted, but also where entrepreneurs are socially situated; where they 'belong'. The interplay between different formations of identity should be conceptually informative.

### **Theoretical framework**

Lewis (2016) suggests the sociological turn in entrepreneurship research validates the need for inquiry rooted in constructs such as identity, and legitimized the need for the type of post-positivist approaches most suited for addressing such dimensions of questioning (Karatas-Ozkan et al. 2014). Identity processes are a good case in point; specifically, Lewis (2016) notes how entrepreneurial identity is embedded and socially constructed. Identity is no longer regarded as essentialist or stable, but described by dynamic, fluid and often contradictory processes (Hytti, 2005). With identity increasingly viewed as fluid, then claim Leitch and Harrison (2016), the research focus must shift to the processes of identity formation. Moreover,

individuals are seen to have multiple, socially constructed identities (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). Hytti and Heinomen (2013) explain identity is constructed through a positioning in discourse and in relation to performance. Identity is thus socially constructed through interaction with others (Williams Middleton, 2013). Previous research has promoted a social constructionist perspective for exploring these interactive aspects, especially for capturing experiences and meanings through discursive and narrative approaches. This perspective privileges meaning and understanding as the focal features of human activity where interactions can change perceptions of social reality (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). It seems clear then that a social constructionist perspective is a useful way to approach the research problem.

For Lindgren and Packendorff (2009) a social constructionist perspective informs us that entrepreneurship is constructed in social interaction, the research task is understanding these interactions (Fletcher, 2006; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). Knowledge about how individuals and collectives perceive, produce and re-produce entrepreneurial action in society has priority. Social constructionism acknowledges different meanings about entrepreneurship, but provides knowledge about interaction processes, yet highlights the need to understand lived experiences in their social and cultural context (Berger and Luckman, 1966). In other words, it allows us to see context, contingency and, importantly, the socioeconomic settings of entrepreneurship processes (Anderson and Starnawska, 2008).

Duane Ireland and Webb (2007) contend that studying entrepreneurial identities and identity theory offers insights into entrepreneurship process. Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) concur, suggesting identity carries great theoretical promise for interesting analysis. However, they also caution that identity can be linked to almost anything, including entrepreneurship. This suggests a productive literature review should focus on the salient links between identity and entrepreneurial behaviour. By productive, we follow Alvesson et al's (2008;7) injunction about after 20 years of identity research, 'there remain opportunities and

challenges to deliver on its promise—to develop novel and nuanced theoretical accounts’. We attempt this by taking a process view of the extensive literature on identity and place and the theoretical implications for developing our socially constructed perspective.

### **Constructing identities**

Coupland and Brown (2012) explain identity research is a contested field, but with some consensus. For example, the nature of the concept is clear. Yitshaki and Kropp (2016) describe entrepreneurial identities as cognitive schemas of interpretations and behavioral meanings that characterize entrepreneurs, provide them with a unique identity, and motivate and guide appropriate role behaviours. The concept is bound-up with answers to questions such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘who are we and ‘who is she?’ Identities are often regarded as performances of the self, for both the self and other audiences (Down and Reveley, 2009).

Historically, this duality in identity theory draws on Mead’s (1934) classic characterization of the “I” and the “me”; which describes how we become reflexively aware of self through interactions with other people. Similarly, Cooley’s (1902) metaphor of the “looking glass self,” captured how others see us. Indeed, identity incompatibility between self-identity and social identity is a feature of many interesting entrepreneurial studies (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010), where for example, gendered identity conflicts with an entrepreneurial identity (Garcia and Welter, 2013). Moreover, identifying as an entrepreneur is not always self-evident, in part because of its heroic and masculine nature (Hytti et al, 2017). Warren (2004), for instance, reported how women entrepreneurs grappled with the meaning of ‘entrepreneur’ and its implications for other important roles they played. Similarly, there may be tensions between a work related identity and the role conflict between being a scientist and an entrepreneur (Karhunen et al 2017). However, the identity dissonance that interests us here is more nuanced, the tension between identity as an entrepreneurial self and the social identity of being

'appropriately' entrepreneurial. Put differently, who and how I present myself and, who and how I am identified. Indeed, we could argue that how the entrepreneurial identity is enacted forms the basis for the social judgement that informs the ascription of a social identity (Anderson and Smith, 2007).

There are two overlapping sets of identity theories. Social identity theory is social psychological and emphasises belonging to a category. Such categories become subject to social approval or disapproval often involving stereotypical typologies. In this perspective, belonging; being one of us' may be significant. Stryker and Burke (2000) talk of assumptions of a common culture, as for example in ethnicity. Identity theorists take a more social view of identity, proposing that identity is informed and enacted by taking a role. Goffman (1959) fits this school with his ideas about the presentation of self as a role performance. In (self) identity theory, Kuhn (2006) describes role centrality; the priority and centrality of entrepreneurship within identity (Cardon et al, 2009). Role identification is with what other entrepreneurs do. Centrality thus refers to the relative importance that an individual places upon a focal identity compared to other identities.

