

# **‘Embrace the masculine; attenuate the feminine’- gender, identity work and entrepreneurial legitimation in the nascent context**

## **Abstract**

This paper critically analyses how gender bias impacts upon women’s efforts to legitimate nascent ventures. Given the importance of founder identity as a proxy for entrepreneurial legitimacy at nascency, we explore the identity work women undertake when seeking to claim legitimacy for their emerging ventures in a prevailing context of masculinity. In so doing, we challenge taken for granted norms pertaining to legitimacy and question the basis upon which that knowledge is claimed. In effect, debates regarding entrepreneurial legitimacy are presented as gender neutral yet, entrepreneurship is a gender biased activity. Thus, we argue it is essential to recognise how gendered assumptions impinge upon the quest for legitimacy. To illustrate our analysis, we use retrospective and real time empirical evidence evaluating legitimating strategies as they unfold, our findings reveal tensions between feminine identities such as ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ and those of the prototypical entrepreneur. This dissonance prompted women to undertake specific forms of identity work to bridge the gap between femininity, legitimacy and entrepreneurship. We conclude by arguing that the pursuit of entrepreneurial legitimacy during nascency is a gendered process which disadvantages women and has the potential to negatively impact upon the future prospects of their fledging ventures.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The strategies employed by nascent entrepreneurs to convince key stakeholders of the legitimacy of potential ventures have been analysed at length (see Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Zott and Huy, 2007; Überbacher, 2014; Fisher, Kotha and Lahiri, 2016). Nascency in an entrepreneurial context is a state of considerable uncertainty during which ideas are translated into substantive form thus, the venture exists as a possible future largely within the imagination of the founder. As Fisher et al. (2016: 397) note, ‘during this stage, the identity of the entrepreneurial venture is intrinsically embedded in the identity of the founder such that their personal legitimacy acts as a proxy for plausibility and potential.’

Whilst epistemologically, the socially constructed nature of legitimacy is recognised within contemporary debate, the ontological influence of socially ascribed characteristics upon legitimacy claims during entrepreneurial nascency is rarely acknowledged (Marlow and

McAdam, 2015). For instance, within the masculinised domain of entrepreneurship, merely being male generates a better fit for the contemporary entrepreneurial prototype (Hamilton, 2013) and so, fulfils a critical identity marker of 'who am I' and 'when and how do I fit' into this discourse. Such assessments are crucial during the period of nascency when a plausible projected future is being constructed and articulated through the *'everyday practices'* (De Clerq and Voronov, 2009: 396) of the potential entrepreneur. In the absence of firm track records to convince stakeholders of viability, a range of legitimacy proxies are drawn upon, one of which is the conviction with which an individual embodies normative notions of who and what is an entrepreneur. As Navis and Glynn (2011: 487) argue, *'nascent entrepreneurs claim' whilst potential stakeholders 'judge'*. Whilst acknowledging that the relationship between nascency and legitimacy has been explored at some length, we suggest there still remains an important gap regarding how social ascriptions such as gender, influence this relationship. Consequently, the research question deployed in this paper is: *how does gender influence the nature of identity construction and pursuit of legitimacy during the nascent entrepreneurial process?* Therefore, we seek to critically analyse the relationship between gender, identity work and entrepreneurial legitimation during this period of venture nascency and in so doing, provide an alternative perspective to the 'taken for granted' norms of entrepreneurship scholarship that have suppressed important questions of identity, ideology and relations of power (Tedmanson et al., 2012).

As Marlow and McAdam (2015: 5) argue, *'by definition, new firms lack legitimating track records; accordingly, the owner becomes the physical as well as the metaphorical embodiment of the envisaged future firm'*. Thus, entrepreneurial legitimation is a multifaceted process requiring the enactment of a convincing identity plus, access to resources but also, a credible actor who fits field expectations. To analytically illustrate this argument, we draw upon the construct of gender and in particular, how this influences

women's efforts to attain legitimacy during nascency. This focus acknowledges the growing body of evidence which indicates the impact of gender upon women's entrepreneurial activities in the context of a masculinised discourse of entrepreneurship (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Henry et al., 2015).

An under-explored element of this debate is how women undertake identity work to demonstrate an entrepreneurial identity and so, achieve legitimacy for themselves and their nascent ventures in the context of a masculinised discourse. Navis and Glynn (2011: 480) explore the construction of an entrepreneurial identity defining it as, 'the constellation of claims around the founders, organization and market opportunity of an entrepreneurial entity that gives meaning to the questions of 'who we are' and 'what we do''. To legitimate this 'constellation of claims' requires dedicated identity work to present the self as plausible to potential stakeholders, whilst developing a distinctive market offering (Fisher et al., 2016). Within this paper, we argue that a key indicator of entrepreneurial legitimacy during nascency is the ascribed gender of the founder; given the elevated status conferred upon masculinity within the entrepreneurial discourse (Hamilton, 2014; Marlow and McAdam, 2013), women have to undertake specific forms of identity work to bridge that gulf between devalued feminised identities and the masculinised prototypical entrepreneur (Bruni et al. 2004). Thus, we add a new facet to prevailing debate regarding the relationship between legitimacy, identity and nascent entrepreneurship.

To illustrate the conceptual relationship between these constructs, we adopt an interpretative methodology using both retrospective in-depth interviewing and a real-time method. In so doing, first, we extend existing analyses of entrepreneurial legitimacy by positioning gender as a central social construct influencing both identity formation and the pursuit of legitimacy. Second we explore how women encounter and then, navigate the prevailing masculine ethos embedded within established notions of legitimacy. This requires

nascent women entrepreneurs to develop specific personal and business related strategies that chime with dominant notions of legitimacy but which represent gender tension (Kelan, 2009). Our alternative here is to provide an intervening perspective to reveal and evaluate such tensions. We do this by focusing on women who are beginning to craft their entrepreneurial identities but are not yet subject to normative and often subjective measures of entrepreneurial legitimacy. Finally, by drawing upon evidence gathered during the period of nascency, we are able to present a real time account of identity formation and legitimating activities - rather than uncertain reliance upon retrospective recall (Casser and Craig, 2009; Obschonka et al., 2011).

To explore these arguments, the paper is structured as follows: we commence by examining the extant theories which inform our analytical framing. This is followed by a description and rationale for the method and methodology employed. Key findings are then analysed in relation to the relevant themes arising from the literature and finally, we discuss the implications within the paper and draw conclusions.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The literature exploring the relationship between gender, women and entrepreneurial behaviour has grown substantially since the early 1990s (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Henry et al. 2015). Over time, this analysis has shifted from 'gender as a variable' which merely compared the entrepreneurial activities of men and women, largely to the detriment of women, to 'gender as relations' and 'gender as a process' (Berg, 2002; McAdam, 2012; Henry et al., 2015) enabling more complex nuanced feminist theorising, revealing a masculinised discourse informing the ideal normative entrepreneurial actor (Ogbor, 2000; Ahl, 2006; Hamilton, 2014). Such feminist analyses refute the notion of sex category comparisons but rather, critically evaluates how detrimental gendered ascriptions pertaining

to femininity are mapped onto women (Bowden and Mummery, (2014). This discourse ontologically positions the feminine as ‘other’ and opposite to the ideal entrepreneurial prototype conferring a status detriment upon women and fuelling a negative perception of their legitimacy as credible entrepreneurial actors even *before* they initiate business operations. As new entrants, women not only have to legitimise their business idea but also, to overcome embedded detriment attached to their subject identity as a visible female embodiment of the future venture. Stead (2017) offers a conceptual contribution that questions how the use of specific practices and identity work positions women entrepreneurs as legitimate members of the entrepreneurial community. Consequently we argue that for women, critical to the formation of a successful entrepreneurial identity is legitimising the self. Hamilton (2014) explains that such identities are contested and legitimised concurrently; negotiated and repaired in the course of everyday conversations; but can be better understood in the entrepreneurial context through explicit gendered analysis. Central to this paper is adopting a gendered analysis to understand the dynamics of legitimacy and identity construction to advance a critical understanding of how women entrepreneurs emerge as legitimate entrepreneurial actors.

If we are to gain a more insightful understanding of the attainment of such legitimacy, a gendered perspective is imperative to reveal how biases are produced and reproduced. Within contemporary entrepreneurship debate, masculinity dominates as the legitimate prototypical entrepreneur which in turn, positions femininity in opposition to the norm (Ahl, 2006). Such gender blindness (Lewis, 2006; Gupta et al., 2013; Hamilton, 2014) has negatively contributed to the social construction of women entrepreneurs as secondary to men and their businesses ‘being of less significance’ (Ahl, 2006: 595), undermining their ability to establish legitimacy.

