

# Making a case for gender-inclusive innovation through the concept of creative imitation

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Through creative imitation, this article aims to make the case for a more inclusive view on innovation related to gender. In entrepreneurship theory, innovation is usually associated with creativity as something extraordinary, followed by generalisations of how innovation is brought about, which are based upon dichotomies that lead to exclusion of those who are expected to innovate. Innovation policy tends to associate innovation with industrial, large-scale product development, to the neglect of other types of innovations. Therefore, policy and research both tend to disregard certain innovations that are pursued by certain actors in certain areas. In particular, women entrepreneurs are neglected, as are innovations within women-dominated industries. This marginalisation is, arguably, related to how innovation is conceptualised, which this article will scrutinise by means of gender theory and narrative theory. The article highlights the example of a businesswoman who has pursued innovation in the area of wedding arrangements, which represents one of the categories that have been marginalised in research and policy on innovation. The woman's story of one of her innovations is analysed based upon data collected at dialogue seminars. This illustrates how innovation – when regarded as a mediation between creativity and imitation – appears to be both extraordinary and everyday, as well as tied to the context in which it appears. This serves to bridge dichotomies and end up with an inclusive approach in terms of who is expected to innovate, where, and what. In so doing, this article challenges common assumptions regarding innovation and offers an original interpretation of how innovation is associated to imitation and gendered relations.

Keywords: *innovation; gender; creativity; imitation; mimesis*

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This article seeks to make the case for a more inclusive view on innovation related to gender, by means of the concept of creative imitation. Entrepreneurship theory tends to associate innovation with creativity as something extraordinary. This is followed by generalisations regarding how innovation is brought about, based upon dichotomies that lead to the exclusion of who exactly is expected to do the innovating. Innovation policy tends to associate innovation with large-scale industrial product development to the exclusion of other types of innovations. Consequently, policy and research both tend to disregard certain innovations that certain actors in certain areas pursue. In particular, women entrepreneurs and innovations within industries that employ the most women (primarily services and creative industries) have been neglected. It could be argued that this marginalisation is related to how innovation is conceptualised; this article will

scrutinise such an argument by means of gender theory and narrative theory. The article analyses an empirical case of a businesswoman whose innovation was to organise weddings in a mine. By representing those categories that have been marginalised in research and policy on innovation, this woman's example makes it possible to discern the gender-based exclusion of the imitative and everyday aspects of innovation.

The purpose of this article is to analyse innovation as something that emanates from creativity and from the routines of everyday practice – in other words, as consisting of 'creative imitation' – and how this is related to innovators' experiences of being categorised and received on the basis of certain gender constructions. The main research question relates to the type of new knowledge is provided by the empirical example of a businesswoman who trades in wedding arrangements in terms of how the dichotomies of creativity/imitation,

men/women, and masculinity/femininity can be blurred and thus challenged. Based on an analysis of this woman's story, enlightened by narrative and gender theories, the article will outline the chain of exclusion that marginalises certain actors, areas, and innovations in policy and research. Simultaneously, the paper will describe the chain of inclusion, bridging the gap between dichotomies produced within policy programmes and research studies. In so doing, the paper proposes a more inclusive approach to innovation that might be employed in policy and research in order to attain a more socially and economically sustainable development.

A great part of policy and research on innovation is characterised by an emphasis on men's contribution to innovation, as well as on envisioned 'masculine' areas of innovation (Blake & Hanson, 2005; Lindberg, 2009, 2010; Pettersson, 2007). Blake and Hanson (2005, p. 682) argued that 'economic sectors which are predominantly peopled by men in terms of ownership and employment are the ones that fall comfortably within [the] dominant definitions of innovation.' Blake and Hanson went on to describe how innovation has been presented as being closely intertwined with new technology. The fact that the notion of technology is often interpreted as masculine has caused innovation to have the same connotation (Hacker, 1989). This prioritisation of men and (certain) masculinities within research and policy on innovation is founded upon a dichotomy that separates the categories of 'men' and 'masculinity' from the categories of 'women' and 'femininity'; the former are regarded as crucial to innovation, while the latter are not. This kind of dichotomisation of gender has been questioned within gender theory for a long time (Gunnarsson, Andersson, Vänje Rosell, Lehto, & Salminen-Karlsson, 2003). Thus, innovation has been conceptualised in such a way that women and depicted 'feminine' areas of innovation have remained relatively unnoticed.

Existing theories and discourses on innovation tend to focus on the creative part of innovative processes. However, other research has claimed that innovation is actually characterised by 'creative imitation,' which relates to how seemingly new ideas are often based on innovative modification of existing ideas (Drucker, 1986). Anokhin, Wincent, and Autio (2011) similarly argue that arbitrage opportunities constitute a possibly more important aspect of the entrepreneurial process than innovative opportunities. However, arbitrage opportunities, created by imitator-arbitrageurs, tend to be neglected by research practice partly due to lack of accepted proxies for measurement (Anokhin et al., 2011). Therefore innovation rooted in imitation has been disregarded, while innovation has remained a concept referring to the creation of innovation opportunities. Radical versus incremental innovation are concepts that also serve to separate two classes of innovation. The former view is exclusive in terms

of who can be an innovator, while the latter is inclusive. As proposed by Steyaert and Katz (2005), there is an 'everydayness' about entrepreneurship that needs to be reclaimed. The 'everyday' view on innovation is potentially inclusive; it is founded on an assumption that all human beings enact a basic social responsiveness (Asplund, 1987), which leads to a spontaneous capacity for innovation. The present article seeks to illustrate this inclusive view on innovation by interpreting the story of a particular innovating businesswoman as an example of innovation as an everyday phenomenon. This view of innovation deviates from the deep-rooted conceptual figures of creativity and gender that greatly influence what is regarded as 'real' innovation in Western society.