Hoang and Gimeno (2010) describe how social identification captures feelings of oneness with a social group and the sense of sharing in its successes and failures; evaluations that the individual holds about entrepreneurs as a group are informed by societal regard for the entrepreneurial role. Symbolic interaction theory (e.g. Goffman 1959), in contrast, emphasizes that new identities begin with claims that must be socially legitimated through interactions with role set members; others react to the role performance as if the person has the identity appropriate to that role performance.

This division of self-identity and social identity lays out our research problem. Entrepreneurial self-identity is performatively produced, whereas social identity is allocated by others. The

issue surfaces because agents cannot simply describe themselves as entrepreneurs and expect to have their narratives accepted by important others (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014). Hence the local, contextual acceptance or denial, the legitimacy, of an entrepreneurial identity to practice entrepreneurship and change (Anderson and Warren, 2011) is the nub of our research problem.

Aside from these different ways of constructing identities; role enactment or belonging to a group, we are interested in the use of an identity. Rather than simply acting out a label, or being accorded a group identity, entrepreneurial identity can be useful. Identity offers sensemaking and sense giving properties. Accordingly, the meanings associated with entrepreneurial identity may serve to guide actions. They offer a sense of direction and justify purpose; and present indicators for others. Hytti and Heinonen (2013) discuss the instrumental value that inheres in entrepreneurial identity. They describe how courage is forged with self-confidence to take risks and get things done. The critical point here is that identity influences entrepreneurial behaviour (Alsos et al, 2016). However, we propose that how this behavior is perceived by others, affects how identity is attributed. In turn, if it is legitimized. Watson (2009) espouses the need for entrepreneurs to carry out ‘identity work’ to legitimise what they do. Thus, entrepreneurs try to present themselves as legitimate to local stakeholders to justify access to resources and opportunities (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Navis and Glynn, 2013). For an entrepreneur, this may affect the level of support that they provide and receive in the local community. Identity and legitimacy thus has an important role in social acceptance, even in embedding entrepreneurs (McKeever et al., 2015).

Identities can serve as powerful drivers for entrepreneurial behaviours around legitimacy, reputation and conduct (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). Fauchart and Gruber (2011) propose categories of identity types; a ‘missionary’ for example, is strongly associated with bringing about entrepreneurial change. Gruber and MacMillan (2017) argue ‘type’ specifically

influences forms of entrepreneurial behaviour, but can a label influence what entrepreneurs actually do? We can conceive how behavior may be molded towards earning the label, especially if the label carries benefits. Seen this way we can envisage how striving for an entrepreneurial identity will be caught up in the things we admire about entrepreneurship. Put differently, identity work can affect behaviour. Sveningsson and Alvensson (2003) emphasize that identity is central to meaning, motivation and decision-making, all critical for entrepreneurial actions. Entrepreneurs create meaning as they frame the venture creation process through dialogue and interactions (Fletcher, 2003). Their patterns of interaction thereby enact (Weick, 1995) entrepreneurship, in the sense that they bring it into existence with particular style and structure, inter-relating with each other and engaging with the environment. For Rigg and O'Dwyer (2012) entrepreneuring is “a process of establishing identity, a process of enacting which is located in a situated context” (Higgins and Elliott, 2011, p. 347). We conclude that the processes of identity production and the recognition of identities impact on the entrepreneurial process. However, we also consider place, the context for these interactive processes, affects the process; places have identity too.

### **Place in the constructions and use of identity**

*“the notion of identity has enormous potential as a bridging concept between individual agency, choice and creation of self, on the one hand, and history, culture and social shaping of identities on the other”* (Watson, 2009: 426)

We conceive ‘place’ as more than the location of entrepreneurship (Berg, 1997); place re-presents social and economic histories embodied as ‘sense of place’, a place identity, which forms the context for social relationships (Gill and Larson, 2014). In the interpretivist tradition, Down (2006) proposes identity as an achievement in time and space, built through relationships in the practice of entrepreneurship. Consequently there is a persuasive strand in the interpretivist literature on the usefulness of studying entrepreneurial identity in surrounding context (Leitch

and Harrison, 2016). This interactive view surfaces as identity work shaped by the social environment (Brown, 2015). Hamilton (2014) explains identity work as drawing on available socially constructed discursive resources and then weaving these into their narratives.

Moreover, Kuhn (2006) observed that regions provide a significant resource on which individuals draw in the construction of identity. Place is central to the formation of identity because of the combination of physical location and the meanings attached to the location. Place is “integral to self-definitions” (Spencer, 2005; 306) and place-related implications are found in all identity work (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). In this view places have their own identity, socially constructed discourses that are “interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined” (Gieryn, 2000; 465). Such constructions of places offer us a theoretical lever because different identities may clash and be resistant to change. Gherhes et al. (2017) described how depleted communities, peripheral post-industrial places can be caught up in vicious circles of suboptimal development trajectories. Their histories shape informal institutions, forming place identities that deter change, especially entrepreneurial change.