In order to reconcile these contradictory constructs women are required to engage in specific forms of identity work to demonstrate characteristics which confound their feminine subject. As such, the dissonance between being a woman and being an entrepreneur has to be ameliorated. This has to some extent, been partially addressed by the metonymy of the ‘female entrepreneur’ and further qualified by labels such as ‘mumpreneurs’ or ‘lipstick entrepreneurs’ (Duberley and Cohen, 2010; McAdam, 2012) which offers a bifurcated option for women to bridge the identity gap. In effect, feminised social roles or priorities [mother; appearance] are attached to the entrepreneur role to create an analytical link to overcome the tensions of oscillating between being ‘woman’ and ‘entrepreneur’. Again however, whilst current debate explores the implications of such identity dissonance in terms of start-up rates and business performance (Bruni, 2005; Gherardi, 2015), how women actually negotiate this identity dilemma during nascency when seeking legitimacy for themselves as founders of credible ventures remains under-explored.

### **Legitimacy and an entrepreneurial identity**

The notion of entrepreneurial legitimacy has been explored at some length. Scholars have highlighted ongoing tensions as nascent entrepreneurs grapple with creating an entity that is novel enough to appear distinct and uniquely viable, whilst simultaneously conforming to accepted norms and practices within certain sectors, in order to be granted legitimacy (Nelson et al., 2016; Navis and Glynn, 2011). Legitimacy is broadly considered to be, ‘a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995: 574). Shifting this analysis to a theoretical space of conformity and dissent, such as that of entrepreneurial nascency, requires accordance with desirable, proper and appropriate templates of entrepreneurial legitimacy whilst claiming distinctiveness. So, the problem

pivots upon the necessity to frame the nascent venture as novel but also with legitimate operational potential if it is to make the transition from concept to actuality (Zott and Huy, 2007). Moreover, as Fisher et al., (2016) argue, clear and robust legitimacy signals are a malleable resource which can be re-modelled to meet the changing needs of the venture as it grows but also, act as buffer during transitions between growth stages. Conversely, fragile, narrow or particular stage specific legitimacy signals can act as an impediment to future venture development.

Within this debate, we contribute through a focus upon the legitimacy of the ‘subjects of legitimation’ in terms of the how the entrepreneurial actor is perceived as a proxy for the nascent venture (Deepphouse and Suchman, 2008; Uberbacher, 2014). At this stage of venturing, trappings and symbolic strategising adopted to signal legitimacy are largely anchored in the persona of the nascent entrepreneur and their identity. Thus, the construction of an appropriate identity which fits with an individual’s sense of who they are, what an entrepreneur should be and the extent to which this maps on to the normative ideal entrepreneur is pivotal in the legitimating process (Gartner, 1989; Greene et al., 2013).

Identities are constructed as on-going projects arising from dialogues between an internal self and external discourses encountered within the social domain (Lewis, 2016; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Ybema et al., 2009). The re-production of identity via this process requires dedicated identity work enabling the construction of credible subject positions within normative organisational contexts. Axiomatically, this refutes any notion of an essential identity, as the self and encountered social discourses are in a constant process of negotiation. Accordingly, this suggests a permeable identity moulded by contextualised bridges spanning notions of the self and a multiplicity of generic social identities incorporating cultural stereotypes - such as ‘the entrepreneur’ (Watson, 2009). Enacted

stereotypical judgements and behaviours are fundamental as heuristic sense making cues (Eddleston and Powell, 2008). Thus, a key constituent of identity work involves interpreting, reproducing and aligning various components of contextualised stereotypical caricatures to present a self affiliated to recognisable groups and in so doing, reproducing the architecture of credible social roles. Accordingly, Leitch and Harrison (2016) argue that clarity and insights into identity formation are required if we are to successfully relate identity to entrepreneurial outcomes, such as established legitimacy.

It is noted that analyses of an entrepreneurial identity are still developing given the heterogeneity and complexity of the diverse contexts wherein entrepreneurial activity occurs and the role of the individual in enacting such entrepreneurial personas. Yet, as Fauchart and Gruber (2011) argue, entrepreneurship is an inherently social activity – regardless of the commercial ambitions of the founders – and as such, role identities are anchored in social stereotypes (Greene et al, 2013). Given the consensus within the extant literature (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Henry et al., 2015) that entrepreneurship is a masculinised domain, the prototypical entrepreneur is configured male; thus, the idealized entrepreneurial identity is typically embedded in masculinity (Ahl, 2006; McAdam, 2012; Hamilton, 2013). Women entering this domain therefore, have to negotiate a relationship to salient entrepreneurial identities given their fundamental status detriment associated with ascribed femininity; this in effect positions them as members of an ‘out group’ (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Thus, a key element of identity work is creating a sense of group membership where belongingness assures security and makes the individual readable as a legitimate social subject (Stead, 2017; Leitch and Harrison, 2016).

### **Legitimacy strategies for nascent entrepreneurs**

Despite agreement regarding the importance of gaining legitimacy to enable the nascent venture to be enacted, Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) suggest that the literature is



relatively narrow in conveying *how* to acquire legitimacy with a focus upon, for example, making a first sale or receiving formal finance (Tornikoski and Newbert, 2007). Underpinning this process of emergence are indicators of legitimacy enacted through a range of diverse range of proxies suggesting potential future viability. To enhance personal legitimacy, the importance of identifying and associating with those already deemed to have status and legitimacy is noted. Alsos and Ljunggren (2016) illustrate this argument when analysing how legitimating signals are sent and received in the realm of equity investment for entrepreneurial ventures. Given the masculinised discourse and evident homophily between the dominant group of male investors and entrepreneurs, women applicants were disadvantaged. To address this problem, Alsos and Ljunggren identify the ‘compensatory’ strategies employed by women to overcome their feminine deficit by involving ‘men who hold valued competencies as board members and particularly, as board chairs’ (2016: 18) as key figures in their funding bids.

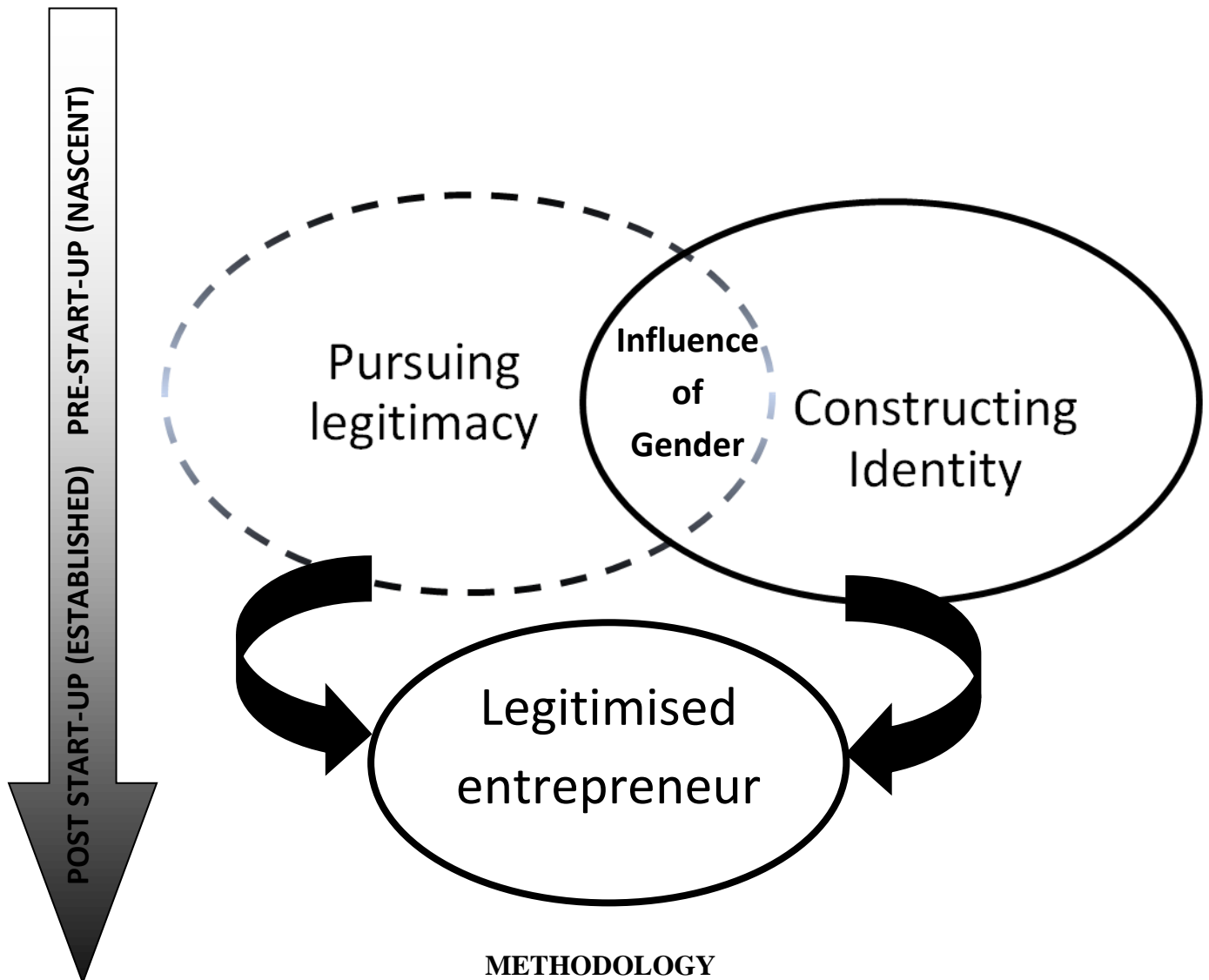
In effect, the nascent entrepreneur can leverage off affiliations to those with acknowledged status; yet, as we have argued, this process is more challenging for women as forming such affiliations requires bridging gender identity gaps in addition to those of legitimacy deficiencies. Consequently, we argue that the gendered subject being of the individual is also critical in this process. For women to achieve legitimacy in this particularly masculinised field requires the reproduction of the stylised identity of male peers but, without transgressing gender norms and so, inciting gender threat (Kelan, 2009). In the context of nascency the proposed venture must conform to normative expectations arising from a masculinised context whilst being voiced by an interloper to the field (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). However, as feminised subject beings, novice nascent female entrepreneurs commence this process from a position of dual detriment both as new entrants but also, as women. This argument is rarely recognised within the comprehensive literature upon