The article is structured as follows. The following second section provides a literature review that accounts for the treatment of innovation with regard to creativity and gender based upon dichotomies. The review suggests an alternative way of conceptualising innovation by mediating between the dichotomies of creativity and imitation. The third section outlines the research design, depicting the context of the study as well as the action research methodology used. The fourth section presents the case study of the innovative businesswoman, followed by a discussion of how her story can be interpreted by means of gender theory and narrative theory. The fifth section offers some conclusions regarding how innovation emanates from both creativity and the routines of everyday practice and how this is related to certain gender constructions. The chains of exclusion and inclusion are outlined, providing implications for how research and policy on innovation could be developed in order to promote innovation in a more sustainable manner. Finally policy implications are discussed in the concluding section.

## Literature review

### *On dichotomies*

Like all forms of knowledge, everything that is 'known' about innovation and its value to society can be questioned on the grounds of underlying assumptions and the discourses that guide our thinking and provide explanatory categories. The role of dichotomies has become a central issue in contemporary epistemological and ontological debates (Miegel & Schoug, 1998). The word 'dichotomy' means 'a division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different' (Oxford Dictionary on-line, 2011); it can be seen as a dualism that organises how we think. Basically, a dichotomy presupposes a belief in the existence of two opposite principles in all things; such as, all things are either good or evil. In this way, dichotomies serve hierarchical purposes by defining what is normal and what is deviating, what is included and what is

excluded. Classifying things into separate categories is a way of structuring 'reality.' Dichotomised thinking is built upon emphasising differences between categories and seldom includes similarities between, or differences within, these categories (Rosenberg, 2002). This will necessarily lead to one part being privileged at the expense of the other.

The French linguist Jacques Derrida (1981) underlined that such oppositions do not harmonically exclude or complement each other. Instead, this relation presupposes a hierarchy between the two; this is what Derrida refers to as a dichotomy. Derrida (1991) sought to deconstruct and demystify such central and supposedly natural polarities as speech/text, surface/depth, norm/deviation, and man/woman. Derrida regarded these dichotomies as nothing more than conventions that, above all, serve to discriminate; they are powerful tools used to preserve dominating structures. While Derrida can be characterised as a deconstructionist, Paul Ricoeur (1984), despite sharing Derrida's strong reaction against one-sided reductions, was much more of a mediator. Ricoeur's thoughts will be examined more closely later on, but focus now shifts to the creativity/imitation dichotomy.

### *Innovation – rooted in creativity*

The *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research* is as the title conveys oriented towards entrepreneurial behaviour and has innovations as one of its core topics. This journal is therefore suitable to mirror how innovation as entrepreneurial behaviour has been conceptualised in contemporary entrepreneurship theory. A review of articles published between 1996 and 2006 reveals a largely dichotomous treatment of imitation and creativity. Innovation is rooted in creativity, and imitation has in most of the articles not been mentioned at all. A word-count function was used to identify 17 articles that included at least one of the search terms 'innovation,' 'creativity,' 'creative,' or 'imitation.' Fourteen of these 17 articles were examined more closely and are listed in Table 1. Four articles on innovation did not mention either creativity or imitation, which suggests that innovation as a term was used without discussing creativity or imitation. Innovation in these articles is used, for example, as 'preference for innovation,' a psychological attribute of the small and medium enterprise (SME) owner (Watson & Newby, 2005). The majority of the articles linked innovation to creativity, while only three articles linked innovation to both creativity and imitation. This indicates that when the content of innovation is discussed, it is mostly linked to creativity and not to imitation.

Two articles by Yu (1999, 2001) emphasise and link imitation to innovation; these two articles referred also to creativity. Yu referred to imitation as a strategy, following

the path paved by Drucker (1986). As a strategy, innovation can be described as being based on incremental or radical innovation. The concepts of 'incremental' and 'radical' represent a dichotomy criticised by Bilton (2007).

One of the articles mentions imitation once. Lowe (1995) points towards the argument that the present article has tried to develop. Lowe argued that previous studies have researched innovation being over-reliant on deductive methodologies while more inductive case studies are needed in order to more deeply understand what people actually do when they are innovating. Lowe used the term 'creative imitation' to describe innovation as a social process (see also Kurtz, 2003). While strategy is associated with choice and leadership, the present paper borrows Lowe's expression, arguing that Yu 'does not come close to what people actually do when they innovate.'

Imitation, as used by Yu and ignored by all of the other articles in Table 1 except Lowe's, signifies a simple and non-complex behaviour, which has led it to become less important to the understanding of innovation. This seems to be an effect of dichotomous thinking, which has created the need for a perspective that bridges the gap between imitation and creativity. While established textbooks on entrepreneurship discuss the importance of creativity and innovation, they do not problematise imitation (Kuratko & Hodgetts, 1998). Even Lowe (1995) did not discuss imitation conceptually. Innovation textbooks have a lot to tell about creativity but not about imitation as behaviour. Thus, there appears to be a strong theoretical bias in entrepreneurship studies towards assuming creativity to be at 'the heart of entrepreneurship' (cf. Stevenson & Gumbert, 1985), while imitation is not. On the contrary, Ricoeur's (1984) argument means that imitation is at the heart of human action; this will be discussed in more depth after discussing the gender aspect of innovation.

