



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

I am Swedish, I am a woman

Exploring Swedish women's identity construction

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Abstract

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The subject explored in this research project is Swedish women’s identity construction. The research questions guiding this thesis aimed at investigating what indications of collective patterns in identity construction could be found in a sample of Swedish women, and how these patterns were understood by a sample of participants in the research.

The theoretical approaches included two theories, social constructionism and social representation theory, along with the discussion and definitions of three concepts, identity, gender and narrative studies.

The methods used to investigate the research questions were a word association survey (WAS) for the first research question, and in-depth interviews for the second research question. During the in-depth interviews, participants had access to the results of the WAS. In order to take part in this study, limitations for participants included being a woman, having Swedish as a first language, and being willing and able to participate in the study. There were in total 45 respondents to the WAS and two participants in the in-depth interviews.

The results were analysed using a method inspired by Hovardas & Korfiatis (2006) in their study using a word association survey, and a method developed by Tesch (cited in Maddy et al., 2015) for the narrative analysis of the in-depth interviews.

The discussion assessed the results against the theories and concepts that were part of the theoretical approaches, providing answers to the research questions aforementioned. The answer to the first research question is that participants do hold collective patterns, or social representations, for some of the stimulus words presented in the WAS. The answer to the second research question is that participants in the study understood the results by comparing them to their own perceptions, and checking whether or not they fit in with the results of the WAS. Participants felt that they were part of the social group under analysis.

Keywords: Identity, identity construction, Swedish women, gender, narrative, social representations.

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INTRODUCTION

The subjects of this research project are women. In the worldwide social arena, women still hold a subordinate position in power relations:

‘We all know that the sexual and economic “conditions” still and always hinder the emancipation of women and that the global era that emerges after the dawn of modernity has been molded into various forms of conservatism and archaism.’ (Kristeva and Hackett, 2011, p.142)

The emancipation of women has been a long, complicated journey that is far from completion. At the dawn of the feminist movement in the Western part of the world, women did not realize that the feeling of subordination that they experienced, existed in various forms. These forms of subordination are interlaced with other domains that range from gender and go to class, race, disability, and ethnicity, among others. There are different social divisions that cause women’s subordination to be at different levels depending on the context. This phenomenon is best summarized in the word intersectionality. Intersectionality is a concept that explains the intersection of different societal categories – e.g. gender, age, occupation, etc. – and theories developing the concept of intersectionality study the effects that these categories-knots produce (Yuval-Davis, 2006)

One of the effects of intersectionality is the dilemma on the application of women’s rights, which the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing officially established¹:

‘[...] the most significant barriers to actually achieving the goals set in Beijing were felt to be enduring cultural values, societal norms and religious beliefs that place lower value on the contributions, work, ideas and lives of women and girls; [...] and that the impacts of trade liberalization, globalization and privatization are contradictory and uneven, with disproportionate numbers of women being negatively affected’ (Sreberny, 2001, p. 64)

What women want, and what women can achieve at the present time in different spaces, would not necessarily be the same thing. Hekman (1997) digs sharply into this issue:

[T]here are many realities that women inhabit, how does this affect the status of the truth claims that feminists advance? Second, if we abandon a single axis of analysis, the standpoint of women, and instead try to accommodate the multiple, potentially infinite standpoints of diverse women, do we not also lose the forces of our argument? If we abandon the monolithic concept of "woman," what are the possibilities of a cohesive feminist politics? (Hekman, 1997, p. 349)

What Hekman (ibid) argues is that women occupy different standpoints, in different places and times. Moreover, women hold these standpoints in the same place and at the same time. For instance, during the 1850’s, when white women in the USA were debating women’s

¹ For more information on the topic, see www.unwomen.org

suffrage, black women in the USA were fighting for recognition as human beings. Sojourner Truth's speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Ohio, portrays the condition of black women at that time, contextualizing it with that of contemporary white women:

'That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm. I have plowed (sic), I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain't I a woman?' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004, p. 77)

Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that categories such as gender, race, age and so on, tend to be homogenized. She states that every individual who is part of one of those category has the same needs and expectations as all the others who belong to that same category. When it comes to women, this generalization is often the case (ibid). But not all women are the same, across times and spaces. What are the similarities between women? What are their differences? What is women's identity construction?

An history of feminism and its studies

Identity has always been part of feminist studies, even though its degree of importance and centrality have varied across different feminist movements, or waves (Elliott, 2012). Historically, there have been three feminist waves. The first feminist wave stretches itself from the 19th century to the early 20th. Different fights led by women spread in the Western part of the world, with different aims and characteristics country by country. The common denominator of these women's struggles was equal, human rights for women. The identity theme, in the first Western feminist wave, was characterized by the discussion over women's likeness to or difference from men. The discussion was on going and there was no common agreement on how to handle the matter (ibid).

The second wave of feminism in the Western world – i.e. from 1960s-70s – was focusing on equal rights and opportunities for women, as the first-wave was, but with a closer eye on what being a woman actually means. Gloria Steinem (2015)'s latest book is a must read account of what it meant to be a woman during the 1960s-70s, and how those years have made her the woman she is today. In the 1960s-70s, the feminist movement started to play a central role in the rise of identity studies (Elliott, 2012). The second wave of feminism had three different directions: liberal, Marxist and radical. The three distanced themselves on how they treated identity in relation to women's fights for equality: liberal feminists struggled for removing the barriers causing inequalities between women and men. Marxist feminists concentrated their attention on work related matters, such as class interests and unpaid work at home. Radical feminists were the first to call for a 'thorough re-evaluation of standards, values, assumptions, and identities that they argued were rooted in and supportive of masculine superiority and male domination' (Elliott, 2012, p.31).