entrepreneurial legitimacy (Marlow and McAdam, 2015) which largely assumes a gender neutral backdrop to debate.

### **Analytical Synopsis**

Our analytical framing draws upon the constructs of legitimacy and identity enacted and transposed through a gendered perspective in the nascent entrepreneurial context (see Figure 1). Whilst we recognise the richness and diversity of the extant literature exploring legitimacy, we argue prevailing work presumes a gender neutral construct whereby the ascribed gender of the entrepreneurial body is of little significance (Marlow et al. 2009). We contest this by drawing upon gendered critiques of entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006; Calas et al. 2009; Hamilton, 2013) which reveal an embedded masculine bias influencing how women perform identity work and their consequent experiences of early-stage entrepreneurship. It is only by employing such critical analyses that as scholars we can expose how gendered assumptions contribute to '*structural impasses which position women in disadvantage, not deficit*' (Marlow 2017: 6) as both nascent and established entrepreneurs. In further developing this critique we emphasise the nascent context as a particularly rich empirical site to critically explore the emergence of entrepreneurial identities and pursuit of legitimacy. Figure 1 illustrates how our concepts are constructed and related. The pursuit of legitimacy and construction of identity are socially constructed in tandem, during the nascent entrepreneurial process. Pursuing legitimacy involves outward facing activities and engaging with audiences and stakeholders (illustrated by a dash oval), whereas constructing identity involves a more internal, self-evaluating focus (illustrated by the solid oval). When we employ gender as a critical tool to understand these evolving concepts we are able to advance understanding of how women entrepreneurs emerge as legitimate entrepreneurial actors.

**Figure 1. Schematic Figure: Influence of gender on legitimacy and identity**



Central to our argument is that the emergent entrepreneurial identity and required legitimacy to stimulate entrepreneurial action, (De Clerq and Voronov, 2009) requires analysis and understanding from a gendered perspective. Axiomatically therefore, we adopt a ‘feminist standpoint’. Feminist standpoint theory draws upon the notion that the work we do (for example, running a business), the activities in which we engage (for example, launching a start-up), shape our identities and consciousness so, our knowledge and this process is gendered (Wood, 2005). As Harding (1987) argues however, it is not sufficient to merely

‘add women’ to existing research enquiry but rather, challenge ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding male authority which presumes that normative masculinity represents ‘human’ experience. Consequently, we define a feminist standpoint as that which recognises and values a woman’s interpretation of her life and moreover, affords her voice and visibility as orator of her own experiences (Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2004; Golombisky, 2006).

Analyses of entrepreneurial legitimacy are usually conducted retrospectively whereby successful (by definition, legitimated) entrepreneurs are required to reflect back on their start-up experiences and recall the legitimation process through post hoc rationalisation (Johnson et al., 2006; Cassar and Craig, 2009; Dimov, 2011). This is problematic from a methodological perspective as the unit of analysis is the *legitimated* entrepreneur who has an established identity so we are unable to learn anything from the dynamics of identity formation through identity work which is necessary if we wish to relate identity to entrepreneurial outcomes (Watson, 2009), such as being awarded legitimacy. To address this issue, we concur with Brundin (2007: 279) that ‘*use of the real-time process studies represents one way to capture entrepreneurial activities as they happen and be able to cover the more intangible, yet very important issues, in the daily life of the entrepreneur.*’ Real-time methodologies, with a micro-processual approach, enable the analysis of everyday practices (De Clerq and Voronov, 2009) in terms of the mundane and the extraordinary that constitute lived experience (Rousseau and House, 1994).

Claiming real time engagement does raise issues regarding how to capture events as they occur. However, Brundin (2007:282) argues that real-time methodologies can be applied in the following circumstances: ‘(1) the researcher being on site and (2) the researcher collecting material when it happens or (3) the entrepreneur reporting about and in connection

with the events taking place'. In essence, implementing the over-arching strategy of '*catching it as it happens* (2007:282)', informs a real-time methodology.

### **Real-time data collection strategies**

The study was designed in sequential stages employing an initial face-to-face semi-structured interview and subsequent real-time strategies: monthly telephone interviews and diary entries. Appendix 1 presents the data collection process. First, an initial face-to-face interview was conducted with the participant to establish familiarity and trust and explored how motivations and past experiences influenced the business idea and the start-up decision. The content of this first half of the interview was largely retrospective, but the second half changed focus to explore the *current* activities the women were conducting to pursue start-up; these accounts form the basis of the first stage of data analysis (see Appendix 2).

The next stage of data collection involved the nascent entrepreneur (self) reporting on her start-up activities and unfolding critical events by generating monthly reflective diary entries, supplemented by (start-up) to-do lists over a six month period. Towards the end of each month, the researcher conducted a telephone interview (20-30 minutes) focusing upon progress and any intervening incidents. Questions were employed as prompts to maintain coherence between interviews and encourage elaboration upon identity work and legitimating activities related to the nascent ventures. Often a simple question that opened initial conversation was, 'How are you getting through your to-do list this month?' By using these techniques the conversation is embedded in real-time and the activities the participants were currently focusing on. To supplement the interview process and aid triangulation, the collection of diary accounts were more self-reflective and allowed women to document their nascent entrepreneurial experiences and insights. By employing a range of real-time strategies, we captured participant experiences as they occurred and in their own words so,

observing the mandated feminist standpoint methodology (Campbell, 2004). Such accounts are essential if we are to understand how gendered ascriptions shape the unfolding entrepreneurial identities and strategies for establishing legitimacy. In adopting a real-time methodology we respond to calls that advocate the expansion of qualitative research offering thicker descriptions and more nuanced accounts of the influence of gender upon women's entrepreneurial activities (Fenwick, 2008).

### ***Identifying and Accessing the Sample***

Using a finite number of cases to employ effective real-time methods was appropriate to facilitate replication logic to inform theory building (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) whilst remaining analytically manageable. The study was undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK) which reflects the European average in terms of women's share of self employment and business ownership (Levie and Hart, 2011). Accessing 'eligible candidates' (Essers, 2009; p.165) – women in the process of transforming concept into venture, but not trading, was an initial challenge. Identifying those still in the nascent period is problematic as the venture does not have a substantive identity – hence why entrepreneurship legitimisation analysis is usually undertaken post hoc. However, we were able to circumvent this problem by consulting an enterprise support agency and negotiating access to their database of individuals who had completed a business start-up programme within the last year. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed with eight women selected to participate in the real-time study<sup>1</sup>. To ensure methodological rigour at all stages of the data collection we followed Lincoln and Guba's (1986) recommended 'trustworthiness criteria' of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. All interviews were digitally recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of data analysis (see Table 1 for

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<sup>1</sup> All participants were offered the option of representation by pseudonym but as only first names are given, none opted to take advantage of this offer.

Case Demographics). At the end of the data collection period (approximately six months) four women had started trading and four had either abandoned their start-up activities or were still working towards business launch.

<Insert Table 1 here>

### ***Data Analysis***

In analysing qualitative research, researchers have a responsibility to be reflexive (Alvesson, 2003; Ikonen and Ojala, 2007) as well as critical. In so doing, the researcher balances an inherent interest at the level of individual meaning with awareness that discourse and ideological as well as structural forces is often the backdrop against which subjects conduct their everyday practices (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). This requires identification of complex social positions and subjectivities as well as personal, political, and intellectual agendas. Consequently, in order to conduct thorough and accurate analysis we followed a data analysis process adapted from Marlow & McAdam (2015) whose study explored a similar phenomenon of gendered identity work in established technology businesses (see Appendix 2 for full details).