### *Gender theory critique of innovation as rooted in men and masculinity*

Dichotomies within innovation policy and research imply gendered aspects in terms of how innovation is understood to be conducted in practice. This can be derived to innovation policy and research as being rooted in men and certain hegemonic masculinities. The background of this statement is outlined here. As noted by Blake and Hanson (2005, p. 682):

Clearly, the contemporary concept of innovation has been constructed to refer to certain kinds of economic activity (largely those associated with certain kinds of technology) and to exclude other sorts of economic activity. Importantly, those economic sectors that are predominantly peopled by men in terms of ownership and employment are the ones that fall comfortably within these dominant definitions of innovation.

**Table 1.** Number of times the words ‘innovation,’ ‘creativity,’ and ‘imitation’ appear in selected texts in the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*

Source	Innovation	Creativity or creative	Imitation
Gray (2006)	60	2	0
Watson and Newby (2005)	9	0	0
Zhao (2005)	200	9	0
Martin and Wright (2005)	11	0	0
McAdam, McConvery, and Armstrong (2004)	140	20	0
Walton (2003)	8	268	0
Kickul and Walters (2002)	43	1	0
Engelen (2002)	75	3	0
Freel (1999)	35	0	0
Jack and Anderson (1999)	9	6	0
Fontes and Coombs (1996)	16	0	0
Lowe (1995)	71	21	1
Yu (2001)	5	2	6
Yu (1999)	4	1	7

The same pattern has been revealed in a range of scientific studies concerning public promotion of innovation systems and clusters in the Nordic countries (e.g. Kvidal & Ljunggren, 2010; Lindberg, 2009, 2010; Pettersson, 2007). Innovation systems and clusters are two types of innovation-promoting networks that consist of actors from different societal sectors and interact in ways that lead to the development of new, relevant knowledge and to the transformation of this knowledge into innovations useful to society (Benner 2005, Eklund, 2007; Lavén, 2008). These studies expose a priority of basic, manufacturing, and high-tech industries, all of which represent industries that primarily employ men. This has led to the marginalisation of services and creative industries, which mainly employ women. This pattern of inclusion and exclusion is based on segregation and hierarchical notions of gender, constructing men and certain masculinities as being more relevant to innovation and growth than women and certain femininities. The symbolic gender aspects of the public investments in innovation systems and clusters are evident in the predominance of technology-intense industries. Blake and Hanson (2005, p. 683) highlighted the central position ascribed to technology within innovation policy and research as follows:

Although the link between innovation and technology is not a necessary one, in practice current conceptions concerning both process and product innovations in the empirical literature are most often taken to mean some form of technological change – either in a product or in the production of a good or a service.

Hacker (1989) argued that interpretation of the notion of technology as masculine, for example, with reference to

machines rather than to social relations, has rendered the same connotation for innovation. Mellström (2003) later contributed to these findings by revealing how technology constitutes an important part of certain hegemonic masculine identities. With reference to Wajcman (1991), Lindberg (2009) identified two types of masculinities that are linked to technology and innovation. One type emphasises physical strength and mechanical skills, while the other stresses professional and calculating rationality attributed to technological experts. The first type is most evident in basic and manufacturing industries and the second type in high-tech industries. According to Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1987) and Connell (2005), these two types of masculinities can be regarded as hegemonic, in that they are ascribed a predominant and normative role in society. Clearly, innovation has been constructed as a concept and phenomenon associated with men and certain masculinities, including industries that mainly employ men and are based on technology linked to two specific types of masculinity.

Nyberg (2002) offered an illustration of inclusion and exclusion based on technology that can also be employed rewardingly in the area of innovation. Her model exposed how certain areas of technology, when combined with certain actors, are made visible in discussions on technology and innovation at the expense of other areas and actors. Those areas of technology/innovation associated with masculinity are the ones that are primarily being recognised as technological or innovative. However, this mechanism does not work equally for men and women. Men who are active in depicted masculine areas of technology/innovation are more readily being recognised as innovators than women are, not least because of the limited number of women who are active within



these areas. However, men who are active within areas of technology/innovation that are *not* recognised as technological or innovative remain unattended, probably because of the limited importance ascribed to these areas within innovation policy and research (see Fig. 1).

Since innovation is often defined in terms of technological change (Blake & Hanson, 2005), Nyberg's figure offers a basis for analyses of innovation highlighting the interconnectedness between innovation and technology as well as constituting a fitting logic of mechanisms of how gender and innovation are mutually constructed. Nyberg presented two interconnected mechanisms that are discernable within policy and research on innovation from a gender perspective. The first is the inclusion of men promoting innovation and the second is the inclusion of industries employing primarily men linked to two specific types of masculinity. This pattern is present in both research and policy on innovation. The segregation of actors and areas can be regarded as a process of 'doing gender,' in which gender categories are constructed and different values are ascribed to those in the everyday actions taking place in organisations (Gunnarsson et al., 2003).

The present article explores gender and innovation as being mutually constructed in the everyday interaction of people. The focus on human interaction corresponds to the theoretical stream of 'doing gender' (Acker, 1999; Fenstermaker & West, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Specifically, the article analyses what is referred to here as the 'co-construction of gender and innovation' from the perspective of the actors and areas being excluded in accordance with Fig. 1. This terminology was inspired by the notion of 'co-construction of gender and technology,' described by Faulkner (2000, p. 5). Since the purpose of this article is to analyse innovations as emanating from the routines of everyday practice, it is necessary at this point to briefly recapitulate Ricoeur's threefold mimesis in order to construct a basis from which to view innovation as an everyday phenomenon.

