**Challenging masculinity in business education
The case of Maya and Susanna**

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**Abstract**

*Business administration as a study choice has been explained via its practicality, high societal status and prestige, and as an opportunity for upwards mobility. Shahzad, Ahmed, and Ghaffar (2013) describe "the nature" of business as a study choice that matches extroversion and dominance. The stories of our participants' reconstruct the businessperson, broadening it. For them business studies needs to contain the values of equality, work-family balance, permanent responsibility towards current and future generations, and skirts, sweatpants and ponytails as truthful pictures of the businessperson of the future.. The linguistic constructions that challenge business masculinity in these life stories hold the power to modify business education.*

**Keywords:** gender, diversity, identity, business schools

## INTRODUCTION

For many of us, our way into working life started when we chose what to study at university. Some people prepare this choice over many years, while others hesitate until the last day to fill in the form or admission webpage. But even an apparently arbitrary choice serves as a social marker and is considered to say something about the individual's preferences, family background, potential salary and future influence in society. Thus, our choice of studies is important to how we socially introduce ourselves, how we socially construct our identity, often including contradictory and complex experiences. However, the ways we present ourselves can be understood as constructions of social power and the promotion of specific identities at the expense of others: thus shaping how people think, feel, and act (Alvesson and Billing, 2011). Ibarra (1999) describes how junior professionals (consultants and investment bankers) assume and adapt to new roles long before fully living the professional identity in their new roles in the company. These young professionals' narratives are constructed around their future professions even before they begin their working life.

Business administration is one of the most popular subjects in Swedish higher education. In 2014/2015, 12% of all students in Swedish higher education studied business administration (Universitetskanslerämbetet

& SCB, 2016). When the Swedish educational system expanded in the 1990s, business administration courses developed more than most in students numbers (Universitetskanslerämbetet, 2016). Business administration programs have been popular all over Sweden for several decades, with numerous applicants. Previous studies on business administration as a study choice have explained this via its practicality, high societal status and prestige, correctness and adaption to social norms, and as an opportunity for upwards mobility (Engwall, 2009; Pásztor, 2012). Quantitative research has described in detail different areas within business as a study choice, attempting to understand who applies, and how higher education institutions can reach and educate these applicants (Damron-Martinez, Presley, & Zhang, 2013; Downey, 2011; Geyfman, Force, & Davis, 2016; Järlström, 2000; Shtudiner, Zwilling, & Kantor, 2017). However, we know less about how the choice to study business economics is linguistically constructed. This means that we know less about what social structures these students produce and reproduce, which is remarkable given the importance of the topic and the number of business economics students.

The social construction of masculinity is a broad field of research that includes masculinity in relation to, among others, adolescence (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Phoenix and Frosh, 2001), parenthood (Edley, 2001; Johansson and Bergström, 2015), care (Courtenay, 2000; SeymourSmith et al., 2002), sport (Edley and Wetherell, 1997), violence (Courtenay, 2000; Kirby and Henry, 2012), and sexuality (Connell, 1992).

Business leaders and entrepreneurs have been described as carriers of a particular kind of hegemonic masculinity: transnational business masculinity, which can be understood as the expression of a combination of traditional values and adaptation to modern technocratic and global masculinity (Connell, 2010; Connell and Pearse, 2015). In addition, previous research has gendered the business student and business as an academic subject. For instance Shahzad, Ahmed, and Ghaffar (2013) describe "the nature" of business as a study choice that matches extroversion and dominance. They find male business students score higher on extroversion than female students, who score higher on openness and agreeableness, including nurturing and affiliation. Previous research has described the choice of business studies as based on the values of money and career success (G. Blackburn, 2011; Easterlin, 1995; Hilmer & Hilmer, 2012; Laswad & Tan, 2014; Li, Zhang, & Zheng, 2014). Quantitative studies show that male students score higher on career and compensation expectations than female students (Dalci, Arasli, Tümer, & Baradarani, 2013; Geyfman et al., 2016; Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005). These studies construct male students as a better "fit" with business as a study choice. The same studies construct female students as "the other" in relation to business

as a study choice, and hence as a group that needs to adapt to current standards in education and their future working life.