Stage 1 and 2 of data analysis process involved initial familiarisation of content and full immersion to begin to comprehend and manage the data. Each author scrutinised the interview transcripts (eight face-to-face and 48 telephone interviews), to-do lists and diary entries, and identified and compared initial concepts then grouped them into provisional categories (Stage 3) (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, cited in Marlow & McAdam (2015)). Once provisional categories were identified, Stage 4 explored how these were related to the key themes within our framing analysis (identity, legitimacy and gender) (Locke, 1996, cited in Marlow & McAdam (2015)). This procedure involved integrating related data drawn from different transcripts by taking one element and comparing it with others of similarity or difference to

develop conceptualizations of possible relations. This resulted in the following research findings relating to the key themes within the literature; they are a culmination of the individual strands which emerged from the data and are articulated in the main body of the paper within the following Findings section (Stage 5). The final data structure which includes excerpts of quotes to illustrate how the findings informed the discrete themes is detailed in Appendix 3. To present a coherent analysis of the findings, each theme is explored in detail employing relevant quotes and excerpts from the data sources (Stage 5). The final stage of the data analysis process which involved explanation and abstraction to contribute to theory development is presented in our discussions and conclusions sections (Stage 6).

The following key for each data source is: face-to-face interview (FFI); telephone interviews (TIn); and diary entries (DEn), with abbreviation appearing after each quote.

## **FINDINGS**

The following section presents key findings that have been critically analysed in relation to the relevant themes arising from the literature. In the absence of an established business during the nascent stage of the entrepreneurial process we observed how women nascent entrepreneurs begin to construct an entrepreneurial identity and pursue legitimacy through engaging in specific forms of start-up activity. Adopting a gender lens upon this analysis has allowed us to advance more critical observations which form the basis of our final discussions and conclusions.

### **Constructing identity and the influence of gender**

During nascency, women not only have to legitimise the emerging venture but also, overcome the embedded detriment attached to their subject position as women who represent



the embodiment of the future venture (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Thus, the nascent entrepreneur legitimises herself using identity work to develop a credible persona to conform to the dominant entrepreneurial stereotype. El demonstrated this conforming strategy when reflecting that her experience as a manager for a haulage company was good preparation for her entrepreneurial career. *'I developed a 'bitch' reputation in that business but it's one of those things that has made me hard core now to be able to do it on my own and do what I need to do to succeed (FFI).'*' In terms of prior education Rose, who recently completed a Masters degree commented on how the programme had influenced her start-up decision.

*'When I did my Masters in Business Improvement, there were sixteen of us, just two females, me and another woman who both worked in the health service.... There were fourteen men on the course, most of them were business owners themselves and I think listening to them for two years I just thought, "It wouldn't actually be that hard to do this [start a business]." ....I wouldn't even say that I learnt that much, it was the experience of the Masters, meeting and observing these men that were more important than the actual qualification (FFI).'*'

Rather than explaining how the explicit experience they accrued through previous work or education prepared them for business start-up, both El and Rose inadvertently associate masculine behaviours and role models as indicators of a future entrepreneurial identity. Developing a *'bitch reputation'* and becoming *'hard core'* allude to behaviours that reflect masculinity and so, may be seen as potential pathways for women to leverage legitimacy, and 'model the norm' (Stead, 2017). Yet, this creates identity tension with scope for repercussions. As Schippers (2009) argues, women who adopt feminised replicas of masculine behaviours are contaminated by such practices and subject to sanction, experiencing degrees of personal dissonance. Schippers describes such challenging characteristics [the bitch, the slut, the shrew] as 'pariah femininities' which invoke paradox. On one hand, they are reminiscent of male authority [being hard, aggressive] but on the other, when articulated by women, they cannot be masculine; 'when a woman is authoritative, she is not masculine, she is a bitch – feminine and undesirable' (p.95). Rose however, adopts a

more deferential stance to her minority presence, noting there were *'just two females'*, on her degree programme with different professional experience (health service employee as opposed to mostly business owners) then highlighting the importance of encountering, observing and listening to the men to pick up cues regarding 'how to be' an entrepreneur.

Indeed, Ogbor (2000) argues that women's participation in entrepreneurship undergoes a process of masculinisation. This normally begins with the administration of self-appraisals through which an individual acknowledges the extent to which their identity conforms to an ideal preferred norm. In her penultimate telephone interview, Pat mapped her perceived characteristics of a successful business owner with her own identity, concluding that they were not aligned.

'I think to make a holistic therapy business succeed you need to have a soft person further down the business for the actual care and treatment, but you need to have that hard-nosed, business head at the top which isn't really me – I'm a farmer's wife and soon-to-be grandmother! (TI5)'

As such, Pat was unable to reconcile the *'soft person'* and the *'hard-nosed, business head'* as one individual but subconsciously separated the feminine and the masculine characteristics into a hierarchy whereby the masculine prevailed *'at the top'* and the feminine *'further down the business.'* Additionally, she not only *dis-identified* with the masculine characteristics but positioned her feminine identities of wife and grandmother as oppositional. Finally, her perception of (local) business success was not a solo woman entrepreneur, but in fact co-preneurs with a gender balance; in short, as long as there was some presence of masculinity then a greater chance of success was anticipated. Similar to ordering gender hierarchies, Natalie considered her femininity to be potentially advantageous because of her target sector and her proposed entry level: *'The industry level that I will be targeting, I think people expect to find that gentle, female-type in training... If I was going up a few levels in terms of the sorts of business I was going to work with I may be expected to be the more double-breasted*

*suit-type with the serious business head* (TI2).’ From the outset, Natalie was positioning her market offering in a manner she felt appropriate to her gender; her reticence to aim at a higher corporate level, likely to be more financially lucrative, was captured by the reference to the ‘*double-breasted suit*’ a symbol of professional masculinity so, not representative of the ‘*gentle, female-type*’ but the ‘*serious business head*’.

Constructing identity encompasses a range of agentic tactics that people employ to proactively shape the meaning or significance of their identity in a given context (Morgan Roberts and Creary, 2013). Thus, for those contemplating entrepreneurial careers, agentic identity work is central to the nascent entrepreneurial process. Whilst identifying and imitating masculine behaviours helped the women to enact a perceived legitimate entrepreneurial identity (Garud *et al.*, 2014), as Pat alludes, this created tensions with other central feminine identities. These tensions were most apparent when participants described the contradictions between ‘mother’ and ‘entrepreneur’. As Natalie reflected, ‘*Sometimes at home you get to the stage where you’re a mummy and you’re just a mummy. You lose a bit of your identity and you’re not Nat, a business owner, I am not sure how to do both* (FFI).’ Similarly Jacqui, who had two young children recalled, ‘*When you have kids you do feel that your confidence definitely does go a little bit. I don’t mean in a bad way but you are just a mummy and I wouldn’t be nearly as forward as I would have been before* (FFI).’ As Jacqui progressed through the start-up process she continually grappled with this identity conflict and drew comparisons between her former professional self, motherhood and her emerging entrepreneurial self,

‘So you’re a Mummy at home and you’re Jacqui at work. It’s like you have two personalities, both completely separate. I remember in my previous job we went to a trade show every year in Germany. I used to love meeting with our foreign agents when my priority was not about picking up the kids on time, but about representing our company. So with this whole start-up thing and the training I’m currently doing,

I've realised once again that business and work and family are so separate but do they have to be? I want my professional identity back again. (TI4)'

These reflections illustrate contrasts between a maternal identity and that of the stereotypical entrepreneurial identity so attempting to combine or switch between them generated dissonance given contradictory narratives. The contradiction between gendered responsibilities and entrepreneurial activity was recognised but accommodated, as Karen noted in a telephone interview: *'It would be easy for me if I wasn't a woman, I would definitely have more time to do this [start a business], but at the same time I do have children and I accept that (DE3)'*. Acceptance of an already established role identity was one way of doing identity work, but equally reversing roles allowed women to be less pre-occupied with maternal identity and focus more on shaping their entrepreneurial identity, as acknowledged by Sinead, *'I think I am considerably lucky because my husband is very supportive and he has taken on a mother's role as I am trying to launch this business. So I see myself now as the main working person in our family, so it's important I make this work (TI4).'*