		Areas of technology/innovation	
		feminine	masculine
Actors	women		
	men		<b>Recognized as technology/innovation</b>

Fig. 1. Recognition of technology/innovation (modification of Nyberg, 2002, p. 208).

### Contribution from narrative theory – mediating between dichotomies

So far, the literature review has sought to discuss the dichotomous treatment of innovation with regard to creativity/imitation, women/men, and femininity/masculinity. The review ends by discussing some theoretical suggestions to bridge the gap between these dichotomies. A central thought in Ricoeur's seminal work *Time and Narrative* (1984) is 'emplotment' as an imitation of action. Human beings create meaning for their lives through emplotment, which means that they continually seek to relate actions and episodes to one another in order to create coherence. Coherence is created in 'narratives.' Meaning is applied to what has happened in light of what is happening right now, and to what is aspired in the future. Narratives primarily mirror or imitate action, both in experienced life and imagined life (fantasies about what will happen based upon what has happened). This means that human action, in itself, primarily consists of imitation; Ricoeur is not the only one to emphasise imitation as a basic characteristic of human behaviour. The idea that social life more or less should be equated with imitation is a central theme in Asplund (1987), who drew upon the classical sociologist Gabriel Tarde, this statement is also applicable to innovation. By combining Augustine's *Confessions* (which problematises time) and Aristotle's *Poetics* (which analyses narrative), Ricoeur arrived at a threefold mimesis. Here mimesis<sub>1</sub> refers to how humans have a preunderstanding of action that is expressed in the narrative form as an imitation of action. Every action seeks an explanation. The term mimesis<sub>2</sub> actively creates this explanation by emplotment. The explanation that has been consciously created here is further developed by mimesis<sub>3</sub>, which occurs when we read or listen to our own story in such a way that it forms our actions and provides possibilities to reflect upon them. In this way, narratives are both told and lived. Emplotment can be expected to constitute a central matter in stories of innovation, thereby being enacted by the 'creative imitation' of one's previous experiences. This kind of fusion of creativity and imitation is explored here in relation to the innovative process highlighted in the case study.

Ricoeur raised the issues of connections and relations that are natural and self-evident, yet also difficult to grasp because they are incompatible with a dichotomous way of thinking. Thus, Ricoeur made a radical break with preconceived dichotomies. Where others saw contradicting concepts, Ricoeur saw a relation, a dialectic, a both-and. This view on abandoning dichotomies is recurrent in the works of Blake and Hanson (2005) and Lowe (1995). These studies blurred the division between contextual and everyday aspects of innovation on the one hand and creative elements on the other. Specifically, Blake and Hanson achieved this by focusing on how the location of innovations and innovators affects what is acknowledged

as a valuable innovation in society. Thus, they set out to contextualise what counts as innovation, both geographically and socially. In practice, these two dimensions are visible in local knowledge, social networks, and distribution of capital and information. Norms, rules, expectations, and facilities occurring at a certain place affect the emergence of innovations. Blake and Hanson introduced the 'social identity' of the innovator as a key to legitimacy within a specific institutional setting, determining what kind of support is being offered by society for the realisation of a specific innovation. Specifically, Blake and Hanson highlighted how gender is a relevant factor in such an appraisal, primarily prioritising men as innovators and envisioned masculine areas of innovation. In this manner, they exposed how demand for and supply of innovations are both geographically and socially contextualised.

For the purposes of this article, the thoughts of Blake and Hanson are especially valuable in analyses of innovative processes when it comes to mediating between everyday experiences and knowledge on the one hand and creative thinking on the other. They bridge the gap between imitation and creativity partly by challenging the dichotomies of man/woman and masculinity/femininity. Having exposed how the separation and differentiated valuation of these gender categories is geographically and socially embedded, Blake and Hanson argued that it is quite possible to analyse innovation as occurring among men and women, in 'masculine' and 'feminine' areas, in everyday and extraordinary settings. The empirical example of a businesswoman pursuing innovation in wedding arrangements is especially effective in the present analysis of the relationship between creativity and imitation because the woman represents two categories that have been constructed and excluded from research and policy on innovation: women and depicted feminine areas of innovation. As the analysis will show, this exclusion makes it easier to distinguish the parallel exclusion of the imitative, as well as everyday aspects of innovation.

However, there is a need to modify Blake and Hanson's use of the notion of 'social identity.' This analysis intends to investigate how gender and innovation are co-constructed in a continuous process and an impediment to this aim is the presupposition of women and men as coherent and mutually excluding social identities. Jagose (1996, p. 78) pointed out that identity 'is probably one of the most naturalised cultural categories each of us inhabits' and that 'identity has been reconceptualised as a sustaining and persistent cultural fantasy or myth.' Instead, the present analysis approaches the topic of gender from the angle of how each innovator and her/his innovations are *received* by actors in their surroundings. The answer the innovator is given in terms of the granting or denial of access to information and resources

contributes to the co-construction of gender and innovation.