Business undergraduate education is today one of the few "headcount" gender neutral subjects in Sweden, where neither of the sexes makes up less than 40 percent of all registered students (University Chancellor and SCB, 2016). Previous research has described business as a field that contains "not many specific men's or women's jobs" and that attracts men and women equally in Scandinavia (Järlström, 2000). However, the business world has many masculine traits: a world of hard working males, loyal to their companies and with few obligations in domestic life (R. Connell, 2010). Wajcman (2013) has described managerial masculinity, stating that in corporations, women tend to fall behind in salary and careers due to masculinity and masculine values. However, expressions of hegemonic masculinity must be challenged in practice as well as in research. Discussing how constructions of masculinity are challenged is a sound development in the research field of masculinity (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, few qualitative studies of business as a study choice have been published (Greg Blackburn, 2011; Pásztor, 2012).

The aim of this article is to discuss how first year business students construct their study choice linguistically. Our focus is on gendered descriptions and on how students position themselves in their imagined future working life. In this study, masculinity and femininity are seen as plural phenomena, and as such, gender hierarchies and male dominance both change over time and context (Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993). In social interaction, people can choose to accept or oppose given positions. But, as soon as we assume a position, we assume in the conversation the pictures and metaphors that depend on this position (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Similarly, we can experience space and limitations in the position attributed to us in a particular situation or interaction. The meaning, for ourselves and for others, in the epithelium  depends on where, when and how these "labels" are used (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Thus, the language can be seen as the fabric in which power claims are built, maintained, and challenged. By focusing on language constructions and context, the use of positioning has been described as suitable to describe how people construct and challenge power and inequalities (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Whittle and Mueller, 2011). Edley (2001b) claims a growing consensus over disciplines that language can be seen as a key to understanding how gender is constructed in and through discourse. What is considered masculine or feminine in a certain context is understood as normative forms of behavior adapted to that context, in this case to business masculinity as an expression of hegemony.  We base our discussion of the business

economist's positioning with regard to social constructions of masculinity on previous research in discursive psychology, for example, Edley (2001), Wetherell and Edley (1999) and Edley and Wetherell (1997), but also on research into challenges to the construction of business masculinity (Connell , 2010).

## DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Discursive psychology builds upon structuralist and poststructuralist language philosophy, based on the premise that the meaning we ascribe to reality is based on language. Using language, we create representations of reality. This does not mean that there is no reality beyond language, but rather that this reality makes sense through language. With roots in social constructionism, language is assumed not only to describe the world, but to construct it, and consequently language also has consequences in reality (Potter, 1996/2004; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). As in ordinary conversations, people's descriptions usually vary; people often contradict themselves in the same conversation. These variations fulfill different purposes, or features, in the conversation (Juhila, 2009; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Within discursive psychology, these variations and contradictions are considered products of historical and social specific situations: people use a range of historically and socially designed discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987a; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In social interaction, people can choose to accept or oppose given positions. But as soon as we assume a position, we also assume those pictures, metaphors and so forth that depend on this position. The meaning, for ourselves and for others, in the identities varies depending on where, when and how gendered "labels" are used. We position ourselves and position others by using available language constructions. Similarly, we can experience space and limitations in the identities attributed to us in a particular situation or interaction. Thus, we construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct difficult or troubled, versus comfortable or untroubled positions (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Thus, positioning can be seen as identity constructive, but identity construction as a linguistic product that fluctuates and depends on history, and the given social interaction and context (Korobov, 2013). But even social communication is based on the reproduction of socially shared or taken for granted understandings. By challenging the available position in an argumentation, one can modify the taken for granted positioning, and social change can occur (Billig et al., 1988; Edley, 2001b).

Positioning occurs when an individual linguistically assumes or assigns an identity in a social situation. The identities that can be selected are those available in the given context (culture, time, location, conversation) and linguistically constructed by the local and local use of interpretation repertoires (Davies

and Harré, 1990; Korobov, 2010, 2013; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). At the same time, these constructions imply that we construct what may be credible action options for this identity in the present, present and future; which means that identity construction in the present depends upon the construction of possible identities in the future (Korobov, 2010; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). By varying usage, different positions are constructed around one and the same individual or group (Billig et al., 1988: Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Seymour-Smith et al., 2002). But such variation can also create space for individual or (professional) group flexibility, since comfortable positions can also create space for uncomfortable positions (Juhila, 2009).