### **Pursuing legitimacy and the influence of gender**

Without the existence of an established business that can exhibit tangible sources of legitimacy, the nascent entrepreneur is required to focus on symbolic proxies and signalling techniques to gain legitimacy. The credibility of the entrepreneurial actor is one such proxy and consequently identifying and establishing relationships with appropriate supporters and potential stakeholders was critical for the nascent women entrepreneurs to legitimise themselves. Different to the internal self-reflection and evaluation associated with constructing an entrepreneurial identity, pursuing legitimacy is a more outward-facing strategy. It is associated with engaging in activities aimed at convincing external audiences of the viability of the operational business. In highly feminised sectors there was some recognition that gender was a potentially legitimating factor, generating a point of

commonality between the founder and future clients. Sinead recognised this when launching an online maternity retail business, *'I think in the type of business that I'm starting I'm not really going to get too many men as customers and I haven't dealt with many men at all really. So that hasn't put me off (TI2).'* Similarly, El acknowledged with respect to her pole-dancing exercise franchise, *'I think sometimes people don't take you seriously if you're female. But then again because of the type of business I'm looking at, it's going to be a women-oriented clientele...So I don't think I will come up with that many obstacles (TI1).'* Furthermore, conforming to gendered sector expectations was considered advantageous; this was illustrated by Jacqui reflecting upon her wedding planning business,

I think in this line of business that I'm starting, and I don't mean this to sound sexist but it is where you would expect a woman to be. I mean you wouldn't really expect a man to be planning your wedding...well I wouldn't! So I suppose in a way that has been good and hasn't really been in my way. So for my business I think actually being a woman is an advantage! (TI3)

In a telephone interview, Sinead was able to provide a tangible example of how her physical appearance (pregnancy) was positive for her proposed venture:

As a pregnant woman I think it has opened more doors from a PR point of view. Just this week I received more press interest in the run up to the launch after the newspaper realised I was also expecting. My baby bump is the current face of the business, so I fit with what people would expect I suppose (*laughing*) (TI6).'

Thus, building homophily and using femininity to legitimise the emerging businesses were useful strategies to employ in certain sectors. However, such advantages were positioned as not merely positive per se but as a counter to deter a male presence which of itself, was deemed as a potential entry barrier in other neutral or masculinised sectors. The women acknowledged that the absence of men/the masculine in such sectors removed some entry '*obstacles*' given the enhanced credibility arising from their femininity. In essence, a legitimacy advantage is conferred by conforming to normalised gendered expectations when creating ventures in traditionally feminised sectors. Whilst potentially positive in smoothing initial legitimacy challenges at nascency, this alleged advantage has to be balanced against

the evidence that feminised sectors are more likely to attract lower returns within crowded markets and poorer growth prospects (Carter and Shaw, 2006; McAdam, 2012), thus undermining the ability to maintain legitimacy as the business matures.

However, achieving legitimacy was deemed to be more difficult when new ventures were being established in male-dominated sectors; Rose reflected upon the segregated gender roles where her proposed business would operate, *'This is a very male dominated industry in terms of the owners of it. Production managers now, there's a lot of female production managers, but not owners. What's more the buyers in the stores are nearly all male and they're the people I need to get in front of (TI5).'* It is apparent that male stakeholders occupied legitimating roles in this particular industry. Despite indications that legitimacy was enacted through developing networks and contacts that provided advice, referrals and recommendations to support the eventual business launch, less value was placed on the strategic legitimacy of women's networks, regardless of sector. Pam was reluctant to use such networks for establishing her interior design business; she explained, *'I don't bother with these Women in Business network things....if anything, a lot of my initial referral work has come through networking with men. They're all business talk. They don't talk about their children! (TI6).'* El also questioned the value of joining such networking organisations, *'There's an association called Women in Business, I think it's called. I haven't joined that yet...I think part of me says I should join at some stage this year. I'm a bit dubious about women-only networks, might be a bit too 'womenified' (TI4).'* At worst, there was doubt, and at best ambivalence, towards using women-only networks to attain support and advice to develop the venture whereas mixed or male dominated networks were considered to offer more value. It appears that male business associates and supporters, provide a 'legitimacy script' (Marlow and McAdam, 2015: 805) as informed directors of appropriate behaviours. This was discussed at length by Pam.

I worked for a man who would have been an entrepreneur and he would be quite ruthless. He has gone from one business to another and every time he does it works. He's great at selling things, selling anything. He's the type of person I ask for advice. And he certainly would be the right person to show you the way to run your business. (TI4)

Legitimacy work was conducted in both the public and private space with immediate stakeholders often being the partner or spouse. Their endorsement and support was important in awarding personal legitimacy and initial approval of the viability of the business. Pat's husband was critical of her idea – he farmed the land where she wished to establish her holistic therapy and retreat centre. Despite her extensive experience managing all aspects of the large family farm business, Pat struggled to win family support to create an independent business based upon a well-researched diversification project.

'I have a traditional farming husband. He can't see where my vision is and I have great difficulty in getting him to come down my route. He doesn't see himself at all involved in it (business start-up) and I think that's where I have failed, in that I haven't given him any aspiration for this idea. He doesn't see it as an opportunity at all! He sees this as a passing fad that people practice. He is very resistant. That has made me stop and say, 'Where do I take this? Do I take this any further? Is this viable or is this a white elephant?' (TI6)'

This quote is telling; Pat's role as farm manager was deemed an extension of her spousal role [supporting her husband, contributing to the family enterprise] but claiming legitimacy as a business founder in a different sector evoked resistance. And despite management experience and extensive research pertaining to the proposed venture, Pat presumed her husband's reluctance to offer support was her fault – she *failed* to convince him leaving a legacy of self-doubt regarding viability such that she did not pursue the project to commercialisation. For some, such as Pat in a dependent spousal relationship, withholding legitimating support when she sought to move away from her recognisable identity of wife, mother, farm manager was within her husband's power and there was little she felt she could do to counter it. In fact, she looked for justifying strategies for his intransigence when assuming responsibility for not

convincing him of venture viability and her role as a legitimate business owner. Similarly, in Rose's case, her entrepreneurial effort was undermined by her husband who questioned her legitimacy with key stakeholders; she commented during her final interview, *'He (husband) said to me this morning, "Dear, what are you doing? You're going to make a fool of yourself! What do you know about food and retail and Tescos and all the rest?'"*(TI4).

These short extracts drawn from the extensive and detailed narratives and diary reflections describing the experiences, thoughts, tactics and concerns of these women illustrate how each constructed their emerging entrepreneurial identities and pursued legitimacy work to establish the foundations of a legitimised entrepreneur. The evidence suggests an oscillation between the feminised subject being and the preferred entrepreneurial identity which had to be actively managed if actor legitimacy is to be eventually achieved.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The relationship between identity, legitimacy and gender**

A fundamental premise of our study views the construction of identity and the pursuit of legitimacy as tandem processes in the context of nascent entrepreneurship. That said, we argue that they are not mutually exclusive but rather the self-evaluation and reflexivity involved in gradually being able to identify oneself as an entrepreneur fuels more outward-facing legitimising activities and vice-versa. However, when we apply a gender lens to this emergent process it is apparent that a feminine identity does not always compliment an emerging entrepreneurial identity, which in turn influence the legitimacy practices of nascent women entrepreneurs. Therefore, given the acknowledged masculinity of the entrepreneurial discourse, this ensures that men considering entrepreneurial careers have the advantage of fit; whilst they certainly have to pursue legitimacy and convince external stakeholders of the



idea/opportunity/venture viability they are not required to undertake self-reflection upon their gender identity and how this positions them – maleness and entrepreneurship is a normative combination. Yet, for women, there is a tension between their ascribed gender identity and how this becomes an element of their potential venture which has to be negotiated - in addition to other key elements of nascency. Thus, drawing together the key themes emerging from the findings, there is an on-going dialogue between these nascent entrepreneurs regarding how they see themselves as potential entrepreneurial actors (constructing identity) and the tactics they use to legitimate this self with future stakeholder audiences (pursuing legitimacy).

Whilst the extant literature suggests that sex differences have been exaggerated in analyses of entrepreneurial activity, reflecting stereotypical expectations of a gendered female deficit (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Saridakis et al., 2013), it is apparent that women are less likely to create new ventures (McAdam, 2012). One critical reason for this we suggest, which has rarely been considered in previous research, is the gendered challenges women encounter when creating their new entrepreneurial identity and establishing legitimacy for the self and the nascent venture. These are illustrated in the evidence presented here which suggests identity role dissonance giving rise to forms of ‘boundary conflict’ between the individual and the space they seek to enter (Kreiner et al. 2009) reflecting notions of dis-identification and ambivalent identification (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). We contribute to this particular debate by arguing that this boundary conflict is exacerbated when both the venture and the entrepreneurial identity are emerging in tandem. In this particular context, despite creating momentum for ‘aspirational identities’ and ‘possible selves’; such identity conflict is more difficult to resolve for women nascent entrepreneurs whose femininity is fixed by gendered ascription but this in turn, contradicts normative stereotypes of the entrepreneur.