## Research design

The empirical example that is highlighted here originates from the *Lyftet (The Raise)* project, conducted by Luleå University of Technology in cooperation with School of Business at Mälardalen University, Sweden from 2005 to 2008 ([www.ltu.se/web/projekt/lyftet](http://www.ltu.se/web/projekt/lyftet)). Within this project, the two authors of the present paper along with another pair of researchers closely followed four regional networks. The networks were situated in two different parts of Sweden: northern Norrland (northern Sweden) and Mälardalen (central Sweden). The common feature of the networks was that they all promoted women's entrepreneurship and innovation, and the purpose of *Lyftet* was to make comparisons between their activities and the model of innovation being promoted within Swedish regional growth policy. This feature was motivated as it balanced the focus on large-scale industrial innovations within public policy programmes, to the neglect of innovativeness among women and industries that employ many women. The empirical example was identified within one of the networks involved in the project. The case of the businesswoman highlighted here is typical of the innovative activity being pursued within the four networks, in that it concerns a service innovation within an area that mostly employs women; that is, services and creative industries. This typicality was the reason why this case was chosen to be analysed in detail in the form of a single case study.

The story of the businesswoman was recorded during two dialogue seminars arranged through *Lyftet* in 2006. The recordings were later transcribed into text documents, which constitute the empirical data employed in this article. Additional data was derived from an e-mail conversation between the woman and one of the authors concerning the development of her innovative process since the dialogue seminars. This type of sequential data made it possible to discern the prevalence of mimesis<sub>1</sub>, mimesis<sub>2</sub>, and mimesis<sub>3</sub> in her story. The procedure of arranging dialogue seminars has its roots in Nordic working life science during the 1980s (Lindberg, 2010; Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999). The ambition of such seminars is to involve stakeholders in the production of academic knowledge. Accordingly, the seminars aim to create democratic dialogue among people concerned with a specific research issue, regardless of gender or organisational position. Symmetry and reciprocity prevail in the conversations between the participants. Dialogue seminars often begin by outlining the participants' visions on a specific area, followed by a discussion about the state of the problem and appropriate measures to solve it. Finally, action plans are created in order to realise the suggested solutions (Johansson & Lindhult,

2008). Two types of group formations are used at the dialogue seminars arranged within working life science. These are homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. The former group involves participants from the same organisational level, while the latter comprises participants from different organisational levels and types of work (Bjerlöv & Garibaldo, 2006).

The dialogue seminars arranged in the project shared most of the values and approaches of the working life science type of dialogue seminars. The ambition was to create a dialogue among the participants, as well as between the participants and ourselves as researchers, in a way that acknowledged everybody's experiences. The first seminar encouraged participants to share the visions of their work efforts in brainstorming sessions, discussions, and drawings. The second seminar involved a discussion that related their activities to regional growth policy and innovation policy. The third seminar initiated the joint development of methods for promoting women's entrepreneurship and innovation, as well as for the creation of less gender-segregated regional growth policies. With regard to group constellation, we chose to work exclusively with homogeneous groups consisting of participants from the same network. The purpose of this was to create a 'free space' for the participants to discuss and express themselves on topics upon which they had rarely been emboldened to reflect elsewhere (cf. Steen Nielsen & Aagaard Nielsen, 2006). The free space provided them with preferential right of interpretation in the descriptions and analysis of their activities. This preferential right of interpretation in policy and theory on innovation has normally been occupied by actors other than these participants. When groups can indulge their social learning 'alone,' power relations that would not otherwise have been pronounced are made visible. In this way, the collection of data through dialogue seminars with homogeneous groups served to identify aspects and visions of innovation that had not been acknowledged in mainstream policy and research. This made it a prerequisite for achieving data that could bridge the dichotomies of creativity/imitation, women/men, and femininity/masculinity that this article has scrutinised.

The choice to collect data via dialogue seminars reveals that the research design of this study has been influenced by an action research approach. Action research is both a scientific methodology and a theory of science (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006). The main feature of action research is that new knowledge is developed jointly by researchers and the people concerned. The data collection thus takes part in a dialogue with stakeholders and the results are validated by both practical and theoretical relevance. Therefore, the area of research and research questions are not exclusively oriented towards academic needs and perceptions. Instead, problems are identified in an interaction between academia and society. The

advantage of the action research approach lies in its capacity to combine a contribution to practical development processes with a critical perspective and long-term development of academic theory. This ability to involve stakeholders and acknowledge their view, in addition to further development of existing theories, makes it possible to discern and analyse those actors and areas that have been neglected in policy and research on innovation.

### *The empirical case – Will you marry me . . . in a mine?*

Couples in the central Swedish region of Västmanland can ask such a question, thanks to the idea of a businesswoman there. This section describes her innovative process as told by the woman herself during the dialogue seminars arranged with the network of which she was a member. The purpose of the network was to promote women entrepreneurship and innovation and the network activities were managed exclusively by women running their own companies. Because they were all business managers themselves, the women could share experiences with each other about how to improve their businesses. They also supported other women who wanted to realise their business ideas by means of counselling, networking, bank companion, innovation workshops, and so on. The businesswoman in question was quite involved in these inspiring and supporting network activities. She was running her own company at the time, concentrating on arranging weddings and other events. Her original business idea was to produce and trade flower arrangements. This was later expanded into providing flower arrangements as part of other events, which she organised together with other local companies. Both her office and her arrangements were located in the countryside where she lived.