The post-second wave of feminism, or third wave of feminism, developed as a critique to the second wave of feminism. The latter was criticized by third-wave feminists for

focusing only on white, middle class and heterosexual women, who were taken as a standard to define what every woman in the world should want or should be (Elliott, 2012). The post second-wave of feminism picked up this assumption, and through criticism, pushed feminist research and identity theories forward. In particular, feminists of this wave argued that women's identity is not one and centred, but multiple and intersected, with common experiences of marginalization and subordination (ibid). Even more, they recognized that women's identities are much different across ethnicities, classes, races, nationalities and sexualities, and in the multiple intersections of these domains (ibid). The second-wave of feminism put forward the importance of women's identities and their diversity, but, in fact, feminist researchers belonging to the subsequent third-wave or post-feminism, argue that the only way to escape the dominant patriarchal discourse is to reject the idea of self or identity (ibid). Why so? Are women doomed with identities that are only in sharp opposition to the patriarchal discourse? And do women have the same identity tendencies, across time and spaces?

Prins (2006) tackles the issue of power and identity with this statement:

According to the constructionist perspective, on the other hand, the processes by which individuals become subjects do not merely involve 'being subjected to', in the sense of being subordinated to a sovereign power or anonymous system. It also implies that the individual is 'becoming a subject', i.e. made into a source of his or her own thinking and acting. Markers of identity such as gender, class or ethnicity are not merely exclusive and limiting forms of categorization, but simultaneously provide narrative and enabling resources (Prins, 2006, p.280)

Feminist researchers sound somehow disconnected in between their assumptions – i.e. women's identity is diverse – and their conclusions – i.e women's salvation from the hegemony lies in the rejection of the self (Elliott, 2012). Beauvoir could have found the answer to this contradiction that feminist researchers generated when saying that 'humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself but in relation to himself: she is not considered an autonomous being' (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 26). If considering what has been said before on the resistance encountered when actualizing women's rights across the world, Beauvoir's remark sounds still up-to-date. It represents the essence of what Millett (1970) describes in *Sexual Politics*: in a world constructed around and by men, women scramble their ways in. As woman is 'mystery for man, woman is regarded as mystery in herself' and 'deciding who she is would be quite awkward for her' (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 318-319). Researching women's identities has great importance. It is part of the process of getting to know each other, to work and develop together in women's research, activism, networking and global awareness.

Aim of the study and research questions

This study will explore patterns in the identity construction of a sample of Swedish women. The assumption that collective constructions of concepts and ideas exist is supported by the social representation theory, which will be described in the following section.

The aim of this research is to explore Swedish women's identity construction from the experiences of a sample of Swedish women themselves. Even though researches in the area of women's identity construction is quite extensive, the topic is often linked and discussed in connection with problems such as normative descriptions (Gavriel-Fried et al., 2015) , or with national identities in relation to occupational roles (Zevallos, 2005)². Also, women's identities have often been mistold and mistaken by the voice and bias of men (Millett, 1970). In this variety of voices and views, the chances for international organizations to find and adapt women's policies across the world are limited, especially if local realities are unknown, thus unplaced in the global arena. Therefore, I aim to explore Swedish women's identity construction as a first step to get to know one local reality. I am studying this topic with the hope that it will spur on research in other local realities, and possibly to spark transnational connections and discussions.

The main research question of this project is:

- What indications of Swedish women's collective patterns in their identity construction can be found in a sample of participants?

The second question is an expansion of the first:

- How are these patterns understood by a sample of participants?

² The sources here cited are just two examples of a vast literature review surrounding those themes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructionism is the overarching theory of this study. This theory is the epistemological point of view of this paper, which limits the definition of three concepts that represent the red-thread of this research project: **identity**, **gender** and **narrative**. Identity, because the aim of this study is to explore identity construction. Gender, because the subjects under analysis are women. Narrative, because it is regarded as the most suitable means for this research to analyse and discuss identity construction.

Social representation theory is the theory that supports the choice of method – i.e. word association survey – for conducting this research on Swedish women’s identity construction.

The theories and concepts aforementioned are the supporting framework for developing the research questions, and analyse and discuss the results.

Social constructionism

Social constructionism overlooks this entire research project. I here propose a quick, but hopefully effective, introduction to this approach. I discuss social constructionism from its origins and as a whole, leaving out internal controversies.

Social constructionism was born from sociology, some thirty years ago, as an attempt to explain the nature of reality:

‘[...]most of what is known and most of the knowing that is done is concerned with trying to make sense of what it is to be human, as opposed to scientific knowledge. Individuals or groups of individuals define this reality.’ (Andrews, 2012)

As its name infers, social constructionism postulates that reality is socially constructed, so knowledge and truth are not two objective realities to be found in the world, but rather the result of social interactions (ibid).

The idea that society makes the world, and that the latter is in an ongoing process of recreation, raises the question of how cultural patterns or routines come to be. Social constructionists argue that even though we as humans are constantly negotiating our reality, we also simultaneously influenced by the reality that we produce and we follow patterns created by ourselves and/or by others (Andrews, 2012). These patterns and routines compose a socially shared store of knowledge that societies, cultures and individuals use to define and describe themselves (ibid).

Social constructionism sees identity as socially constructed. According to its view, first we are given an identity from the ‘significant others’ – i.e. our caregivers – who mediate reality for us. (Andrews, 2012). This mediation of reality and of the collective identity happens through language (ibid). Second, the individual acts on the collective identity that s/he received, and through language s/he reconstructs, modifies, and adds on his/her reality and identity (ibid).

The main critique to the social constructionist approach is that of relativism (Slife and Richardson, 2011). Relativism postulates that every concept, idea or belief is bounded with the life of its creator, so things can be both right and wrong, true and false, etc. depending on the moment in time and space (ibid). The “everything-is-possible” idea born from relativism is potentially dangerous, for instance in matters concerning human rights, as the following quote exemplifies:

‘Most scholars try to avoid relativism because it implies an “anything goes” approach to the world, and thus a kind of nihilism about what is justifiable and what matters’ (Slife and Richardson, 2011, p.335).