Nonetheless, De Clercq and Voronov (2009; 399) explain entrepreneurial discourse provides ‘a normative prescription of the roles people are to play and how they should interrelate with important institutions in society’. Farmer et al. (2009) link aspirations for an entrepreneurial identity to motivation; as developing an ‘entrepreneurial self’ by comparing themselves to a ‘typical’ entrepreneur. The enterprise discourse thus offers stereotypical scripts of ‘the entrepreneur’ (Down and Warren, 2008; Perren and Dannreuther, 2013), often as heroic (Nicolson and Anderson, 2005), licensed to effect social change and create new ventures. Alternatively, there may also be negative connotations around selfishness (Warren, 2004) or legality (Warren and Smith, 2015). In other words, there is a normative ‘moral space’ (Anderson and Smith, 2008) prescribed for entrepreneurship, an *authentic* identity in social

perceptions of what they might legitimately do in any given context (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Welter, 2011). Yet context presents an investment of meaning and values (Gieryn, 2000). Place provides discursive resources for identity around lifestyle and home (Larson and Pearson, 2012). Legitimate identity constructions in a 'place' are enabled and constrained by local norms and processes (Gill and Larson 2014).

Berglund et al. (2016) showed how rural change is conditioned by local discourses, explaining how entrepreneurship challenged and reframed structures through interactions. Local networks legitimise entrepreneurial activity (Johannisson and Nilsson, 1989), and local environment can dramatically impact the ability of entrepreneurs to thrive in that locality (Hustedde, 2007; Fortunato, 2014). Interaction between an individual's identity and the identity of a place can be formative, but negative connotations about appropriateness may provoke resistance to entrepreneurial action (Doern and Goss, 2012), particularly if the entrepreneur comes from outside the context (Hartz, 2012).

New Zealand is culturally distinctive in its perceptions of entrepreneurship, which seems likely to influence how entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identity is perceived. Thompson (2004) and Maritz and Beaver (2011) describe a laidback lifestyle culture, emphasising life balance rather than capital accumulation. Derek Handley, who founded a New Zealand business with Richard Branson explains, "*No one takes themselves too seriously either - which by default means that you can't*" (Virgin website). Several studies describe this 'Tall Poppy' syndrome, where conspicuously successful people are put down, dismissed as too big for their boots in Kiwi's egalitarian culture (Mouly and Sankaran, 2002; Klyver and Bager, 2012). For example, Thompson (2004; 253), "*delight in bringing successful individuals down to earth, rather than treating them as heroes*". Kouriloff (2000) suggests this tall poppy phenomenon hinders entrepreneurship, whilst Kirkwood (2007) concluded that it damaged entrepreneurs. Such cultural norms starkly contrast with a 'heroic' identity discourse; standing out by high

performance or self-promotion may be socially unacceptable (Fuglsang and Sorensen, 2013) and influence perceived legitimacy of entrepreneurial identity and practice. We turn now to examine contextualised entrepreneurial practice.

### **The case as entrepreneurial context**

*“When the depression hit [Stanton] and a lot of the companies closed down, a gang moved into town.” – local respondent*

Stanton is a rural town in North Island of New Zealand with a dwindling economic history. Urbanisation, combined with falling dairy prices challenged the continued existence of small towns. Our case is embedded in the history of Stanton, but focuses on the changes that began when Linda arrived. Linda is well known, appearing on TV, radio and newspapers. She is presented as an extraordinary entrepreneur, recognising her many new businesses in struggling Stanton. Growing her business and brand, she was keen to be associated with the rejuvenation of place and readily agreed to participate in our study, even encouraging her shop managers to talk to us.

Stanton was established in 1887 around flax-milling and a railway, but after the decline of flax, evolved into a service town when land was cleared for settler farming. It still has the railway and the State Highway ensures traffic through the town, but all the founding enterprises have gone. Stanton’s economy became outdated. Stanton was a depleted community with economic and social problems, struggling to survive, a pioneer town that seemed to have outlived reasons for existence (Eaqub, 2014). The depressing appearance of the shops on the main highway compounded the problem, discouraging motorists who might have stopped to visit a café or shop. Boarded-up shops, dilapidated buildings and peeling paintwork added an air of decay. The lowest ebb was the mid-90s when gangs moved in bringing problems of crime and drugs (Gilbert, 2013). The gangs were driven out, but Stanton’s reputation suffered.

Stanton declined dramatically; government statistics show all the indicators of a depleted community (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Between 2006 and 2013 New Zealand's population grew by 5.3%, but Stanton's population decreased by 10%. The unemployment rate is double the New Zealand average (14.8% versus 7.1%). Social decay paralleled economic decline; in 2013, Stanton was allocated the highest score of 10 in New Zealand's Index of Socio-Economic Deprivation (Ministry of Public Health, 2014).

Stanton retained some positive features. The railway and the highway remain physically prominent, businesses and houses cluster around the main street. On the outskirts, tourism-oriented businesses include a water park and a bird park in the attractive rural landscape. In town, Stanton's two imposing buildings remind us of glory days: a large stone-built bank (now an antique store) and a large roadhouse-style hotel dominate the main street. There used to be another grand hotel, but that burnt down in 2012. The Information Centre, Railway Museum, library and public-park evoke history.

Despite depletion, in 2007 Linda saw opportunities, recognising the potential of passing motorists. Linda and partner arrived in Stanton 13 years ago and opened their first store eight years ago. Linda now has a chain of stores, not only in Stanton, but also in three other rural small towns. She started manufacturing fashionable clothes, selling her own brand and imported clothing. They also own a property portfolio. Six staff are employed in the manufacturing business and 38 in the retail stores. There is also a gallery (including Linda's own artwork), a warehouse and an online operation. Economically and visually, Linda's arrival has had a major impact on the town; retailers of gifts, clothing and fancy goods have opened, the cafes are prospering and the local Council have spruced up the town gardens, picnic areas and toilets.