The woman's business idea was developed in several steps. It started with her flower-arranging profession, was expanded by her initiative to arrange weddings, and was finally completed by her idea of combining wedding and flower arrangements with a spatial aspect of the enjoyment. The spatial experience is attained by means of arranging weddings in spectacular locations with social history elements, such as at country estates, castles, and the recently added location of a mine (Dialogue Seminar, June 1, 2006). This story of innovation is used as a springboard for a discussion of how the notion and phenomenon of innovation can be understood differently when stripped from its predominant connotations with creativity, men, and masculinity. This different understanding of innovation will provide visible contents of innovation that otherwise tend to remain unseen or undervalued in research, as well as in policy on entrepreneurship and regional development. The innovator's own narrative of the origin and the refinement of her idea is presented here, as told at the dialogue seminars arranged

in *Lyftet*. She started by describing the origins of her trade:

I work with flowers. I started to dry flower arrangements and thereafter it evolved to include fresh flowers, intended for castles and country estates. For five years, I had arranged weddings, primarily in cooperation with a castle. (Dialogue seminar, June 1, 2006)

The idea of arranging some of the weddings in a mine emerged as follows:

I had lived in this neighbourhood for six years ... I had not heard anyone talk about the mine. Then I visited the mine myself and ... read that it was possible to have weddings there. It was very interesting and I was very surprised that not a single person in the neighbourhood thought that it was anything special ... I asked around a bit ... and said: 'This is really cool, don't you realise that?' (Dialogue seminar, September 20, 2006)

In order to realise this idea, the woman started to look for partners:

I was out looking for partners and thought that I might just as well contact those located in the countryside since I live there myself. The mine was located outside the city ... and was one of Sweden's oldest health spas. The director and one of the owners of are also from the capital ... and they thought it was pretty cool with the [idea of] wedding [arrangements]. (Dialogue seminar, September 20, 2006)

However, the woman has not always been received with understanding from her surroundings:

Something that I got to hear when I met new people, at least in the beginning when they didn't know exactly what I was doing for a living and when I didn't work full-time, was: Oh, so you're a housewife? – No, I'm self-employed. – All right, what are you pottering about with, then? Pottering [she laughs]. – Well, I own a company and am now working with flower arrangements at weddings. – So you're a housewife then. Apparently, when you work at home, that makes you a housewife. It's a pity this isn't regarded as entrepreneurship [just because] you're working at home. (Dialogue seminar, June 1, 2006)

The businesswoman also engaged in an e-mail conversation with one of the authors of this article concerning the further development of her trade.

The article now interprets the woman's story using the narrative and gender theories presented earlier.

### *Bridging the dichotomy of creativity/imitation*

As the businesswoman's story reveals, her innovation is geographically embedded in that it relies partly upon the attraction of the cultural history of specific locations

(such as castles and a mine) and partly on the location of her home (from where she runs her company). The triggering factor for her to identify the prospects for this particular innovation seems to have been her everyday experience of trading flower arrangements, as well as the creative combination of various areas of existing local knowledge (flower arrangements, wedding arrangements, and spectacular locations) and of different actors (herself in the role of the coordinator, the mine providing location and the health spa providing accommodation and additional enjoyment to the wedding experience). In this way, her innovative process has combined imitation (her own existing skills and those of others, as well as their everyday experience of their professions and location) and creativity (new combination of existing skills, services, and products), resulting in a new service.

Another feature in the businesswoman's account is the gendered norms concerning working life, as shown in her account of being received as 'a housewife' instead of as the entrepreneur she considers herself to be. Her choice to run her business from home is clearly perceived as being so 'everyday' that it does not count as entrepreneurship (which, in this case, is apparently expected to be an activity pursued outside the home). This indicates that gendered norms and expectations in the local geographical setting may have an impact on how individuals and society receive different innovators. The aspect of social contextualisation is analysed further in the section with conclusions.

Following Ricoeur and the threefold mimesis, the analysis can start with the businesswoman trading in arrangements. The quotations do not provide any explanation of why she was pursuing this trade. As mimesis<sub>1</sub>, it represents a preunderstanding of action, which makes explanations superfluous. One can imagine how she gained her skills: working together with established florists, imitating their behaviour, making good arrangements by observing and imitating the skilled florists. However, it was probably not possible to make her own flower arrangements exactly the same as the skilled florists. It was probably not even possible to make a second arrangement exactly the same as the first. Flowers are not exact copies of one another, which means that there is always a creative element involved; every arrangement must be done differently. Still, the florist seeks to repeat and imitate those arrangements that stand out in his or her memory as being especially beautiful. On the other hand, it can become boring making the same arrangement over and over again and it is not always a good idea to make exactly the same arrangement when another customer puts in an order.

A question was posed at the dialogue seminar as to why the businesswoman started to arrange weddings in a mine. In the quotations, she talks about the emergence of this idea in a way that mediates imitation and creativity.



She was working with flowers, drying them to be specific. One can imagine her doing this over and over again until she started to arrange the flowers in new ways with fresh flowers. She produced arrangements for castles and country estates; that is, a context with a specific character, which allowed for repetition and imitation, doing the same thing over and over again in almost the same way but also with some variation, which required creativity. Then came her idea to arrange weddings in a mine. In her explanation of this stage, the businesswoman emphasised her creativeness. 'Not a single person thought it was special' – except the businesswoman herself, who understood that this was 'really cool.' For many non-florists, this idea appears quite innovative. For the businesswoman, it was also very meaningful in that she created a new way of using her flower arranging skills. Doing the same thing over and over, with both dry and fresh flowers, did not give her the same fulfilment as when she was able to develop a new way of using her skills. In addition, her location in the countryside was obviously another reason for her to join the other entrepreneurs. We believe that they share similar experiences in terms of the challenges posed by geographical distance and the lack of clustered customers. This is an illustration of *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, since the businesswoman actively created an explanation in her story and since the realisation of her idea is not only told but also lived.