Allen partially answers back this criticism with a satirical remark:

‘Prominent scientists, notably the physicist Steven Weinberg, have spoken out against the social construction fad. We are told we can't treat inexorable laws of nature like that. Scientific results are the deepest truths we know, and they hold regardless of society and its constructions. “Any intelligent alien anywhere,” Weinberg says, “would have come upon the same logical system as we have to explain the structure of protons and the nature of supernovae. But how could he know that? If intelligent aliens were as common as blackberries, someone like Weinberg might know what he claims to’ (Allen, 1999).

Relativism is a risk for social constructionism, especially for questions of morality, ethics and democracy. Even so, relativism is a risk only if it is not acknowledged and handled accordingly. As the quote above states, social constructionists do not doubt the truthful discovery and description of phenomena such as protons and supernovae, but rather invite society to rethink the idea of science as producer of objective knowledge *only*, and also the idea of scientists as its truly guardians (Allen, 1999).

Cited in Faragó (2002), Mannheim came up with the concept of relationism to contrast relativism, in order to tackle its critique to the social constructionist approach. Mannheim recognizes that the problem with relativism, and the reason why it does not apply to social constructionism, is that relativism is part of an epistemology that sees individuals alone as explorers of the truths in reality (ibid). Mannheim suggests to look for a new epistemology, one linked to the social constructionist view, which sees truth as inside the social context that produces it (ibid). His definition of relationism is:

‘Relationism signifies merely that all of the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought’ (Faragó, 2002, p.181).

Relationism means that certain things are true only in certain times and places, bounded to the context and living with it.

In this study, social constructionism constitutes the lens through which the core concepts of this paper (identity, gender and narrative) are being observed. Social constructionism, and this research project, see these concepts as in a continuous process of

recreation, so even the definitions that are later provided for each one of them are to be seen as the product of the present context of analysis.

Concepts

Identity

Identity research is a massive, always expanding field. In order to simplify and clarify the analysis of this concept, I have subdivided its discussion in a few topic questions that open up each paragraph. The questions are: *What is the (brief) history of identity? How is identity constructed? And finally, who needs identity?*

What is the (brief) history of identity? There are three main standpoints in identity studies, which respectively claim identity to be first, a project of the self, second, a product of the social, and third, situated in discourse. Identity as a project of the self is rooted, and already discussed during the Enlightenment, when philosophers such as Descartes and Locke debate the importance for individuals of thinking – i.e. cogito – and observing the world as a means for achieving self-awareness and knowledge (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The word identity itself first appears in 1570 to signify oneness, essential and internal. The concept of identity raised in this period as a reaction to and a consequence of the process of secularization, which has marked a rupture between the immanent and the transcendent, the physical and the spiritual (ibid.). The Romantic period added a few specifications to the concept of identity, those being sensibility, self-fulfilment and morality. During the 20th century, Freud and the psychoanalytic movement pushed forward the first challenge for the concept of identity as a project of the self that is the unconscious (ibid.). The doubt instilled by Freud is whether we, as individuals, are aware of our uniqueness, Freud himself arguing for no as an answer. The postmodern-self illustrates the contemporary debate revolving around identity, which is ‘bound up with both challenge and conformity to essentialism’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 21). Essentialism is the belief that every subject and object in the world has an innate essence, fixed and stable over time (ibid.).

The challenge to essentialism is thinking identity as fragmented and contradictory. This way of thinking is partially due to contemporary processes such as globalisation and commodification. Yet in order to cope with uncertainty, individuals often need to restore to their gender identity, national identity or even religious affiliation, in order to gain stability (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). This last point leads to the discussion of identity as collective, rather than a project of the self. Social identity theory (SIT) is one of the theories studying identity as a product of the social, intersubjective, collective and with a social location (ibid.). Examples of collective identities are, among others, middle-class identities, gender identities, and black identities, which are all often intersected with each other. SIT has been criticized for putting forward differences in between collective identity categories, rather than emphasizing the touchpoints that bring those categories together. Also, SIT is not flexible when describing categories and membership processes. This presents an issue that has been partially solved by the introduction of discourse in identity studies (ibid.).

Thinking about identity as situated in discourse means thinking about identity as performativity, using Goffmann’s terminology (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). The concept of

performativity puts forth the idea that there is a set of structures with regulatory power over identity, and society, but that these same structures or discursive practices are produced by individuals' identities and always performed by them. Thus, identity as situated in discourse becomes an ongoing construction made of categories and agency together. Identity constituents, as for instance gender, are part of this non-stop work in progress, therefore challengeable.

How is identity constructed? The debate around how identity is constructed centres around two main opponents: the cognitive tradition and the social constructionist one. The theories derived from the cognitive tradition think about identity as inside the individual, stable, and mainly out of the person's control and awareness (Taylor, 2010). On the other hand, the social constructionist theories and approaches see identity as a reflexively pursued and shaped project, dependent on automatic processes as well as fully aware ones (ibid). The cognitive tradition and the social constructionist tradition picture individuals in two quite antagonistic ways; the first one looks at humans as already made, mainly passive and subjugated to their internal forces that are pre-established mechanisms 'like a clockwork motor in an old-fashioned toy' (ibid). The second tradition argues that humans are always in the process of making themselves, in between the boundaries and resources that are made available by the society they are inserted in (ibid).