Our choice of profession, work or studies tends to operate as an important part of the puzzle when we socially construct who we are, how we fit into society, what we are interested in and prefer in life, and how we explain where we come from, our family background, and what our potential future looks like. The construction of our possible future positions within a profession starts when we choose what to study, years before we actually enter working life (Ibarra, 1999). But how we construct our past can also change due to the study program we choose. People can describe their past and how it led towards a particular choice of studies, but later change the story in multiple ways if they change study choice (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014). Hence, when they enter higher education, students are already beginning to construct their identity for their future working life. Nevertheless, research on study choices often overlooks students own linguistic constructions of their future working life when they begin their studies (Holmegaard et al., 2014; Lair & Wieland, 2012; Pásztor, 2012) and research on study and career counseling rarely uses discourse analysis in general (Stead & Bakker, 2010). However, Xue (2008) claims discursive psychology, more than other perspectives within social constructionism or discourse analysis, can explain the social and cultural construction of gender. Within discursive psychology gender constructions, masculinity and femininity are not seen as representing certain types of men and women, but as subject positions used by men and women in certain social contexts (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Discursive psychology, as a theoretical and methodological approach, can provide insights into how people produce and reproduce social structures (Stead and Bakker, 2010; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

## METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

**Data collection**

During 2012-2013, the first author conducted 25 interviews with first year business administration students at two Swedish business schools. The two sets of interviews were part of a seven-year doctoral project, during which we also selected and analyzed other empirical material on higher education. We based our selection of the business schools on national rankings. The Swedish student organization "The Business Student" (Ekonomistudenten, 2015) publishes a yearly ranking based on admitted student grades, percentage of students obtaining a job within six months of graduating, and initial salary. Stockholm Business School (henceforth *S-University*) ranks first of 25 universities, while Mälardalen University (M-University) ranks 24th. The national university ranking Urank (2015) is based on national statistics on students grades and achievements, teacher qualifications, quality of teaching and research, and students' social background. In total, S-University ranks third of 24 business schools while M-University ranks 19th. However, S-University ranks 24th out of 24 for the heterogeneity of student social backgrounds while M-University ranks first. We selected these two universities for the study based on these national rankings.

At M-University the students were introduced to the planned study by a short presentation at an introductory lecture and on the university website. Those who were interested in participating signed up after the lecture or e-mailed the first author. We selected a random sample of five women and five men, based only on first names to obtain a balance in gender. The interviews were held at the university and all participants received a movie theatre ticket as a token of appreciation.

At S-University, access to the students was more difficult. We were allowed to post a short text on the students' website with a description of the study. We made the same random selection among the students that were willing to participate in the study.

**Data analysis**

Methodologically, the interviews were inspired by life story interviews. Life stories are more unstructured than traditional interviews and take the form of a conversation rather than questions and answers (Riessman, 2008). Life story interviews allow the respondent to organize life events in context. When conducted correctly, the interview takes the form of an autobiography (Atkinson, 1998). In this case, however, the objective was to highlight a shorter part of the respondent's life; when they were choosing what to study and the time after high school graduation. Therefore, the interviewer's role was to help the respondent move forward and back in time to find events that they wanted to describe as affecting their study choices.

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The interviews lasted one to two hours and we transcribed them verbatim. As is common in discursive analysis, to analyze the interview material we read and re-read the transcriptions several times searching for linguistic patterns (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). We conducted the interviews in Swedish and translated the quotes used for this paper into English ourselves. This was followed up by a proof-reader to ensure we captured the essence of the respondents' words.

R. Connell (2010) argues that life stories are particularly appropriate for social analysis, as they reveal trajectories or repertoires through a series of institutions such as family, education, and organizational working life. Through life story interview material, he suggests, we can see the tensions and links between patterns of gendered constructions in the local context. At the same time, these repertoires construct institutions. In the life story material, the students used several repertoires to explain their current and future selves as business people. We selected the life stories of Maya and Susanna since in different ways they contain positioning work that is typical of our interview material and that can be recognized in linguistic patterns throughout the material. We present the interviews as short cases, followed by analysis, discussion, and interpretation of the linguistic constructions made in these cases.

## THE CASE OF MAYA

Maya is a 19-year-old student at M-university. In the first phase of the interview, our conversation was repeatedly interrupted by her receiving text messages on her phone that she just had to read and answer. Maya comes from a small town not far from M-university, so she still lives with her parents.