Linda fits the classic entrepreneurial profile; spotting opportunity, creating new businesses, bringing jobs and growth. If entrepreneurial identity and legitimacy are linked to

entrepreneurial success, Linda managed the transition from being an incomer to being seen as champion of Stanton's economic revival.

## **Methods**

A qualitative case study allowed us to locate narrative and practices in context, conceptually and empirically (Pratt, 2009). Our main data were interviews and local narratives which we analysed using the constant comparative method. Background data were informed by observations, discussion and readings from local history resources. These provide us with informed 'thick' description (Geertz, 1973) to see context.

Reflecting on our approach, we acknowledge that our observations and analyses were subjective, but took care to try out our interpretations by inter-researcher discussion, surfacing our own biases and challenge from each other's views. We appreciate that our data was shaped by the questions we asked, even by our presence as researchers. We tried to present neutrality, but inevitably provoked particular responses. Moreover, as is common in social construction, we analyse our interpretations of others' interpretations; the double hermeneutic. We try to address this by allowing respondents' voices to be heard; albeit in our explanatory framework.

## **Sampling**

We wanted to establish how Linda's entrepreneurial practices had been received in the community. We held detailed discussions with more than twenty respondents, but selected the twelve most theoretically interesting for extended interviewing to deepen our understanding of their experiences. We justified our enquiry as being interested in local development and did not directly ask about Linda. However, all our respondents introduced her and were keen to talk about her. Our sampling was purposeful (Gartner and Birley, 2002) in that the twelve principal respondents had the characteristics and positions we thought most relevant to our enquiry

(Saunders, 2012). Of course, they too were biased, but their perspectives and prejudices; their social constructions enabled our comparative analysis.

We spent considerable time with Linda gathering her narratives. Within Stanton, we listened to small business owners with both long (pre Linda) and short durations of stay in the community (post Linda) and local hospitality business owners, whose prosperity was linked to the fortunes in the town. We included interviewees with interests in town, but not living there. These included a long established estate agent, who told us about people who wanted to live in Stanton; signalling the perceived and changing status of Stanton. We interviewed an economic development manager from the regional council who provided us with an economist's overview of Linda's roles. We interviewed two shop managers employed by Linda, who were based elsewhere in her chain of businesses. They provided an 'insider's' perspective of her business practices.

Other informants included a regional economist with expertise in rundown communities; a local photographer; a politician from a neighbouring region with other depleted communities; a new food shop-owner from Stanton who arrived in town towards the end of the study; council representatives from neighbouring towns with responsibilities for regional development; an independent consultant with experience of regional development in the central North Island. All our respondents thus knew Stanton well, but knew it from different perspectives. Table 1 describes our principal respondents and their local roles along with the duration of their presence in Stanton. Table 1 also indicates the volume of qualitative data collected.

*Insert Table 1 about here please*

## **Data collection**

Over six months we made many visits to Stanton. We read local history archives, studied websites and read media stories. Our purpose was to be informed about the town and its history,

to be well prepared for our interviews. We also had many informal meetings, conversations when buying coffee, lunch or browsing the shops which provided textural data about context.

The interviews were very open-ended. When the conversation turned to Linda, we asked how she carried out her business, probing interviewees' experience and perceptions. We asked about themselves, their history, and that of their family in relation to Stanton, drawing out whether, why and how it was a good place to live and work. We asked them how well the town was doing, and how it had changed, particularly since Linda's arrival. We asked them to consider this from their own point of view and also to reflect on what outsiders might think and asked about the town's future. All were keen to talk about Linda's contributions to the town, her connection with the town and how they saw her future in the town. Interviewing Linda herself, and husband Kauri, we asked about her perceptions of how they, and their business practices were received in Stanton as well as her business experiences.

## **Analysis**

For analysis, we first sought commonalities, patterns and contrasts across respondent experiences (Patton, 2002), particularly about how Linda constructed her identity; through the media and with locals and their own sense of identity. Later, we discussed our own research experiences, forming an introspective record of field work, considering our personal biases and feelings. One of us had once lived in Stanton, another knew it well through frequent visits to Linda's shops, and the third was a visitor. Our own different experiences of Stanton probably coloured what we read in transcripts, but the critical combination helped identify bias.

We next wrote-up interview summaries, capturing key points in comparing the interview transcripts and our field notes. Throughout this process, one author critically reviewed the emergent patterns acting as devil's advocate. We report our findings as grounded in interviewees' perspectives, using representative quotes from our interviews and media sources.

Formally, our analysis used the constant comparative method (Jack et al, 2015; Fram, 2013); manually comparing data with data to identify common themes, contrasts and disconfirming items. Then we iteratively compared themes with theories (Boeije, 2002). The analysis was time consuming, essentially trial and error, continuing until we believed we had developed a sufficiently convincing account that answered our research question.