Who needs identity? Hall (2000) used this very same question to title a related work in which the author discusses the reasons why studying identity today. Although there is no new ways to conceptualize identity, in Hall (ibid)'s opinion it is relevant to keep investigating identity because identity can no longer be thought about in the outdated way. That is, identity thought of as a unitary, stable and internal constituent, even though for now there is not any new concept to substitute identity with (ibid). Therefore, researchers are concentrating on a re-discovery of identity as an ongoing process that people perform individually, as well as socially (ibid). These premises restated, let us go back to the opening question of this paragraph: who needs identity? There are, at least, two possible answers. First, society needs identities to regulate power distribution and processes. In other words, identity makes it possible for people to recognize some common origins or shared characteristics with other individuals or groups, and so affiliate themselves with (ibid). Hall (ibid) argues that identification is particularly useful for politics. For instance, in processes of migration if there was "no-other", there could potentially be "no-problem" for welcoming and integration. Second, individuals need identity to position themselves into their society and time. The given social identity, determined by identification with one or more groups in the society, is linked and always working with the achieved personal identity, which despite the name is never really finalized (Taylor, 2010).

Identity is also necessary for people in order to recognize who is *the Other* for them, as difference, and not only similarity, is the determinant for identity construction (Hall, 2000). At the same time, one could argue that seeing identity as composed by differences, rather than seeing it as a complexity, is restrictive for its definition. Identity is always in construction, and so are other concepts helping individuals to define their own identities. One of these concepts is *the Other*, who can be outside one's social group, as well as inside. For instance, men and women are all humans, but when it comes to sex, which is part of identity, *the Other* is constituted by women:

‘She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.’ (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 26)

Cited in Hall (2000), Butler explains how sex is used for differentiation and power normativity in our contemporary society. Our sexes are part of our identities, thus identity finds a strong connection with the body as its physical manifestation. Our talks and actions are a tangible show time for our identity expression and construction.

Identity and identity constituents, such as gender, are the result of a performative act involving the social given identity and the personal achieved one (Taylor, 2009). Identity in this paper refers to who one is with respect and in relation to one own self and to others. Thereby, terms such as “subject” and “self”, are used interchangeably as synonyms of identity, and do not refer to any other field of study they are normally associated with. They respectively philosophy for subject and theology for self.

Gender

The discussion around gender has increasingly developed in complexity during the last few years, and so the definition of gender itself. For instance, one of the most popular social media on the market has recently updated its choices for gender identity when subscribing. A list of 50 gender options is now available for users, each one of them completed with a description:

‘As well as being able to choose a custom gender identity, Facebook have allowed users to be referred to as "he", "she", or "they". The move came after the social network consulted with lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) advocacy groups.’ (Bradley, 2014)

A question: is gender identity just deciding on whether I am female, male, both or neither? There are a few stages for what one could be referring to as gender acquisition. First of all, there is sex. Sex is given by biology and gender characteristics are only superimposed on it (Paechter and Paechter, 2002). Gender assignment is based on sex and superimposed on biological features, which are penises for males and vaginas for females (ibid). There are a few exceptional cases when sex crashes with gender assignment. For instance, XY individuals are unable to react to androgens and therefore develop a vagina, but with no uterus or period. After gender assignment, each individual develops their own gender identities, supposedly around the age of three (ibid.) Gender assignment and gender identity are always accompanied by gender role that is a series of traits, behaviours and prescriptions that are ascribed to a specific gender (ibid.). Based on one’s gender identity and role, gender attribution is the act of ascribing a more or less specific gender identity when meeting other individuals (ibid.).

Paechter and Paechter (2002) argue that gender is a collective phenomenon. Western societies, in particular, have constructed gender as dimorphic with two and only two separate genders that are mutually exclusive, and with almost no exceptions allowed. Transgressing one’s gender membership and its norms is punished with exclusion, or *Othering*, and, statistically, males’ homosexuality tend to be sanctioned legally and socially more than

females' homosexuality (ibid.). Men being punished more than women for their homosexuality is related to the fact that the hegemony in our society is male, and undermining its norms is challenging its dominance (ibid). Power relations in gender roles result in a compulsory homosexuality, even for transsexuals who need to demonstrate that their gender identity is really, and only, the opposite of the ones they have, before undergoing surgery (ibid).

Gender is not innate, it is part of everyone's identities, but it does not come from the inside. Individuals perform it, and even though gender might be sometimes acted unconsciously or unwillingly, it is not for these reasons automatic (Butler, 2004). Gender is performed within boundaries, imposed by the society one is living in and by individuals themselves, and always with or for another individual/s (ibid). The same boundaries humans are living in are created and shaped by humans, in the context of their times. People want these boundaries to be stable and fixed over time, to make categorizations and a sense of general order possible in the society. More than these boundaries though, time is the real constraint, and as time changes, the construction of categories changes and so does gender. *Sexual Politics* describes women in literature, who are the same women that are part of the society, from the words of men, and with a contextual reflection of the author, a woman (Millet, 1970). In this book, gender roles and gender identities have two, clear and separate categories. Using Paechter's (2007) terminology, *Sexual Politics* depicts the hegemonic masculinity, which embodies a particular set of gender practices, but no hegemonic femininity, as the latter is only constructed on negations of the dominant category – i.e. the masculine one.

In this study, gender means a set of traits and practices that ascribes individuals to one, multiple or no social positions, with different constraints and advantages. Since gender is part of identity, it follows the same pattern of being constructed, and always under construction. Thus, gender performativity varies across times and spaces, which makes research in this area, and in this research project, particularly interesting and challenging.

Narrative studies

The roots of narrative studies are of a classical plate. In 1957, Frye postulated that all narrative genres could fall in one of the following categories: comedy, tragedy, romance or satire (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). In 1990, Bruner proposed a list of five features – i.e. action, scene, actor, goal and trouble – as the main components of every narrative (ibid). The impression given by narrative researchers' efforts in cataloguing features that are, or should be, general and always applicable narrative characteristics is that of striving towards a separation between the world of literature and the everyday reality. The separation is not yet completed, because narrative theories in communication studies are still atheoretical. This is partially because there is not any narrative theory leading communication studies in general (Braithwaite and Schrodt, 2015).