She discovered business studies when her older brother took the same subject and later on started working for the Swedish Tax authorities. With few other academics in her family, role models are scarce and Maya explained that her brother's job seemed flexible. She liked that, and thought that business studies might suit her too. When I again asked her why, she laughed and said that she likes handling money.

> Interviewer: What´s the thing with money?
>
> Maya: The funny thing, in the family, I'm the one that takes care of bills and transferring money and deals, you know, with all the bank numbers and social security numbers (laughs).

This positioning of herself as someone that likes to handle money, opened her story of a study choice that began to develop earlier in her life. She went back in her family history. Her parents came to Sweden as refugees the year before Maya was born. Her father struggled for years to get a job to be able to provide for his family. Maya's mother only went to school for a few years in her home country. Because of her lack of

schooling, Maya's mother cannot read or write, and has found it hard to learn Swedish. She never got a job in Sweden, and remained a housewife. With a hardworking father and a mother without language skills, Maya had to take responsibility for the family's relations with society.

When she spoke about her mother, Maya seemed more emotionally engaged. Her parents were poor throughout her childhood, but her mother made the household work and the family always had food on the table.

> Maya: She [the mother] says this money should go here, that should go there and this is for saving. And she knows where things are cheap, where they are expensive, where I can go shopping where I can do this, rather efficient. I am fascinated because she can´t read or write, she is often ill as well, so it is funny that at the same time, sure, the refrigerator is full of food, but at the same time, she manages to save a lot of money. It is totally incredible.

Maya started her story about constructing her study choice by describing a male role model. Her brother did similar studies and she positioned herself in relation to his working life. Since he seems to have a flexible job, and Maya claims to like flexibility, her study choice was a good fit for her. UNICEF (1999) describes how one reason for young women's lack of aggressiveness in the academic sector could be the lack of positive female role models in society and working life. However, later on in Maya's story another role model appeared. She positioned her mother in terms of traditional bookkeeping and as the leader of the household. Maya's positioning work in her story is constructed in relation to her mother more than in relation to her brother. Female students often described their mother and other female relatives vividly during their interviews. However, they did not construct them as role models for their working life, but as efficient leaders in domestic life. In relation to the working lives of their mother or other female relatives, several of the female students (and some of the male students) constructed their study choice as a way to *avoid* exclusion from working life or hard labor in traditional female jobs (such as nursing).

When I ask Maya about how she sees her future, she changed her story again. In fact, she has always been interested in fashion. She loves fashion and it is her dream to work in the fashion industry. But at the same time, working in fashion scares her. She pictures an industry where everyone has to be creative and in control all the time to be able to make a living. Instead, she explained, she might work in accounting for a fashion company, which would still be in her area of interest, but a more secure job. Then she stated that she would probably work in a bank. She thought that would be boring, but that she would probably end up there

anyway. Or she could start her own business and be her own boss. She could work practically anywhere.

When discussing her possible future roles on the labor market, Maya positioned herself as a future mother

and described the dilemma of working life and motherhood:

> Maya: I don´t want to miss out on anything, like, I want to do everything, I want to study, get a good
> job, have a family, travel. I want to do everything. Kind of like that, all in one. At the same time, I want
> a family. Children and everything. But at the same time I want a good working life. So I can, I just don´t
> want to, I couldn´t just sit at home and take care of the children. […] I have to do something to pass the
> time. Something to make me feel valuable, kind of. So I could never. Like my sister, she is at home with
> her kids and doesn't think like that. She has her daughter now. Takes care of the family. Sure, that's fun,
> but when my kid is one or two I would like to think that I could go back to work.

When discussing the challenges in her future working life, joining the labor market does not seem an

issue, as she says she could work practically anywhere. Instead, Maya positions herself as a future working

mother. She says that she does not "want to miss out on anything," anything being either working life or

motherhood. The choice to study business is through the material constructed as a future working life that

makes both career and motherhood possible. Maya then says that she needs to do "something to make me

feel valuable." Traditional feminine values, might relate being valuable to motherhood, however this is not

how Maya positions it. Traditional masculine values might relate being valuable to a career and a good

salary. But this is not how Maya positions it either. Instead, she describes being valuable as being part of a

team, sharing, recognizing and being recognized by one's peers or coworkers. Maya states that a good job in

business is where you have colleagues that miss you when you are not there. Being valuable is being part of

a group or a team with colleagues with whom you share ups and downs and work closely. With colleagues,

you don´t have to be an expert in everything yourself, and you share equal responsibility for both success

and failure.