First, we argue that femininity is deemed less conducive to a legitimate entrepreneurial identity; consequently, women utilise strategies to imitate masculinity and so, mediate such detriment or alternatively, identify confluence between aspects of femininity and their entrepreneurial activities. In the case of the former tactic, some of the participants associated masculine behaviours and particular male role models as proxies for legitimacy and undertook specific forms of identity replication work to align with such proxies. So for instance, presenting a ‘bitch reputation’ or ‘hard core’ attitude to gain legitimacy; cues regarding how to craft such identities were sought from successful male entrepreneurs, colleagues on business courses and engaging with male dominated networks. In effect, these women were adopting ‘compensation strategies’ (Alsos and Ljunggren, 2016) to counter the detriment of femininity by embracing specific forms of masculinity. Similarly, this confirms the conceptual argument advanced by Stead (2017) that modelling the norm could be viewed as a ‘fixing strategy’ and a means to fit in which will compensate for the deficit and result in some degree of acceptance and legitimation. Yet, such strategies require careful surveillance and ‘*tempered disruption* (Stead (2017: 71)’ to avoid gender threat (Kelan, 2009).

Straying too far from expected gender performances can in fact, damage personal legitimacy; consequently, there is an element of ‘edge walking’ here (Krebs, 1999) as women defer to the masculine discourse as legitimate and normative when trying to embrace it but simultaneously, not transgressing their femininity to the point of abjection. So presenting an identity which in a man might be deemed competitive and aggressive becomes a pariah femininity and a ‘bitch reputation’ in a woman; although presented with unpleasant connotations, the bitch remains recognisable as a female object. Entering male networks or aspiring to emulate male mentors again suggests deference as this occurs as a learning and developing exercise rather than one which challenges or disputes such activities. For those who chose not to adopt masculinised identities or divert to feminised sectors, their efforts

were sometimes adjusted to ‘lower level entry’ or emphasising the advantages that particular feminised qualities such as being ‘gentle’ or ‘soft’ could offer. Such adoption of specific femininities to avoid gender threat was articulated by some of the respondents such as Rose, but interestingly, her husband contributed to the process of maintaining the gender hierarchy. Critically evaluating her competency reinforces his patriarchal authority over her choices and activities; so whilst his feedback could be interpreted as concern for her welfare, it also dispels any threat to his dominance within their partnership (Schippers, 2009).

Second, despite acknowledging heterogeneity in that not all women nascent entrepreneurs are also mothers (Ekinsmyth, 2014), our analysis did show evidence that the established identity of motherhood, as the epitome of a feminine identity can impede the emerging identity of the entrepreneur. Participants with child care responsibilities struggled to balance motherhood identities and those of a credible business owner. Karen *accepted* that her role as a mother was delaying her start-up activities and both Natalie and Jacqui associated ‘*being just a Mummy*’ as contradictory and therefore, difficult to manage alongside a professional entrepreneurial identity. In addition, the particular masculinity of the entrepreneurial prototype makes it less acceptable to discuss symbols of feminine responsibility such as child care – unless of course, this responsibility becomes part of a specifically feminised version of entrepreneurship such as the ‘mumpreneur’. Within such metonymies, maternal responsibilities bridge the gulf between the masculine discourse and oppositional femininity making women comprehensible as entrepreneurial actors (Iyer, 2009). On the other hand, alleviating maternal responsibilities permitted individuals to dis-identify (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004) with the motherhood identity whilst conducting their start-up activities and focus on developing their entrepreneurial identity, as demonstrated by some participants whose spouses assumed greater domestic responsibilities.

Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) argue that in particular entrepreneurial contexts, gaining legitimacy requires identity work which interprets and balances masculinity and femininity to create provisional selves that fit within specific environments. In highly feminised sectors it is apparent that women establishing businesses in this space anticipated fewer obstacles because of feminised profile of these sectors. As Deephouse and Suchman (2008: 61) state *'legitimacy is fundamentally homogenizing, producing herd-like conformity along whichever dimensions the prevailing rational myths establish as legitimacy-defining.'* Thus, femininity here is a potential legitimating factor where women nascent entrepreneurs can signal empathy with and understanding of potential client needs (whether that be planning for their wedding or shopping for maternity clothing).

Consequently, women who conform to normalised expectations and establish businesses in these sectors did so to enhance legitimacy at this stage. Ultimately, demonstrating entrepreneurial potential is easier as this space is *'where you would expect a woman to be.'* However, despite appearing advantageous for achieving legitimacy in the short term and thus, a rational choice, the extent to which these businesses have the potential to grow in crowded markets with marginal returns is limited. As an extensions of 'pink-collar professions' women entrepreneurs who operate businesses in such 'pink ghettos' (Smith, 2014) are unable to achieve the financial security and scheduling latitude envisioned at start-up (Weidhass, 2016), and so, the cycle of women as low status actors is merely perpetuated (Deephouse and Carter, 2005). This strategy therefore, [aligning femininity with sectoral profile] for the pursuit of legitimacy may be termed a Pyrrhic victory. It may enhance legitimacy initially, but ultimately may prove detrimental as legitimacy assessment criteria move away from merely symbolic mechanisms towards tangible performance metrics, such as financial returns (Fisher et al., 2016).

Third, De Clerq and Voronov (2009) argue, gaining legitimacy requires the artful navigation of rules, norms and objective conditions that facilitate some actions and inhibit others. Applying gender as our analytical frame, this ‘artful navigation’ takes on a more complex course particularly when we explored perceptions of network efficacy. Specifically women-only networks were not always considered as a viable conduit for gaining entrepreneurial legitimacy, regardless of sector because they reinforced the status detriment afforded to women in the masculinised entrepreneurial context. The accusation of being ‘*too womenified*’ suggests a desire to disassociate from women as a category and instead, affiliate with men given their higher value in this field. Indeed, prior studies highlighted a gendered dimension to network composition, as well as access to networks (Foss, 2010; Greve and Salaff, 2003) whereby male networks enhance legitimacy in certain sectors and are therefore strategically selected as proxies of legitimacy. Category boundaries have various elements of permeability; as such, women cannot become men but they can associate with and emulate aspects of masculinity to alleviate status detriment. This suggests that women are more likely to place significant value on male advisors, family members and stakeholders as they are the gatekeepers of normative legitimacy in the entrepreneurial context. We argue this is problematic as despite initial endorsement by reproducing normative assumptions of entrepreneurship and pedestals the legitimate entrepreneurial identity as inherently male.

Drawing upon this real time evidence tracking women’s effort to seek legitimacy for their nascent ventures, we also observe a process of attenuating identity work as the participants seek to compensate for the detriment of femininity in the context of a masculinised discourse. In constructing their new identities as entrepreneurs, for some women this involved ‘embracing the masculine’ and ‘attenuating the feminine’ as they leveraged off support and sought approval from male mentors, advisors, colleagues and family members whilst seeking to attenuate stereotypical feminised behaviours. Yet, for

those women with child care responsibilities, unsupportive spouses or strong affiliation with prototypical feminine identities (grandmothers, wives) this balance was more challenging. For some this was resolved by focusing upon feminised sectors where women were identified with the product or service which effectively bridged the tension between femininity and entrepreneurial activity. For others, the project was abandoned as too difficult when trying to elicit support and gain legitimacy in the face of intransigence from key supporters and stakeholders.

## CONCLUSIONS

Within the entrepreneurship literature, the notion of legitimacy has been afforded considerable attention (Navis and Glynn, 2011) as have analyses of entrepreneurial identity (Leitch and Harrison, 2016). Combining these two constructs, we add a further contribution when adopting a gendered lens to evaluate this relationship. In their overview of the status and position of gendered analyses of women's entrepreneurship, Jennings and Brush (2013) raise questions regarding the potential contribution offered by this body of work. Does it offer something distinctive or merely trod well-rehearsed arguments whilst just 'adding women to the mix' (Ahl and Marlow, 2012)? Drawing upon our analytical critique, illustrated by real time evidence we concur with Jennings and Brush (2013: 692) citing Hurley (1999: 56) 'that women's entrepreneurship scholars *do* tend to "look at the familiar differently"'. Thus, we have taken familiar constructs and developed a novel analysis by adopting a gendered critique. As such, we argue that the masculinity embedded within the entrepreneurial discourse critically shapes women's efforts to achieve entrepreneurial legitimacy during nascency. This underpinning detriment requires women to undertake specific forms of dedicated identity and legitimacy work to become bona fide (legitimated) entrepreneurs but this requires oscillation between core feminine and entrepreneur identities.