Narratives are both ancient and universal (Bruner, 2004). Ancient, because firmly rooted in history. Universal because, even though languages and their linguistic cultural perspectives are different, every individual in the world (taking away those with cognitive injuries that prevent them from doing so) can produce narratives and relate to other's. Again, this universal comprehensiveness is not because of universal features, such as a narrator who

tells a story with a plot including beginnings, main events, conclusions, all spatially and temporally organized (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). Citing Barthes (1977):

‘[...] narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.’ (p. 79)

Barthes (ibid) simply argues that narrative, in different shapes and styles, is a constant trait in human’s lives. The reasons why that is the case are well exemplified by Bruner (2004), who argues that first, humans have no other way than narrative, of describing their lived time; only narrative provides the time perspective to their stories. Second, life is inevitably tied with narrative, because as ‘narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative’ (Bruner, 2004, p. 691). In a broader sense, people construct the world they are living in with their stories, and at the same time, they are influenced by other people’s constructions of the world, in an ongoing, two-ways process.

In theorizing narrative, Bruner (2004) uses a constructionist approach, which is ‘a view that takes as its central premise that “the world making” is the principal function of mind, whether in the sciences or in the arts’ (Bruner, 2004, p. 691). The stories that people create and tell may or may not be in the real world, or might have been in the real world before, but are then happening only in the person’s own mind.

Labov and Waletzky (1997) were among the first researchers who discussed and proposed a structure for narrative analysis:

‘Most attempts to analyse narrative have taken as their subject matter the more complex products of long-standing literary or oral traditions. [...] Myths, folk tales, legends, histories, epics, toasts, and sagas seem to be the results of the combination and evolution of simpler elements. [...] We suggest that such fundamental structures are to be found in oral versions of personal experience.’ (Labov and Waletzky, 1997, p.3)

Labov and Waletzky (ibid) argue that narrative serves two main functions: referential and evaluative (ibid). The referential function refers to the use that people make of narratives to reconstruct the temporal sequence of a particular experience (ibid). The evaluative function describes what is more the personal interest of those who produce narratives. The authors suggest the social context as the trigger of this personal interest, but I also add that the individual alone, in his/her intimacy, could find reasons and scopes to produce narratives, without any stimulus from the external reality.

Narrative, in this paper, is a central construct to understand, describe and evaluate individual and collective actions, and social representations of concepts. It is used to investigate and discuss individuals’ identity construction.

Social representation theory

The social representation theory postulates the existence of collective constructions of concepts and ideas, called social representations (Hovardas and Korfiatis, 2006). A social representation is ‘a structured mental construct shared by the members of a social group, allowing elaboration and communication of a social object’ (Hovardas and Korfiatis, 2006, p. 417). This social object can be either physical or abstract, and the communal agreement of its characteristics allow individuals to talk about it and understand each other (ibid). Building on this definition, identity is a social representation, with shared attributions such as class or gender, which define individuals and allow them to recognize and categorize each other.

METHOD

This research has an exploratory nature. Its aim is to investigate Swedish women's identity construction.

My data collection methods are a word association survey (WAS) and in-depth interviews. My quantitative and qualitative data thus collected were analysed by merging the model for data analysis of word association studies proposed by Hovardas and Korfiatis (2006), together with the model for interviews analysis developed by Tesch (Maddy et al., 2015).

The purpose of using mixed methods – i.e. WAS and in-depth interviews – was that of sharing the process of data analysis with the research subjects. The in-depth interviews in this study served the aim of involving some of the research subjects in the data analysis, for a collaborative narrative reconstruction of the results of the word association survey that they have been part of (Sprague, 2005).

My research process begins with the participants and the literature review, continues with the WAS and the in-depth interviews, and concludes with the structure of data analysis, described in the following sections.

Participants

45 women participated in the WAS, and 2 women participated in the in-depth interviews. Participants for the WAS were recruited using email sharing and social media. Participants in the in-depth interviews were recruited by asking those who participated in the interviews to follow up and contact the researcher, i.e. me, if they wanted to take further participation in the study by collaboratively discussing the results to the WAS.

The conditions for participation in the WAS or in the interviews were being a woman, having Swedish as the first language, having studied English up to at least the compulsory school level – i.e. age 16 –, and being willing and able to participate in the study. I used two additional background questions: age and occupation.

In the survey, the majority of participants were students – 18 in total – and the age gap with most respondents ranged from 18 to 25 years old. In the in-depth interviews, participants were two students aged between 18 and 25 years old.

The WAS participants' demographics are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

Materials and procedure

I used the search engine of the Gothenburg University Library and Google Scholar to research relevant literature. I divided my research into three big themes: **identity, gender and narrative**. I looked for books and articles adopting a social constructionist approach, and I categorized each relevant text I found according to the three main themes

mentioned. One book for each theme has given me the basis to search for other relevant material: Benwell and Stokoe (2006) for identity studies, Paechter & Paechter (2002) for gender studies and Taylor (2009) for narrative and narrative analysis studies.