When we reached the end of the interview, I asked Maya to picture her future working role for me. In

Swedish, the word for businessperson is gender neutral (företagsekonom). However, Maya positions the

businessperson as masculine, but immediately repositions herself in a feminine position:

> Interviewer: Can you picture a businessperson? Could you describe a businessperson to me?
> Maya: At least the clothes I know are typical. A suit and all that. I don´t like that. I want, typical girl,
> want to dress in a skirt. High skirt, white shirt and a jacket. Ponytail and like glasses (laughs).

Even if one resists a position, one reproduces that position as taken for granted (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). When positioning the businessperson as a man in a suit, Maya reproduces the forgiventaken power structure between men and women in business, constructing a dilemma of being both alike and different (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988 ). By *using* the forgiventaken she reproduces it, but by *resisting* the forgiventaken, she highlights the dilemma between the forgiventaken and the desirable (Wieslander, 2015).

Wrapping up the interview, we talked about business in general. With regard to her choice of studies, Maya concludes:

> Maya: Business … everything is business to me, kind of.
>
> Interviewer: In what way is everything business?
>
> Maya: Kind of it affects everyone. Like in a recession. What happens then? It is kind of, a lot of people get affected by that. A lot of people get affected. So it´s kind of, you, it has its power. That's how it is.

In this last section, Maya uses the word "power" to explain business, this power affects "people". Being part of the world of business she herself will affect people, taking an active part in this power. In Maya's story, business is constructed as a collective rather than individual field.

## THE CASE OF SUSANNA

Susanna was 21 years old at the time of the interview. She comes from a small city in the south of Sweden, where she grew up with her mother who is a vet. Her parents divorced when she was a small girl and since then her father has been absent from Susanna's life.

Susanna obtained excellent grades at school, and after spending a gap year abroad, she decided to study to become a medical doctor. She was accepted by several universities, and she started her studies at one of the most prestigious medical schools in Sweden. However, she didn´t enjoy the work or get on with her classmates. At this point in her life she was in an identity crisis, questioning herself and who she was. She went back to high school where she took a class in entrepreneurship. She remembers this as an interesting, useful, solution-focused class. Despite negative reactions from her friends and family, she decided to drop out of medical school and apply for S-university.

> Susanna: I had not thought about S-university before. I guess I had some preconceptions that you had to have a certain background and parents with prestigious jobs and eh … clothes and that there would be social pressure on how to look. […] And then I thought I didn't fit, but I did some research and it is still the best-ranked business school in Sweden and, you know, I have the grades.

In this quote, Susanna uses the stereotypical picture of the businessperson as being from a certain background or social class and a certain type of clothes and look. She positions herself as different from this stereotype. She does not have the right background or the right looks, but she has the grades. In the middle of the interview, we discussed Susanna's possible future. She explained:

> Susanna: By forty, I would like to be in a position with responsibility. Not necessarily as a boss or something like that but a project leader in some way, to get training in leadership and human resources and organization. I want challenges in my work and problems to solve. Well, challenge goes hand-in-hand with that. I hope that I will be good at what I do. And you hope that you will be responsible and appreciated in some way and able to make a difference. I would really like to work to make a difference for humankind. Well, it's the same reason as with medicine, I want a job where I make a difference. To do good and not just help banks make more money or more bonuses but actually…

> Interviewer: What is making a difference? What does that mean?

> Susanna: A job where I can say that this group of people in one way or another is better off. Where I can say that I make a concrete difference to improve the lot of animals or nature or humans. Where we use resources better or more efficiently. Making the world better. […] And that does not go hand-in-hand with becoming an investment banker, not with my view on investment banking. So that´s why that is not for me. […] I´m not after a job where I will make a lot of money. It´s not the important thing for me.

Asked if anything else would happen by her forties, Susanna explained:

> Susanna: I hope I have a family that I have time for. Work will always be important for me because I think, I hope that I will like working when I am forty, that work will be fun. […] But, um, family must also be important, or for me it is because I have the experience of being an only child and having a father who never cared, or at least never showed he cared, and I don´t want my children to experience that.