So, whilst existing literature explores entrepreneurial legitimacy in terms of various strategies – from story-telling to leveraging off high status stakeholders - we suggest that achieving entrepreneurial legitimacy is more complex than presenting recognised credentials and appropriating entrepreneurial resources to inform plausible future scenario building. Critical to the legitimising process is the social, cultural and institutional attributions attached to the entrepreneurial subject which serve to privilege some, to the detriment of others, informing the nature of the identity work undertaken to fit with prevailing notions of who and what is an entrepreneur (Baughn et al., 2006; Ahl, 2006). To bridge the gulf between the status detriment of femininity and the preferred masculinity of the legitimised entrepreneur requires specific gendered forms of identity work. We argue that gender is a critical element of the entrepreneurial legitimation process yet, the extant literature assumes a gender neutral context which has led to a gender blind body of literature which we argue, inevitably embeds a discriminatory ontology. In effect, gendered ascriptions position women in disadvantaged spaces as they attempt to legitimate their nascent ventures. This is rarely acknowledged within contemporary theoretical debate. Consequently, responding to Powell and Baker's (2014) call for research that may generate insights into the significance for founders of bringing 'who I am' into closer alignment with 'who I want to be,' we conclude that with respect to women's nascent entrepreneurship, a more accurate alignment is 'who I am' and 'who I *have* to be.'

From a practical perspective, we argue that the challenges arising from the identity work necessary to bridge the gulf between ascribed femininity and articulating a legitimate entrepreneurial identity have critical implications for the actualisation of women's new venture creation which we suggest are not only discriminatory in themselves but also, contribute to the differential start-up rates of male and female owned businesses and future performance potential. As such gender really matters in the legitimation process; not only

because of the specific identity work women are obliged to undertake but also, given the practical implications of the intrinsically gendered nature of this critical stage of entrepreneurial activity. The problems of gaining legitimacy during nascency may indeed, thwart the ambitions of many potential women entrepreneurs and so, contribute to the gendered gap in terms of start-up rates. Consequently, implications for start-up support providers are significant when considering provision and design of interventions. Just as financing strategies would be an important component of a training programme, there is merit in acknowledging the importance of more subtle legitimising strategies to not only accrue much needed resources, but to endorse initial credibility of nascent women entrepreneurs. This involves developing a strategic awareness of key stakeholders they may need to approach to help them legitimise their ventures, often before launch. Furthermore, when advising and encouraging women to embark on entrepreneurship mentors and other business advisors have a responsibility to be aware of any unconscious bias or pre-conceived expectations they may harbour when providing advice and support as such attitudes may subtly prevent the attainment of legitimacy. This may be particularly critical for nascent women entrepreneurs who are endeavouring to establish businesses outside of the 'pink ghettos' and in more masculine sectors and industries.

#### *Limitations and future research*

Acknowledging limitations, the research setting was in one UK region. In addition, the current study has only permitted a 'snapshot' (over a six month period) of where these women are with regard to their businesses. As such, future longitudinal work is required to fully assess the impact of ascribed femininity on entrepreneurial legitimacy and identity in survival and growth stages of business and indeed how women may adapt their strategies when trying to *maintain* legitimacy as an established entrepreneur (Fisher et al., 2016). Similarly, future research could explore how the nature of identity work changes as



individuals transition from nascent to actual entrepreneur. Furthermore, we acknowledge that through our chosen sampling strategy, we accessed women nascent entrepreneurs who had self-selected (and completed) a business start-up programme. We are therefore, unable to generalise to all women nascent entrepreneurs and in particular those women who establish businesses without any prior training or support or who might be considered serial or habitual entrepreneurs. Indeed, this provides scope for future research which recognises the heterogeneity of women (nascent) entrepreneurs.

Theoretically, the arguments are limited through the focus upon gender as a dominating characteristic; how gender intersects with other social ascriptions would offer a fruitful pathway for future research. We have concentrated on key stage in the entrepreneurial process, that of nascency and explored the familiar constructs of legitimacy and identity. Jennings and Brush (2013) note other constructs central to contemporary research such as opportunity recognition, passion and emotion. We would suggest that these critical activities are normatively positioned as gender neutral whereas they are embedded in gendered assumptions and biases. Illuminating and illustrating how these biases shape women's engagement in such fields offers much scope for future research. It is only through engaging in continued critical analysis that firmly embeds a gendered perspective will we as research community create greater awareness of gender issues among our peers, students and indeed those women who are both considering and engaged in entrepreneurial practice.

Main body word count: 9807

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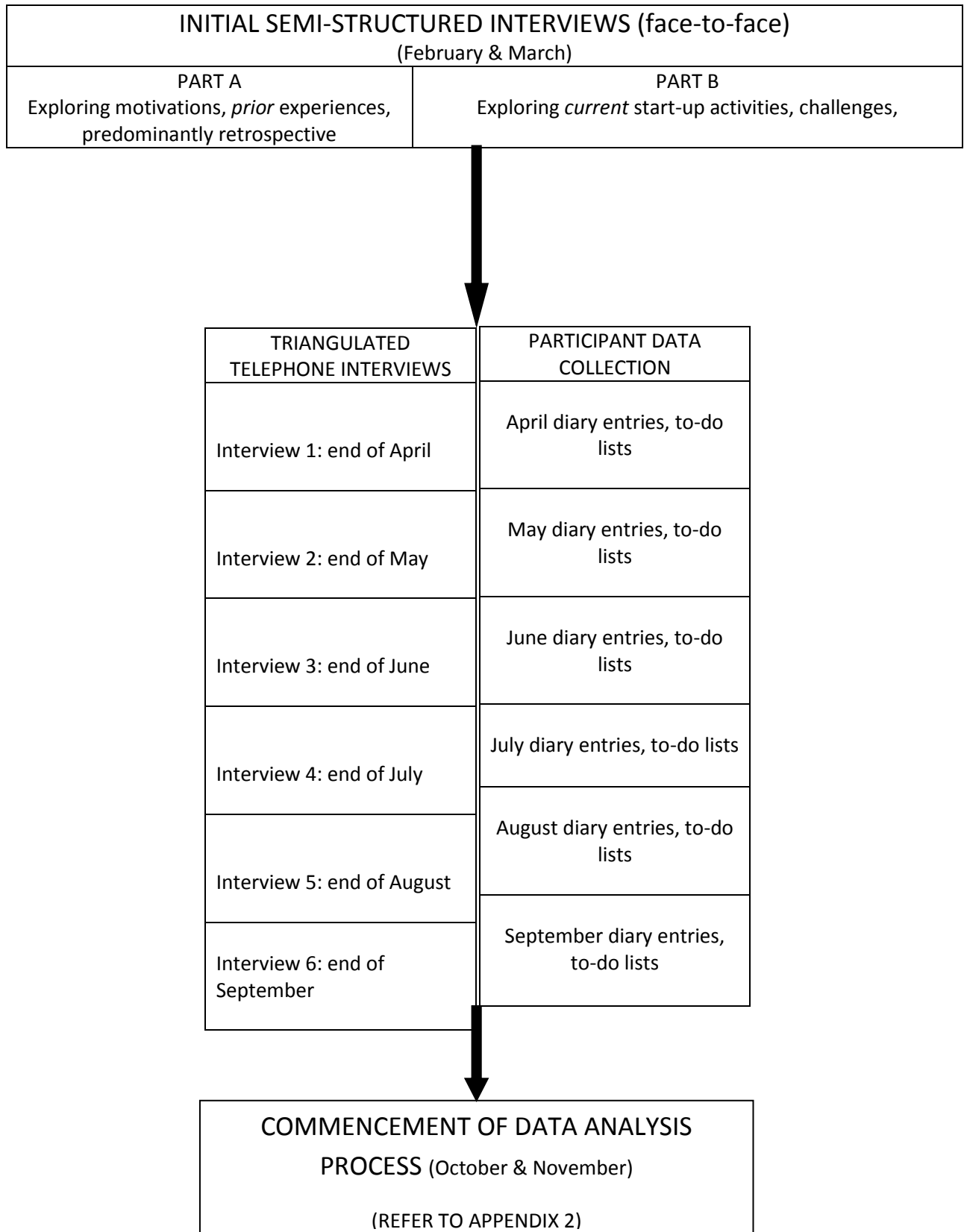
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Table 1. Key case study demographics

Nascent Entrepreneur	Age Range	Education Level	Type of Business	Marital Status	Mothers	Ages of Dependent Children	Employment Status	Process Outcome (started or not)
El	24-29	Secondary	Pole-dancing Exercise franchise	Single	X	None	Employed (part time)	✓
Jacqui	36-41	Tertiary degree	Wedding Planner	Married	✓	6 & 4 yrs	Employed (4 days)	X
Karen	24-29	Tertiary PhD	Water saving treatment product	Married	✓	11 & 9 yrs	Employed (full time)	X
Natalie	36-41	Tertiary degree	Export Marketing Consultancy	Married	✓	8 & 6 yrs	Employed (3 day job share)	
Pam	36-41	Tertiary degree	Interior Designer	Single	X	None	Unemployed	✓
Pat	54-59	Secondary	Holistic Therapy & Retreat Centre	Married	✓	None	Employed (farmer's wife)	X
Sinead	24-29	Secondary	Online Maternity Retailer	Married	✓	2 yrs	Unemployed	✓
Rose	42-47	Tertiary degree	Fruit Smoothie Manufacturing	Married	✓	None	Unemployed	✓