Table 1. Respondent's occupations

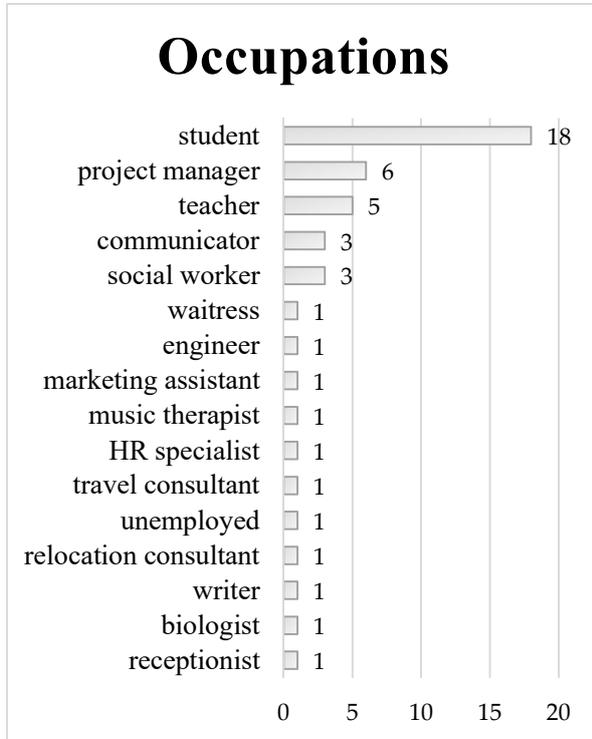
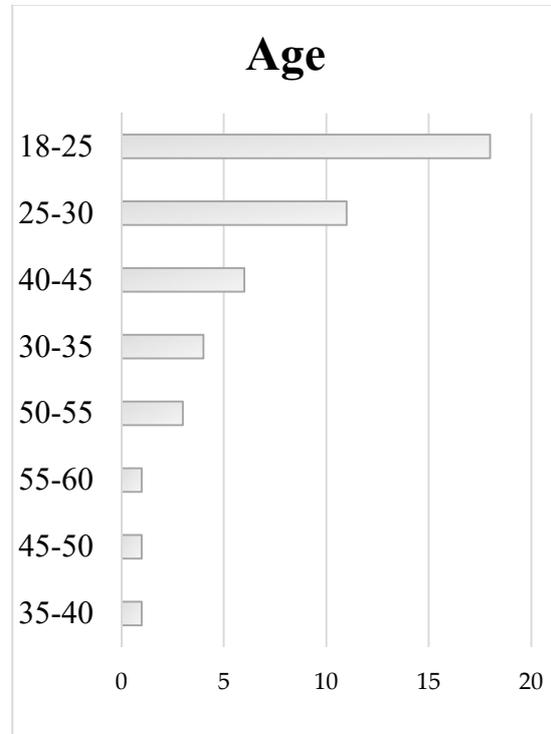


Table 2. Respondents' age



Word association survey (WAS)

The survey is composed of eleven stimulus words and one image, illustrated in Table 3. Respondents were asked to provide three associations for each stimulus word, and the associations to be put in order of importance. Restrictions included not relying on other technological means – e.g. dictionaries, web search etc. – or third parties. No time limit was stated, but respondents were asked to possibly fill out the survey all at once.

The stimulus words used in the WAS were chosen following the critique to the logical dichotomy in formulating research questions and interpreting data (Sprague, 2005). Logical dichotomies are the product of the Western European social thought, where everything exists in opposition to something else, e.g. man-woman, nature-nurture, change-stability (ibid). Sprague (ibid) gives the example of nature vs nurture as probably the most famous dichotomy known in social science researches on human behaviour. The debate around nature vs nurture and other dichotomies as such – e.g. capitalist vs worker, structure vs agency – are continuously subject to reformulations and discussions, especially

Table 3. Stimulus words for the WAS

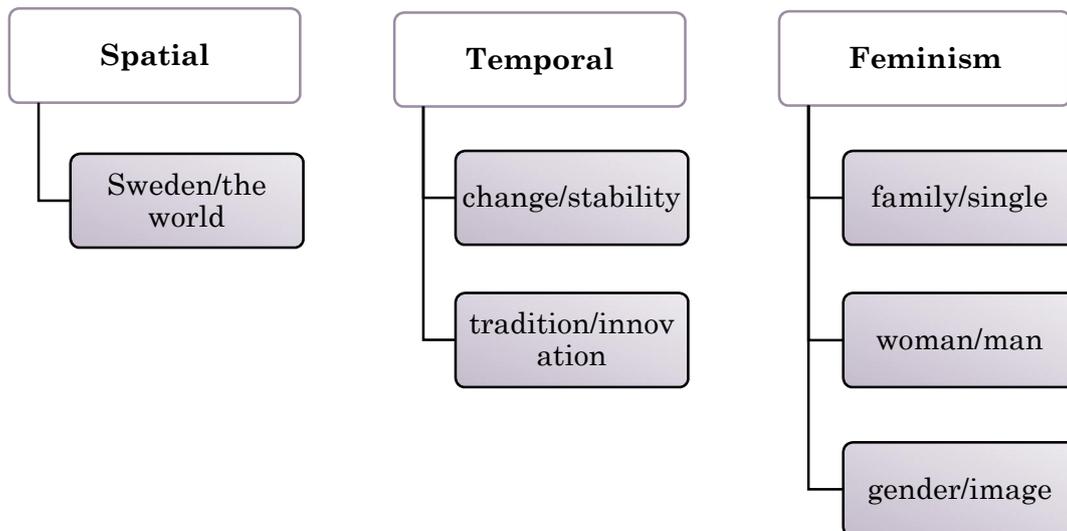
SWEDEN	THE WORLD
CHANGE	STABILITY
TRADITION	INNOVATION
FAMILY	SINGLE
WOMAN	MAN
GENDER	

when one seeks to establish where one concepts ends and the other begins. The demarcating line between these dichotomies is a thin one, or rather a continuum:

‘Measurement is a process of creating categories, identifying distinctions, but in the empirical world, phenomena are much more likely to exist on a continuum.’ (Sprague, 2005. p. 88)