### ***Narratives, analysis and findings***

We have organised these data into identity themes; first Linda's own view is followed by an account of her identity work. Next, we report Linda's media identity and how she is identified by regional stakeholders. Finally, we report locals' identity of Linda.

#### **Linda's presentation of self**

*"I'm a nurse by trade. And always been creative, always making stuff when I was a kid. I'm a mother of five, all under 12. I'm married to Kauri and we've been together about 16 years. I am, I guess an entrepreneur, I've got shops. So we've got 11 shops. I've got a sewing factory as well. So we produce NZ made clothes. I do motivational speaking, so I do a lot of talks on stage about what to wear and not to wear. I was DJ'ing on a radio show for three years and loved that. My mission is to get a TV show and I've written a book and sold about 4000 copies."*

Linda presents a heroic entrepreneurial identity, well grounded in entrepreneurial enactment. Interestingly, whilst she reports her entrepreneurial actions, her comments seem to emphasise the impact of reputational work; identity work rather than role performance. Later however, she modestly explained her entrepreneurship in context, recounting the local significance and benefits.

*"I think if we get all of our little towns going..... Because there will be local jobs and people don't have to pay heaps for childcare and everything. They will have people around that can help with the kids. They don't have to pay for parking. They can often walk to work, so petrol*

*prices you know. So getting our little towns ..... I laughed, cause we got that community award, they said that we were the biggest employer in Stanton, which cracked me up, cause you don't even think of it like that eh?"*

### **Identity work**

Linda became aware of the challenges to her identity and entrepreneurial presence in Stanton. She experienced resentment, attributing it to her incomer status and New Zealand culture. She describes how she dealt with resistance.

*"When I first got here, no one knew who we were and they were like 'who's this girl changing everything, what the hell is she doing?' And I got absolute shit for that, basically. I was in tears probably every second day...cause no one wants change. Why would they? We've been perfectly good for 20 years, even though the shops are all boarded up, why? And who is this girl thinking she is all that and trying to change our town and she's not even from here. In NZ there is this kind of 'tall poppy' thing and all those waiting for you to fall, to be honest."*

Demonstrated above is Linda's perception of what she encountered in Stanton; *who is she to bring change and there is no need for change anyway.*

Linda explained how she ignored the negativity, but used the influence of her identity to engage others in the Stanton project. Conceptually this is role enactment.

*"I was a big mouth about it all and I was out there really promoting it, networking and joining everything, from BNI, to talking at Rotary, to talking to our Treasurer, to talking to everyone.....Because I had to change the whole reputation of the town, to be honest, when I started."*

Linda, using her identity, took up a role as a 'voice' for Stanton, speaking for Stanton by using her media presence:

*“I think now I’ve just got to help start changing policy at that level, now that I’ve got a voice, and people listen... and in my shows”*

She cajoled the council to improve the town with better maintenance of public spaces such as parks and walkways:

*“it’s usually for the good of the community. It’s not just about us.”*

Linda tried to balance enacting her highly visible identity with the encountered realities facing entrepreneurial practice at the micro-level of a small town. Paradoxically, she believed she had to be high profile, yet locally accepted- *Superwoman becomes Supermom, bearing cake*. We see her interplay the centrality of entrepreneuring with a folksy small town mother.

*So the way I do it, is just go in positively. I take cake and say ‘Hey boys, I need your help.’*

Linda’s identity work was navigating small town rules, balancing media profile with subtle action to try to ensure her entrepreneurial identity remains legitimate, but less threatening. This worked for some, but not for all. Resentment towards an incomer who became famous by altering their town is hardly surprising. Those who had worked hard for many years may feel piqued because their own work is unnoticed. Perhaps this is the power of an entrepreneurial identity, compared to a small business identity. Table 2 brings together our analysis of Linda’s identity work.

**Table 2, Linda’s identity work**

TYPE OF IDENTITY WORK	THEORY	ACTIVITY	SITE	PURPOSE
OUTCOMES	APPLICATIONS			
The entrepreneurial self fame	presenting enhanced reputation	narratives	media	promotion national
Enacting entrepreneurship approval	actions engender support	role play	Stanton	local engagement local

The table displays different actions and audiences in her identity work, as well as the location. We continue this contextualisation of identity in place by thematically comparing perceptions of identity.

### **Linda's identity by outsiders: a small town saviour**

The media attributed Stanton revitalisation to Linda. Such entrepreneurship is very newsworthy; rejuvenated Stanton with hanging baskets and attractive shops selling stylish clothing, eye-catching jewellery and appealing gifts is a compelling story. Linda's entrepreneurship re-invented this hard-edged town with a bad reputation where few chose to stop. She is cast as the 'saviour' of this plucky, but struggling place. As described in this popular blog:

*"To those that don't know it, Stanton is a typical small New Zealand town. The sort of place you drive through unless you need fuel, a toilet or unfeasibly cheap real estate. Like many once-prosperous rural towns, the train stops twice a day for commuters and the impressive bank building on the main street is given over to antiques. In recent years, Stanton has undergone an unlikely retail revival. Thanks in no small part to dynamic local woman, Linda.*

*This entrepreneur, artist and mother of five saw the potential of all the through-traffic and put everything on the line to open a gallery/gift shop. Building on that success and opening more stores, other retailers have joined her and the local council has spruced the place up with gardens, picnic areas and some lovely public loos. ....". Works Wonders, accessed 8 March 2017.*

Note how place is identified as benefitting from Linda's entrepreneurial efforts; her visions, her risk taking - all focused on Stanton. The town is fortunate, but a passive recipient of her entrepreneuring skills. Heroic identification indeed, but contextualised as *for* the place.