X = NO; ✓ = YES

Appendix 1. Data collection process



Appendix 2. Stages of the Data Analysis Process (adapted from Marlow & McAdam (2015))

<b>Process of analysis</b>	<b>Level of analysis</b>	<b>Description of analysis</b>
1. Familiarization with content and initial insight into data	Read for content	Reading/ rereading each case in order to become familiar with the material.
2. Immersion	Comprehend and manage data	Identification of broad categories/themes through a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Transcripts were coded, segments of texts highlighted and organized into relevant clusters.
3. Categorization	Identifications of key themes	Emergent themes developed to generate tentative links between the transcripts in terms of identity construction, pursuing legitimacy, gender, and entrepreneurship and nascency.
4. Association and pattern recognition	Constant comparison analysis	Integrated related data drawn from different transcripts by taking one element and comparing it with others of similarity or difference to develop conceptualizations of possible relations.
5. Interpretation and representation	Writing up data	Generating a <i>“narrative account of the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and participant account of her experience in her own words”</i> (Smith & Eatough, 2006: 18). Regarding our key research question, two critical themes emerged: (1) constructing identity and the influence of gender (2) pursuing legitimacy and the influence gender. Subsequent outcomes identified the core meaning of the data, remaining faithful to respondent perspectives interpreted through wider social and theoretical constructs.
6. Explanation and abstraction	Contribution to theory development	Finally, recontextualizing, or placing new knowledge about the phenomena and relations back into the context of how others have articulated evolving knowledge. This process also identified new research avenues and potential questions for further inquiry.



Appendix 3. Final data structure (excerpts of quotes)

	<b>Constructing identity and the influence of gender</b>	<b>Pursuing legitimacy work and the influence gender</b>
EI	<i>I developed a 'bitch reputation' in that business but it's one of those things that has made me hard core now to be able to do it on my own and do what I need to do to succeed.(FFI)</i>	<i>I think sometimes people don't take you seriously if you're female. But again because of the type of business I'm looking at, it's going to be a women-oriented clientele...So I don't think I will come up with that many obstacles.(TI1) There's an association called Women In Business, I think it's called. I haven't joined that yet...I think part of me says I should join at some stage this year. I'm a bit dubious about all women in business, might be a bit too womenified.(TI4)</i>
Jacqui	<i>When you have kids you do feel that your confidence definitely does go a little bit. You feel like, I don't mean in a bad way but you are just a mummy and I wouldn't be nearly as forward as I would have been before. (FFI) So you're a Mummy at home and you're Jacqui at work. It's like you have two personalities, both completely separate. I remember in my previous job we went to a trade show every year in Germany. I used to love meeting with our foreign agents when my priority was not about picking up the kids on time, but about representing our company. So with this whole start-up thing and doing the training course, I've realised once again that business and work and family are so separate but do they have to be? I want my professional identity back again. (TI4)</i>	<i>I should book some meetings with the bigger hotels, but I can't. Friday is my only day off and I have the kids, so it wouldn't be right to drag them along.(DE3) I think in this line of business that I'm starting, and I don't mean this to sound sexist but it is where you would expect a woman to be. I mean you wouldn't really expect a man to be planning your wedding...well I wouldn't! So I suppose in a way that has been good and hasn't really been in my way. So for my business I think actually being a woman is an advantage! (TI3)</i>
Karen	<i>It would be easy for me if I wasn't a woman, I would definitely have more time to do this [start a business], but at the same time I do have children and I accept that.(DE5) Everything has taken so long, and I suppose when Orla [baby daughter] came along too my priorities were with her for a good lot of the time but thankfully now it's starting to take shape. I do blame myself though, it was as much my fault as it was anyone else's. Hopefully, through going through the courses and speaking to Social Services I now have the support to help me realize I can do it. I just need confidence in myself to go for it. (TI6)</i>	<i>I am studying hard to get to get this doctorate before my name in order for me to have some sort of credibility before I officially launch. Then in terms of having two children as well and holding down a job it's all factored in to delaying my progress. (TI4) I have taken a leap of faith in trying to start this business, but sometimes I feel like such a fraud. There's not very much money in it [the venture] and all I seem to be doing is writing cheques at the minute you know. (TI5)</i>
Natalie	<i>I would say my confidence was knocked for six...Sometimes at home you get to the stage where you're a mummy and you're just a mummy. You lose a bit of your identity and you're not Nat, a business owner. I'm not sure how to do both.(FFI) The industry level that I will be targeting, I think people expect to find that gentle, female-type in training... If I was going up a few levels in terms of the sorts of business I was going to work with I may</i>	<i>I don't have that academic business background, so that's part of the game plan now...get a postgraduate diploma in Marketing. I can see that's what's going to hook people. (TI4) I have been to a few Women in Business events and they're good – but I mean it is all women! I don't want to tie myself to women, I'd rather slip in and out and be involved in more than one network. The Chamber of Commerce now, that is an excellent networking facility</i>

	<i>be expected to be the more double-breasted suit type with the serious business head. (TI2)</i>	<i>– mostly men but a few women attend. (TI5)</i>
Pam	<i>I don't have children so I find it quite difficult to communicate with women sometimes at these women events, as at some point they talk about their kids, like a common identity! Whereas with men who I've met through different property events, you never know what their family life is like – it's straight down to business. (TI3)</i>	<i>I worked for a man who would have been an entrepreneur and he would be quite ruthless. He has gone from one business to another business and every time he does it works. He's great at selling things, selling anything. He's the type of person I ask for advice. And he certainly would be the right person to show you the way to run your business. (TI4) I don't bother with these Women in Business network things....if anything, a lot of my initial referral work has come through networking with men. They're all business talk. They don't talk about their children! (TI6)</i>
Pat	<i>I think to make a holistic therapy business succeed you need to have a soft person further down the business for the actual care and treatment but you need to have that hard-nosed, business head at the top which isn't really me – I'm a farmer's wife and soon-to-be grandmother. (TI5)</i>	<i>I have a traditional farming husband. He can't see where my vision is and I have great difficulty in getting him to come down my route. He doesn't see himself at all involved in it (business start-up) and I think that's where I have failed, in that I haven't given him any aspiration for this idea. He doesn't see it as an idea at all! He sees this as a passing fad that people practice. He is very resistant. That has made me stop and say, 'Where do I take this? Do I take this any further? Is this viable or is this a white elephant?' (TI6)  <i>So back then, I was never going to be accepted as a business owner because I was a young woman, so I thought well, I will at least be educated. So I used that as a stepping stone. So I was building blocks all the way along to this point in time. But that doesn't stop barriers in the environment towards me. I still have to face attitudes towards women and their own business even though it's been tempered by my age you still never get away from that! There's more baggage about you being female! (FFI)</i></i>
Rose	<i>When I did my Masters in Business Improvement, there were sixteen of us, just two females, me and another woman who both worked in the health service.... There were fourteen men on the course, most of them were business owners themselves and I think listening to them for two years I just thought, 'It wouldn't actually be that hard to do this [start a business].' I wouldn't even say that I learnt that much, it was the experience of the Masters, meeting these men that were more important than the actual qualification. (FFI)</i>	<i>He {husband} said to me this morning, "Dear, what are you doing? You're going to make a fool of yourself! What do you know about food and retail and Tesco's and all the rest? (TI4) This is a very male dominated industry in terms of the owners of it. Production managers now, there's a lot of female production managers, but not owners. What's more the buyers in the stores are nearly all male and they're the people I need to get in front of. (TI5)</i>
Sinead	<i>I think I am considerably lucky because my husband is very supportive and he has taken on a mother's role as I am trying to launch this business. So I see myself now as the main working person in our family, so it's important I make this work. (TI4)  ... A lot of those ordinary, everyday things – I mean I look at my sister for example she is the one who has to take a day off when the kids are sick,</i>	<i>I have a mentor I am going to talk to him about it (a specific challenge) because he knows what he's talking about! Then there is a programme starting for women entrepreneurs, so I might tap into that – but it's just coaching and mentoring stuff. (TI3) As a pregnant woman I think it has opened more doors because from a PR point of view. Just this week I received more press interest in the run up to the launch after the newspaper realised I was also expecting. My</i>

	<i>whereas I am not. I don't have to worry about those sorts of things and if I did it would be very, very difficult for me to get this business off the ground. (TI5)</i>	<i>baby bump is the current face of the business, so I fit with what people would expect I suppose (laughing) (TI6).</i>
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SSI = semi-structured interview; TI $n$  = telephone interview  $n$ ; Den = diary entry  $n$ .