The words used in the WAS are all pairs of logical dichotomies, and they were presented separately and in a shuffled order. The choice of the word-pairs anchors itself on the context – both spatial and temporal – where the survey took place, and to some of the themes that have been central to feminism. **Sweden/the world**, **change/stability**, and **tradition/innovation** refer to the spatial and temporal domains. **Family/single**, **woman/man** and **gender/image**, refer to themes that have been much debated by feminists over the years (Beauvoir, 2010, Millett, 1970). The image, that is the “toilet” symbol for male/female was taken to be in opposition to gender, as gender as a category could be thought as one, double, multiple or even none, but its symbol does not reflect this variety. The image taken to be in opposition to gender will now be referred to as “image” throughout the paper. See the survey domains and related word pairs summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. WAS domains



Word association is one of the methods used in social research to assess and evaluate conceptual structures, which are individuals’ collective constructions of concepts and ideas (Hovardas and Korfiatis, 2006). Word association surveys draw from the assumption that:

‘giving a stimulus word and asking the respondent to freely associate what ideas come to his or her mind gives relatively unrestricted access to mental representations of the stimulus term’ (Hovardas and Korfiatis, 2006, p. 418)

These mental representations are the steps of identity construction that this research is looking after.

The research process of collecting responses for the WAS took two weeks. During the first week, I collected responses by spreading the WAS via email, and during the second week, I gathered participants using Google Forms.

I first wrote my survey in a fillable Word and Pdf format (Appendix 1). The survey title is “Women’s Identities”, and it opens with a presentation of myself and of my study. Participant information and conditions are the first section of the survey. The second section comprises the stimulus words, one written for each line.

During the first week of survey spreading, I posted a presentation of my study on social media, where I asked friends, and friends of friends, to share my post or to send me a private message to get the survey file. My initial aim was to gather at least 30 responses. I renamed all the survey responses files I got back through email with numbers, so as not to know who sent me back what. As Leeuw (2008) reported, responses to survey has been diminishing during the years, partially due to an increase in non-contacts and refusals. I personally experienced the challenge in getting participants for my research. I only received 6 respondents through email sharing of my survey file during the first week of its circulation.

I decided to try to spread my survey through Google Forms. I structured the survey on Google Forms in the same way I did for the Word and PDF file, with a short introduction of myself and instructions for each section. I posted and reposted the link to the survey on social media for a couple of times in less than a week, with a post saying how much I cared and was passionate about this research, as I took the advice from Leeuw (2008) that ‘for Internet surveys a well-written invitation, combined with reminders and a good lay out and respondent-friendly Web interfaces is essential’ (p. 316). I thought that opening myself up as a researcher and expressing the connection that I feel with my study was an incentive to make other people interested and connected with the subject, as incentives are effective in raising participation (ibid). After less than a week, I got 39 respondents that, together with the ones I got from email sharing, brought the number of respondents up to 45. Since I shared the survey through email and social media with friends, acquaintances and strangers, I got responses from women that I know and women that I do not know, and I am not able to discern them.

In-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews were individual and semi-structured, with open-ended questions. I chose in-depth interviews to have participants giving rich, thorough narratives of their thoughts on the WAS structure and answers (Maddy et al., 2015).

Before the interview, I had participants signing a consent form (Appendix 2). The consent form included a short description of myself and of my study, the same description included in the WAS. The consent form also comprised the information and conditions for participants, which were, again, the same ones as for the WAS. Finally, participants had to sign and agree on the interviews being audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. I had a few open questions that guided me as an interviewer, even though I have not asked all

of them directly since participants spontaneously discussed them. The questions were the following:

1. *What are your thoughts on this survey? Its structure? Its answers?*
2. *What are the most thought provoking words for you? Why?*
3. *Which words or patterns can you foresee in the answers? Why?*
4. *If you were to describe Swedish women, which three words would you use? Why?*
5. *If you were to describe yourself, which words would you use? Why?*

The participants had access to the survey answers in a paper format, for the whole duration of the interview. The stimulus words were written with the same order as in the WAS, and the associations followed each word. The answers had not been prearranged, and they were in the same order as participants answered them, meaning three associations for each word, on the same line.

I interviewed two participants in one week. The location for the interviews was a caffè. Interview with P1 lasted for 27:06 minutes, while the interview with P2 lasted for 44:19 minutes.

I have not replied to any of the participants' statements during the interviews. I was using feedback word such as 'interesting' or 'ok'. I was not interfering with them in any way during their discussions, and I let them take the conversation to where they meant it to go.

By interviewing the research subjects who participated in the WAS, I aimed at developing a relationship between myself (the researcher) and my subjects. Feminist research aiming at collecting qualitative data has been debating how to bridge the gap between researchers and researched subjects:

'The key practice in objectifying a person or a group is constructing a dichotomy between the self and the other – the way that we “know” that we are distinctive is through “understanding” that we are “not-them”' (Sprague, 2005, p. 134).

Sprague (ibid) argues that one way to avoid objectifying research subjects and to bridge this gap is to share drafts of the research project that subjects are involved in. The research draft to be shared can be the results, the analysis, or both (ibid). I managed to get closer to my research subjects by meeting some of them face-to-face and interviewing them on the survey they have participated in. There is no illusion of equality by developing a relationship with the research participants. Rather, the study is a collaborative exploration aiming at constructing meaning together. This meaning is later analysed and discussed by the researcher alone (Sprague, 2005).

Data analysis

The results section is divided in three parts: *content analysis*, *structural reconstruction* and *narrative analysis*.

The *content analysis* allows an overview of the results data as a whole. It also provides an assessment of the numbers of associations for the first, the second and the third association category. For the content analysis, the associations were copied on a spreadsheet. For each stimulus word, the associations were organized in their first, second and third association. For each category – i.e. first, second and third association – identical associations were

combined with their numbers of frequencies. Inflections and derivations of the same word – e.g. construct/construction/constructed – were considered as different words, since the underlying meaning for each one of them could not be inferred, and might not have been the same in the participants' formulations.