In this quote, Susanna starts again with the stereotype of the businessperson: the boss. And she continues with other stereotypical business roles and drivers: being an investment banker, making money for banks and for oneself. Again, she positions herself as different from the stereotype. This way of positioning herself can be explained as putting herself in a comfortable position and thus avoiding a socially uncomfortable position (Juhila, 2009; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The uncomfortable position for Susanna would be to be seen as a greedy investment banker. The comfortable position is to position herself as valuing ethical and sustainable development for humans, animals, and nature. She uses her former identity as a possible

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medical doctor to support this position as a possibility in her future professional identity. The repositioning of the self as different from the stereotypical businessperson in terms of ethics and the desire to do good is a linguistic pattern that crisscrosses several of the interviews with both female and male students. With variations, this positioning follows the pattern of both recognizing and opposing vertical careers and making a lot of money. At the same time as it positions the businessperson as the stereotype, it repositions the student.

Susanna went back to discussing her possible future work in terms of achievements and problem solving. When I asked her about her greatest fears for her midlife, she explained that it would be bringing up her children on her own, but reasoning with herself, she comes to the conclusion that she could manage that as well. If she had to bring up her children on her own, she would manage. With the study program she has chosen, she will be able to work flexible hours or run her own company if needed. As we have also seen with Maya, career and motherhood is a repertoire that is repeated in the material. Using this repertoire, business studies are justified as enabling one to support one's children independently and combine a career and domestic responsibilities. Throughout the material, business studies seem to be a better fit in terms of motherhood than traditional female professions such as nursing that involves shiftwork at the weekend, at night, and on public holidays. Coming to her old age, I asked Susanna to look back on her life from the age of eighty:

> Susanna: I hope that I have time to see my grandchildren and that I can afford to spoil them. […] To have someone to share with, nostalgia, all that that you have time for when you are eighty and have a lot of time. I don´t have much fear now either.

In this quote, Susanna again draws on stereotypical features of the businessperson: not enough time and plenty of money. This she justifies in relation to coming generations: she hopes to have time to see her grandchildren and that she will be able to spoil them. As long as she has someone by her side (which is by no means certain), she has no fear of her future. Closing the interview, we asked Susanna to describe a businessperson to us.

> Susanna: When I applied for this school, I pictured a shirt and tie, kind of a suit. Now, I think anyone can be a businessperson. If you are driven and ambitious and interested above all. I like that because, as I said, I had some preconceptions about S-University. But when you go through the gates, you see everything from suits to sweatpants. […] It is as broad as you wish, and I kind of, I feel that, my God, I

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fit in excellently because there are five like me and five other types […] you really fit in as you are because everyone here is really, really different.

Again, Susanna reproduces the businessperson in a suit as a traditional masculine look. But then, she contrasts this stereotype with "my God I fit in excellently". In the quote, Susanna explicitly uses the word "different": "everyone here is really, really different".

Throughout the interview, Susanna's absent father was present in her descriptions of her life choices. But at the end of the interview, she instead insists on the importance of her mother's support. As her mother is a vet, I ask her to compare her mother's choice of profession with her own:

Susanna: Businesspeople don´t work with living animals […] well, they don´t work healing animals, but healing companies. No, I don´t know, but actually, the difference is the animals, you might say.

This last quote positions the businessperson as a caretaker or physician who has the skills to take care of and heal companies.

## DISCUSSION

Maya and Susanna's accounts can be understood as young women's naïve stories. They are too young to have a great deal of experience of life. But the construction of these young students' life stories must also be understood in relation to the common understanding of business as a study choice that involves preconceptions of extroversion and (male) dominance (Shahzad et al., 2013), and is based on values of money and career success (G. Blackburn, 2011; Easterlin, 1995; Geyfman et al., 2016; Hilmer & Hilmer, 2012; Laswad & Tan, 2014; Li et al., 2014; Malgwi et al., 2005). Business studies are built on the hegemonic perception of business masculinity (R. Connell, 2010). In the cases of Maya and Susanna, we see how these young women reproduce business masculinity through constructing suits, long working hours and money as taken for granted. However, they are not positioning themselves as passive participants, they challenge and oppose what is taken for granted and thereby construct new roles and new understandings of their future roles as businesspeople.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity presumes the subordination of the other, non-hegemonic masculinities and femininities (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). One way to understand these young women's stories is as constructions of labor market underdogs. Adapting to masculine gendered areas is not just about symbolism, but also about social, political and/or economic privileges (Edley, 2001b). These privileges are at stake for these young women entering business education. Even if university business