### **Linda's identity effects**

Linda's identity and practices influenced and animated others. One effect was how the local council responded, smartening up Stanton's appearance. Linda's entrepreneurial identity was enthusiastically endorsed and legitimised by the council. For example, Sean, the Regional Council's Economic Development representative connects Linda's entrepreneurship directly to Stanton as an identity that energises others:

*"she's created the [Stanton] brand in terms of that retail offering, which I think others are trading off"*

Sean is in no doubt at all about the benefits of Linda's presence and actions, her role enactment. Note again how credit is attributed to Linda, the rest are merely followers. However, we also see an argument for identity as a role model.

### **Local identifications of Linda's entrepreneur role**

Here we see positive recognition from some longer-standing business owners in the town. However, we note these narratives endorse entrepreneurship, rather than Stanton's hero:

*"I think that's positive for the town; if someone comes in and opens three shops, and markets the town, I'd say 'Great we'll take it, thanks very much'.*

*If you're bringing people into Stanton, everyone's going to have a little bit of a spin-off from it."*

and

*“she still put us on the map with all her advertising, media and god knows what, about Stanton. Everyone talks about the lady in town here.” [Adrian,)*

*I mean without a doubt, Linda opening, she’s put herself out there too. I mean there are people that are good at marketing. And she is good at marketing, and so she has attracted a following in Stanton, which other people have got on board with and taken advantage of.”*

*“And when she first opened we were in every newspaper and that..... You know you just need a few events like that. Where somebody stands up and makes a scene, makes a splash, something new opening and gosh it’s good for everybody.” [Julie]*

The role of entrepreneurship in reviving Stanton was played out in full; influence, energy and energising, as well as role modelling. There is recognition that her entrepreneurial identity stimulated rejuvenation. Sean explains:

*“Yeah. And I mean, she’s an anchor, and you know probably the key to Stanton’s retail environment.”*

There is evidence that entrepreneurship, led by Linda’s enactment, was legitimised in Stanton’s recovery. But note how the process is less personified and more about how Linda led entrepreneurship, rather than being the epicentre of recovery. Linda’s engagement *with* place, rather than *for* place, is brought out.

### **Counter narratives, the importance of place**

We encountered counter-narratives, with two strong themes that challenge both identity as role, and as enactment. First, this high profile way of doing business lacks legitimacy, it is not how a business should be run; secondly, that there is too much emphasis on Linda, rather than Stanton.

Linda's incomer identity, not one of us or 'belonging' created disenchantment, even disapproval of Linda's entrepreneurship. The tone of these counter-narratives is to challenge the legitimacy of her entrepreneurial identity as small town saviour. There are hints of the tall poppy here. There are suggestions the role model effect, is more of a 'bandwagon'. In sum, Linda's identity was too much and counterproductive:

*"I think that too many people jumped on to the bandwagon"*

Julie's husband Rees disapproves of Linda's media identity. He insisted that the heart of a good business is service, not just publicity:

*"You can splash all you like into papers, journals and flight magazines, and all the rest of it. Boy you can waste a lot of money",*

Similarly, Joy noted Linda's extensive promotion, but believes the impact is temporary. Joy sees the long-standing strength of her own business as her carefully-sourced stock. There is a sense in each of these views that Linda's business contribution has worked so far, but her entrepreneurial identity is superficial and probably a bit phoney. *Authentic* business takes longer. This theme seems to say that entrepreneurship identity should be about a sound business and not about self-promotion. Put conceptually, these respondents resisted the presentation of the entrepreneurial self.

The next identity theme suggests that it should be about Stanton, not simply about Linda. Conceptually we see this as contesting enactment. For long term residents in Stanton there was a strong notion of it being 'their place'; a sense of belonging evoked a sense of ownership. Who was Linda, to change their town *and* to claim all the credit? Adrian suggests *"Stanton was her little baby from the start of her empire."*

*"She's helped, but she's not the only one. She's done a lot of free advertising for Stanton, don't get me wrong. But she's got involved you know,*

Here we see begrudged approval for some of what Linda did, but couched in terms that reject her entrepreneurial leadership and criticise her relationship with the town. Rees:

*“Linda came along, she’s good. But she’s not the only one. There’s 18 shops opened up that were closed, so Linda opened three, but the rest of the people are just as passionate as [Linda] is you know.”*

Moreover, we saw earlier how Linda’s identity was enmeshed in place, she was the Stanton saviour. However, expansion outside Stanton challenged this spatial identity. She is no longer just the Stanton saviour; she is no longer embedded in their town. Linda’s affinity to Stanton, perhaps as Stanton’s own hero is broken. Ben (publican):

*“My view is, my personal view is; I would rather have seen her just concentrate on Stanton. See what you have now is you’ve got people coming from [another town]; she’s got shops in [nearby town], well they probably get there and there’s no sense driving down to Stanton, cause they will be able to see what we’ve got there. But she’s got a vision to have shops all over the place.”*