From another angle, her idea of wedding arrangements in spectacular locations was not particularly creative. The woman had heard about the mine and happened to visit it once. Because arranging flowers was an everyday activity for her, it was somewhat logical for her to wonder if flowers could be arranged in a mine and, given that flowers are arranged for weddings, whether she could arrange flowers at a wedding in a mine. The natural quest for meaning and variation in daily life helped create this idea. For non-florists, the idea of arranging weddings in a mine may appear odd but, when realised, as quite innovative.

Thus, Ricoeur's threefold *mimesis* helps shed light on what this businesswoman does when she innovates. *Mimesis*<sub>1</sub> focuses on how every action is based on the imitation of others and oneself, while *mimesis*<sub>2</sub> puts forward the intentional act of creativity in terms of both performing intentionally and in new ways, but also creatively forming the plot – the intention to do what appears as creative when performed. Finally, *mimesis*<sub>3</sub> emphasises reflection. The dialogue seminars in themselves constituted an arena for reflection in which the businesswoman could hear herself telling, or in fact retelling, a story she had been living out for some time. Telling her story on this occasion created the possibility of refining and renegotiating earlier versions. This was as much a dialogue with others as it was a dialogue with herself.

The fact that the woman told her story at the dialogue seminars led her to take further action. It is noticeable in her continuous Email contact with one of the authors of this article that the storytelling at the dialogue seminars had strengthened her dedication to arrange weddings with social historical elements. Telling her story also meant that the other participants at the dialogue seminars – her colleagues – would return to her and ask about her further experiences of arranging weddings down in the mine. Each time she retells her story, she will continue to reflect upon and adjust her idea. In this way, the retellings will modify future behaviour, keeping the process of mediating between imitation and creativity alive.

### *Bridging the dichotomies of men/women and femininity/masculinity*

The following analyses the businesswoman's story in the light of prevailing gender theories on innovation, with particular emphasis on social contextualisation. As advocated by Blake and Hanson (2005), the social context is crucial when it comes to furthering innovation in society. Because the present article has adapted their focus on social identities to a more constructivist setting, it will now take a closer look at how the innovative process of the businesswoman might be analysed as received by individuals and society.

One contextual feature is that her innovation was pursued in an area that is largely being received with exclusion by research and policy on innovation. The regional programme for growth, implemented in her region of Västmanland during 2004–2007, highlighted four clusters and innovation systems; these concerned robotics, vehicles, electric power, and metals. These are all industries that employ mostly men and technologies linked to the two types of hegemonic masculinities identified above: one industrial type emphasises physical strength and mechanical skills, while one high-tech type emphasises professional and calculating rationality attributed to technological experts. Services and creative industries such as wedding planning and flower arrangements – which mostly employ women – clearly did not attract much attention in this context of regional growth policy. The innovative process pursued by this businesswoman did not fit the primary focus on industrial and high-tech areas of innovation. However, the regional programme of growth did acknowledge the existence of a sprouting cluster embryo within the area of healthcare and wellness. This could have constituted an opening for a broader spectrum of actors and areas being furthered by the policy programmes in the region.

The empirical example does contest the dichotomies of women/men and femininity/masculinity because it is situated outside the demarcations of innovation policy and entrepreneurship research, thus crossing the boundaries

set up by these dichotomies. To that end, the business woman challenges the man/woman dichotomy simply by being a woman pursuing innovation and entrepreneurship. Her experience of being dismissed as a housewife instead of an entrepreneur distinguishes the mechanisms of this dichotomy. These two conclusions confirm the assumption of this article that dichotomies of innovation are constructed in a process that is intertwined with the construction of gender. In this case, the mutual construction – that is, the co-construction – of gender and innovation seems to have generated inclusion and exclusion of certain actors and areas following a specific pattern of segregation and hierarchical gender constructions, keeping women and men apart and ascribing superiority to male entrepreneurs. The excluded actors, therefore, are represented by female entrepreneurs and certain depicted feminine areas of innovation. The examination implies a deconstruction of the rationality behind the dominant understanding of innovation within policy and research as it is based on certain notions of gender. This makes it possible to challenge the common understanding of how innovation is brought about, without getting bogged down in delimiting dichotomies.

In order to challenge the common understanding of how innovation is brought about, it is crucial to identify how the co-construction of gender and innovation takes place in the specific geographical and social setting. The businesswoman has challenged the dominating dichotomies institutionally, domestically, and socially. Firstly, she is an example of how innovation is affected by the institutional setting in which it takes place. As shown above, access to the resources provided by the regional policy programme were conditioned on the basis of certain gender constructions. Secondly, the businesswoman has exposed the role of the domestic environment in the process of innovation. Innovations are products of a specific time and place that recognise a demand among potential users or customers and exploit local knowledge to fulfil this need, thereby sprouting from the everyday context of the innovator. There is still a general pattern of work division between men and women in the labour market, in which women primarily choose to work in the public or private service sector. There they mainly find their customers and competence at a local market. Correspondingly, their innovations on these areas tend to focus on the specific needs and characteristics of these customers.