studies in Sweden are headcount gender neutral, segregation takes place in the labor market after graduation, where male business students are likely to obtain more senior positions in the private sector, and female business students midlevel positions in the public sector (Beck, 2013). Furthermore, university business is one of the higher education disciplines leading to the biggest income differences between men and women (Beck, 2013; SACO, 2016). Instead of reducing, gender gaps have gradually increased in recent years among young Swedish business managers (Tuvhag, 2013). Female finance managers earn 70% of the salary of male financial managers, which is described by Statistics Sweden (2016) as an "unexplained pay gap." It cannot be fully explained by different sectors, different parts of the labor market or different education and working hours. The active positioning of young female business students as other than the stereotypical businessperson does have consequences.

However, young professionals adapt to future working roles long before they enter working life, and the construct they bring into their future professions has the power to reconstruct or adjust the profession. Professions do not only develop from seniors to juniors, but also vice versa (Ibarra, 1999). Gender relations can change due to women resisting patriarchal structures and men shouldering alternate masculinities (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Men's and women's lives have been created throughout history in opposition to one another. Therefore gender must be understood as a historical construct, and hence femininity and masculinity gain from being analyzed in tandem (Aberi, 2011). Discussing women's relational work of masculinity emphasizes gender as relational and in constant flux (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

> The contestation is real, and gender theory does not predict which will prevail – the process is historically open. Accordingly, hegemony may fail. The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not rely on a theory of social reproduction. (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 853)

Gendered discourses construct meanings of femininity and masculinity based on history. As such, men and women both shape and are shaped by gendered beliefs, practices and institutions (Liddington, 2011). Edley (2001a) describes how gender identities remain fluid and can adapt to change in particular social settings.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity as a pattern of practice is debated and criticized in the field of discursive psychology (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In the same way, we must be open to new ways of understanding gender constructions, both masculine and feminine, as in constant flux. Patterns of gender

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constructs vary due to context, including class and generation. Also, due to the inherent dichotomization of gender, constructs of masculinity depends on constructs of femininity and vice versa, and therefore need to be studied and discussed together as relational. R. W. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that the field of hegemonic masculinity has come to miss out of constructions of femininity, and claim that studies on masculinity needs discussions on femininity to unveil the asymmetrical positioning of gender — but also the possibilities of change.

Gender identities are negotiated in certain social contexts, and this negotiation involves the operation of power (Edley, 2001b). However, masculinity can be described as a struggle or a constant negotiation, where new forms of masculinity might displace old ones (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). With the roots of language being in social constructionism, discursive psychologists claim that it not only describes, but also constructs the world, and therefore language holds real consequences. Through constant negotiations together, we modify our opinion of which arguments hold the truth (Potter, 1996/2004; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Using this argument, we can analyze the alternate future businessperson that Maya and Susanna construct. Their possible future constructions of work and life positions retains the traditional values of efficient use of limited resources, but they also hold values of work-family balance and responsibility towards current and future generations[1]. Maya and Susanna view the future businessperson as having a high skirt, sweatpants, ponytail or glasses, as broad as you wish, and really, really different. They see the businessperson of the future as missed when absent, as a team member among equals, and as a healer of companies with the power to do good for society.

However, Maya and Susanna's stories may be less important as stories of young women reconstructing the businessperson, but should rather be highlighted as constructions of new positions for the businessperson? The linguistic constructions that challenge business masculinity in these life stories hold the power to modify business education. R. Connell (2010) claims that through life histories we can understand how the contractions of labor processes are possible. Instead of analyzing how these women adapt to business masculinity, we should analyze how they adapt business to themselves, and their experience and values. If business as an academic subject and we as university teachers hold on to the stereotypical picture of the drivers of business and businesspeople, these students are likely to drop out of their studies, and the

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[1] Can be compared to the work of WCED (1987) *"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."*

drivers for change will disappear. As women today comprise half of the business students in Scandinavia, they have the power to bring emancipation. Because what if these young women (and men), through their expectations, can change the business construct as we know it? By listening to these young students and living up to their expectations, the negotiation of business administration as an academic subject must contain the values of equality, work-family balance, permanent responsibility towards current and future generations, and skirts, sweatpants and ponytails as truthful pictures of the businessperson of the future. What if hegemonic business masculinity needs to change from the outset — when the student chooses to study business.

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