Adrian regrets:

*But now she’s everywhere. So I rarely see her now. She used to be here quite a lot. I would wave out to her as they go past, her and [her husband]. But it’s rare. She’s all over the country with her other things she does; speaking engagements.*

*So I don’t know how passionate she still is about Stanton.*

There is a sense of Linda is promiscuous with her entrepreneurial identity favours. Moreover, that fear is not unreasonable; Stanton’s rejuvenation is still fragile. Sean notes:

*“If she was to go, the future of Stanton would look fairly bleak”*

In contrast, Kauri, Linda’s husband, comments about the business case for expanding outside Stanton:

*“what we are looking at the moment, are we still viable in these little towns? Because the money we were making has dropped a lot, and so our cash flow is not as good.*

There may even be a touch of regret at having had to move on and out of Stanton:

*“also we’ve diluted our brand, because we’ve opened in lots of other places, whereas everyone used to make Stanton their mission.....”*

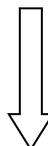
A manager of Linda’s shops outside Stanton commented:

*“I think a little piece of her will always be in Stanton because that’s where it started for her, that’s our mother ship, that’s where it started.”*

In table 3, we summarise these narratives and processes.

**Table 3, Identities and entrepreneurial engagement in place**

Respondent <i>Identification</i> typology	Identity legitimacy	Contextual perceptions of Entrepreneurship	Why?	Value attributed	<i>entrepreneurial enactment</i>	Entrepreneurial Identity
					Factors for identities	Respondent’s relationship to place (‘social distance’)
Aficionados	High	Entrepreneurship for place	Direct benefits are seen	Entrepreneur and role	Role, actions and context align	Outsider (an economic site)
Skeptics	Medium	Entrepreneurship in place	Indirect benefits are seen	Entrepreneurship, social identity in place	Role and place based outcomes overlap; belonging	Local (both economic and social)
Cynics	Low	Entrepreneurship done to place	Few benefits are seen, disruption	Ownership of place	Place offers opportunity	Intensely local (a social site)
					<i>belonging</i>	Place Identity



## Discussion

Our research site of Stanton allowed us to examine the relationship between a high profile entrepreneurial identity in place, a place with its own sense of history, its own norms and values, shaping identity around a home, a lifestyle and a challenge (Larson and Pearson, 2012). Whilst we cannot generalise our findings to other places, we can make some theoretical observations about the nature and use of identity in practice. As we saw, Linda's identity was produced from what she did, how she was represented and how she was received; opening new shops in a tired small town was considered very entrepreneurial by those who sought to develop and promote Stanton. This was especially true for those who benefitted directly. In turn Linda's business practices were 'approved' and legitimised by this group. Others offered some approval, albeit somewhat grudging, for Linda's business operations. However, they clearly disapproved of her identity work. When Linda promoted Stanton, this was good; but if she promoted Linda, this was bad.

The promotion of her entrepreneurial self was disliked by those who thought small business practice should be about the business and not the entrepreneur. Our interpretation of how the media promoted Linda as the subject and Stanton as object, clearly rankled some respondents. For them Linda's practices took advantage of local resources, but failed to give due credit to others, or to Stanton itself. For her critics, small business practices are embedded in the local place and are judged within a local value system (Jack and Anderson, 2002). Our own original view echoed one of our informants who said, "*what's not to like, she made jobs for locals, got the place looking better and showed others what to do*". Yet entrepreneurial identity practices are viewed through a local lens. Some practices were *with* Stanton and some

for Stanton, but self-promotion in identity work was not about Stanton and hence disapproved. Linda's identity resonated with New Zealand's transcendent discourses of entrepreneurship as a good thing for economic revival- as long as you don't get too big for your boots.

There is inevitably some resentment of those who effect local change, particularly if they are an outsider (Hartz, 2012). After all, entrepreneurs seek to change things in entrepreneurial enactment. Problems rose in what we see as the presentation of self. Linda's presentation of self was built up by the media amplifying and broadcasting her localised entrepreneurial identity. Boyle and Kelly (2010) in a fascinating paper about celebrity entrepreneurs, describe how celebrity status carries the power to influence others and gain access to political elites. They argue that celebrity entrepreneurs significantly influence business discourse. Citing Guthey et al. (2009), they demonstrate the importance placed on this influence, explaining how Sir Richard Branson sets aside 25% of his time for public relations. An entrepreneurial status is clearly considered useful. Put simply, Linda's local entrepreneurship made good news and Linda took full advantage to increase her influence with local government, but at the cost of some local disapproval.

We see this as identification as an entrepreneur *par excellence*, based on entrepreneurial practice. However, an important part of the narratives was Stanton itself. Stanton was obviously where Linda practiced, but the role of place was central to the enactment. Rejuvenation of the town was news, but *who* animated the change was even more newsworthy. In other words, change in Stanton was attributed to Linda and became an integral part of her identity. In turn this challenged and threatened the identity of other local business owners in Stanton.