Thirdly, the empirical example provides knowledge about how innovation is determined by the social context, embedded in the local setting. This social context can be seen in the reception of the innovator – and of her/his innovations – by individuals and society. The crucial factor seems to be *who* recognises a need among potential users or customers that might be satisfied through innovation. People recognise needs in different ways,

which leads to the invention of different kinds of things. The innovation of wedding planning in spectacular locations would probably not have emerged if not for the businesswoman's specific experiences in the area of flower arranging and as a provider of wedding flowers. In addition, public policy programmes clearly ascribe different values to different novelties, deciding whether it is to be recognised as a valuable innovation. This mechanism of attaching value is closely connected to the symbolic content of artefacts, notions, and actions and, therefore, innovations. Within the social context, gender is present as a structuring force when it comes to social experiences, attachment of value, and interpretation of symbolic content based upon the mechanisms illustrated in Fig. 1.

## Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the empirical case above, this paper agrees with Blake and Hanson's (2005) suggestion that innovation is to be defined contextually, rather than universally, in order to understand how innovation is brought about in practice. Contextualisation furthers a more inclusive perspective of the origin, process, and results of innovation – as an everyday activity pursued by people regardless of their sex, industry, or type of innovation. This inclusive perspective tends to bridge the dichotomies upon which this article has focused: creativity/imitation, women/men, and masculinity/femininity. Correspondingly, an excluding perspective tends to reinforce these dichotomies. The article's analysis has discerned two chains of events – the chain of exclusion and the chain of inclusion – which are shown in Fig. 2.

As claimed at the beginning of this article, the dominant understanding of innovation within policy and research relies upon a biased focus on creativity as the main characteristic of innovation. This turns the activity of innovation into something extraordinary, in that it is assumed to take place somewhere other than everyday life and to be based upon skills other than those utilised on a daily basis. This leads to a generalisation about how innovation is brought about. Innovation is thus defined universally as being pursued by an imagined homogenous group of people (men) in depicted homogenous areas of innovation (industries employing mostly men) and resulting in certain types of innovations (high-tech products). This generalisation, in turn, is based upon dichotomies that distinguishes two categories of people – men and women – in which men are portrayed as innovators and women are not; industries that mostly employ men are depicted as innovative, while industries that mostly employ women are not; extraordinary knowledge and experiences are understood as the basis for innovation, while everyday knowledge and experiences are not. This chain of events, starting with a

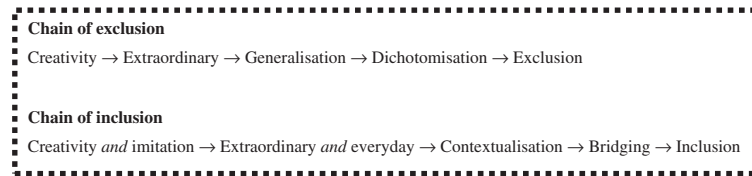


Fig. 2. Chains of exclusion and inclusion.

biased emphasis on creativity, leads to the exclusion of actors and areas in terms of who is expected to innovate, where, and what.

This article has explored the other chain of events, referred to as the chain of inclusion. The analysis of the innovative process conducted by the businesswoman in Västmanland reveals how the acknowledgement of both creativity and imitation as co-existing characters in innovation is linked to an understanding of innovation as being based upon extraordinary skills and experiences, just as much as it is on those used in everyday life. In this way, the study of innovation becomes more contextualised, exposing how the act of innovation and the value ascribed to certain innovators and innovations both vary depending on the geographic and social context. In so doing, this line of thought bridges the gap that has been constructed by a dichotomist view on innovation, ending up in an inclusive approach to actors and areas involved in innovation. An inevitable consequence of such a deconstruction of dichotomies is the shattering of the idea of unified gender categories, such as 'men,' 'women,' 'masculinity,' and 'femininity.' This mosaic is desirable in order to understand how gender and innovation is continually co-produced in social interaction, thereby opening up for an analysis of both structures and agency, both stability and change. Here, the concept of 'structures' is used in the sense of general patterns of action and institutions.

### Policy implications

The policy implication of this conclusion is that it is possible to achieve a more innovative society and economy through a regional development policy that is less exclusive and more inclusive in terms of which actors, areas, and innovations are acknowledged. A policy strategy that excludes potential innovators and innovations is likely to preserve present power relations in a particular region, counteracting changes that are necessary in order to achieve the sustainable growth that the European Union (EU) member states have sought. However, it remains to be determined what the alternatives are. This article is limited to one case study that, regardless of its typicality for all of the networks included in the project, primarily depicts one woman's experiences. Several stories remain to be accounted for in research, providing alternative areas of prioritisation for regional growth policies. It is easy to detect what such programmes *do* acknowledge but harder

to identify what is missing. Thorough social and economical analyses are needed in order to map the prevalence – and potential – of innovation among different actors and industries in Sweden and elsewhere. Such studies ought to be informed by both narrative and gender theories in order to reach beyond limiting dichotomies of creativity/imitation, women/men, and masculinity/femininity.

The question remains as to what exactly this article has added to the existing knowledge about innovation. The point of the article has not been to say something new about creative or imitative behaviour per se. However, it has argued that innovation is associated with a dichotomous understanding of innovation. Innovation has been associated mostly with creativity, men, and masculinity and less with imitation, women, and femininity. The effect is that certain contents and processes of innovation tend to be seen and esteemed, while other contents remain unseen and undervalued. We have argued that innovation can be understood as an everyday phenomenon. If imitation is the most basic characteristic of human social life, then creativity follows as a spontaneous and natural response. This contradicts the dominating view of what should be recognised as innovation and what should not. Where others make differing estimations of types of innovation this article does not when using the glasses of narrative and gender theory. On the other hand, the article makes a distinction between what is recognised and what is not recognised as innovations, thereby indicating the political power dimension involved.

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