For us, this account helps us to understand the legitimising of entrepreneurial identity. Being accorded entrepreneur status is only part of the story; this element of identity is attributed, awarded or earned simply by being entrepreneurial, doing what is expected of the general entrepreneurial discourse. Many of our stakeholders subscribed to that view. In turn this

entrepreneurial status became empowering through its ability to influence others. In this view, Linda's actions were a legitimate part of her identity and vice versa. However, being entrepreneurial was not enough in itself; who enterprised what; and who benefitted became part of the legitimacy; the *how* and *where* mattered too (Lewis, 2015). The legitimacy of Linda's actions was challenged on three fronts, but each emanating from the local discourses which condition and reframe entrepreneurship (Watson, 2009; Berglund et al, 2016; Gill and Larson, 2014). Firstly, there were those who thought that what Linda did was not so special anyway, that she was no better than many other who had developed businesses in an entrepreneurial fashion over the years without all the publicity. This point seems to reflect the culture of the Tall Poppy, where a heroic identity might be an impediment to entrepreneurship in New Zealand (Kirkwood, 2007). The second deprecation reflected locality by the fact that she is not one of us, she did not really belong. Who was she, an outsider to change their town (Hartz, 2012). The third concerns Linda's attachment to Stanton *per se*, the question of whether she is being rather too free with her identity favours and therefore doesn't deserve a heroic status.

Other studies of entrepreneurship in depleted places have not demonstrated this social disapproval of how entrepreneurship was achieved (McKeever et al, 2015; Anderson and Gaddefors, 2016; Korsgaard et al, 2015). However these studies do show a greater extent of social involvement in small business practices. Nonetheless, these studies demonstrated more social participation; entrepreneurship was with the community rather than to the community, unlike Stanton.

### ***Conclusion***

Our paper presents a reminder that entrepreneurship is based in places and, part of contextualisation is the conferring of legitimacy. It seems that you can be legitimate in what you do, but less so in how and where you do it. This place, Stanton is a contrast to widely recognised entrepreneurial places such as Silicon Valley. In Silicon Valley, 'belonging' can be

achieved simply by being entrepreneurial. In Stanton, perhaps in other small towns, belonging seems to be about being part of the place and not just an economic dimension (Stead, 2017). Our use of identity and its explanatory theory has allowed us to extend the notion of place as expressed by Larson and Pearson (2012). We have examined entrepreneurial identity in place and shown that identity work may not be enough to legitimise practice. By centring on identity, we add to the embedding literature.

Significantly, we saw how identity was shaped not only by the macro discourses of enterprise, but also by the micro discourses of this depleted locale and its residents. Identity was contested, inextricably linked to the spatial boundaries of Stanton, but also socially to Linda’s, the residents’ and other stakeholders’ perceptions of place and culturally legitimate behaviour. This reminds us that entrepreneurship and small business is both socially and spatially embedded (Hytti, 2005; Lewis, 2013). We saw endorsement of the economic elements of small business practices, but not universal approval of the social dimensions. There may be lessons for practitioners in that this seems to demonstrate that taking more account of embedding may ease the entrepreneurial process for both the place and the entrepreneur.

We conclude that being enterprising, behaviour, may garner useful identification as an entrepreneur. But broader approval, social legitimation as an entrepreneur, depends on place. Socially legitimate identity is contingent upon who enterprises, where and how they do it.

**Table 1. Principal respondents and detail of qualitative data collection**

Respondent	Business/Role	Resident	Background/experience/career	Hours spent in interview(s) Pages of transcript (11 pt font) Pages of fieldnotes
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Linda	Entrepreneur Business owner  Developer	13 years	High profile entrepreneur. Led revitalisation of Stanton.	Three hours of interview(s) 16 pages of transcript Four pages of fieldnotes
Kauri	Entrepreneur Business owner  Developer	13 years	Linda's husband. Keeps a low public profile. Noted by Linda as her steadying influence.	One hour of interview, joint with Linda
Ben	Business owner	52 years	Local publican, owned pub for 18 years.	Two hours of interview(s) 10 pages of transcript
Joy	Business owner	17 years	Antique store owner. Lives above store.	Two hours of interview(s) Seven pages of transcript Two pages of fieldnotes
Rees	Business owner Local Councillor	43 years	Co-owner (with wife Julie) of tourism business. Elected Councillor.	Three hours of interview(s) 15 pages of transcript Three pages of fieldnotes
Julie	Business owner	40 years	Co-owner (with husband Rees) of tourism business. Chair of Progressive Association.	Three hours of interview(s) 15 pages of transcript
Gray	Business owner	12 years	Owner of design store for 7 years. Lives above the local pub.	Two hours of interview(s) 13 pages of transcript
Adrian	Business owner	11 years	Owner of café in Stanton.	Two hours of interview(s) Eight pages of transcript
Jane	Realtor	30 years	Local estate agent.	One and a half hours of interview(s) Seven pages of transcript
Sean	Economic Development Manager, local District Council	4 years	Responsible for economic development.	Three hours of interview(s) 13 pages of transcript
Sophie	Store manager		Store manager of non-Stanton shop owned by Linda. Interviewed as key insider informant.	Two hours of interview(s) Seven pages of transcript
Katie	Store manager		Manager of non-Stanton store owned by Linda. Interviewed as key insider informant.	Two hours of interview(s) 10 pages of transcript