The *structural reconstruction* is for determining and quantifying the frequency of the associations for each stimulus word. Only associations with frequency higher than one – i.e. words given by more than one respondent – for the first, second and third association category are included in this part of the analysis. From the spreadsheet created for the content analysis, associations with frequency higher than one for the first, second and third association category, were copied and pasted in tables. The first association for each stimulus word is highlighted in bold in each table, as well as the associations that appear in all the three categories.

The *narrative reconstruction* brings together the results of the WAS with the results of the in-depth interviews. It aims at uncovering the interrelation across stimulus words and their associations, with the interviewees' discussion. The in-depth interviews were transcribed using a verbatim transcription, i.e. a transcription with a light editing, leaving out fillers and non-verbal communication. The transcripts of the in-depth interviews were first read a couple of times as a whole. After that, I highlighted segments of the transcripts that were relevant for the results of this research project, and I named them with codes. Next, codes that referred to the same issue were merged together into categories. Finally, the categories were grouped into three themes that refer to the domains of the WAS: spatial, temporal and feminism (Figure 1), and one more theme that refers to the WAS as a method of investigation.

The three-part subdivision of the results for data analysis is inspired to Hovardas & Korfiatis (2006)'s methods for data analysis that the researchers used in their science education study to test word association as a tool for investigating conceptual structures. The narrative reconstruction is based on the procedures developed by Tesch (cited in Maddy et al., 2015).

Reliability and validity

For qualitative data, reliability refers to how the researcher gathered the data and how s/he analyses and discusses them (Hernon and Schwartz, 2009). If the reliability of the data is limited, so is the degree to which findings can be generalized (ibid). This study used a WAS and in-depth interviews. The data collected are much more of a qualitative rather than quantitative nature, for both the WAS and the in-depth interviews. The data collected from the WAS included participants' perceptions and reactions to the stimulus words proposed. The data from the in-depth interviews were the participants' personal reflections on the results of the WAS. It is likely that participants in both the WAS and the in-depth interviews might answer in a different way, if given the opportunity to take part in this, or a similar study again. For instance, participants in the in-depth interviews could not recall which associations they gave in the WAS. Even though the data collected might not be stable over time, the data

analysis has quite a strong support, since based on methods used by previous studies with WAS and in-depth interviews.

Validity concerns whether the method used for data collection measures what it is supposed to measure, and whether the interpretation of the results given by the researcher is the correct, or best, interpretation possible. Citing Åsberg et al (2011):

‘Findings reported in any study, says Giddens (whether based on qualitative or quantitative data) are only as stable as their interpretations. They have no trans-historic truths that can progress towards a greater accumulation of facts or *science*’ (p. 414)

The red-thread of this research project is identity studies. I strived to be consistent and integrate the theories and concepts that are part of the theoretical framework with the results, being objective and straightforward in my considerations. My supervisor Åsa Fryberg has followed this research project since the start, providing constructive feedback and inspecting the whole study project. Two other fellow students had participated in peer-review sections, sometimes inspiring the direction of this thesis for good.

Ethical considerations

Sprague (2005) argues that ‘investigators who describe their reasons for being interested in a research question reveal more of their own agendas and biases’, and I agree with her stance (p. 168). I am a middle-class white Italian woman. I am privileged only for being able to study in a foreign country, and thus developing an interest in how women’s identities are constructed in a country other than mine. Cultural issues could have made me misinterpret the results of this research study, thus I decided for a collaborative method to analyse data, i.e. in-depth interviews for discussing the results with a sample of WAS participants.

English was a second language for both the participants and me. The WAS and the consent form to take part in the in-depth interviews addressed this issue, and all the participants have a level of English that is up to the compulsory level, thus sufficient for taking part in this research.

Cognitive considerations were addressed in a box that participants had to check before filling out the survey, which said “I understand and fulfil the relevant conditions to participate in this survey, and I am willing and able to answer it” (Appendix1 & 2).

The results were handled anonymously and retraction from the study was possible at any point. Participants in the in-depth interviews were addressed as P1 and P2, in order to avoid any kind of connections or biases.

RESULTS

Content analysis

Twelve stimulus words composed the WAS: **Sweden/the world, change/stability, family/single, woman/man, tradition/innovation, gender/image** (Figure 1). The survey results amount to 45 respondents, each one providing groups of associations comprised of one first, one second and one third association. Twelve stimulus words were given. The total number of groups of associations – i.e. composed of one first, one second and one third association – is 540 ($45 \times 12 = 540$). Out of 540 groups of associations 19 groups of associations were composed of only one association, which means that respondents provided the first association, but not the second and the third. Additionally, eight groups of associations only provided the first and second association. The total amount of associations, after condensing identical associations, is 1456, including the first, the second and the third associations provided by each participant. For an overview of the result numbers, see Table 4.

Table 4. Results overview of the 12 stimulus words and their associations

12 stimulus words * 45 respondents	→	540 associations (each one including 3 words associated)	→	1456 words (1 st + 2 nd + 3 rd association)
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The 1456 associations to the 12 stimulus words in the WAS were copied on a spreadsheet. After merging identical associations, the total amount of associations for the first, second and third association category was calculated. For the first association category, the total amount of associations is 325, for the second 403, and for the third 728. The median of associations per stimulus word for the first association category is of 27 associations, for the second association category is 34.5 and for the third association category is 35. The first association category was the group with the lowest number of associations, because clusters of identical associations were more frequent than in the second and third association category. For an overview of this data, see Table 5.

Table 5. Results overview for the first, second and third association categories

FIRST ASSOCIATION	SECOND ASSOCIATION	THIRD ASSOCIATION
325 words	403 words	729 words
Median of associations per stimulus word: 27	Median of associations per stimulus word: 34, 5	Median of associations per stimulus word: 35

Structural reconstruction

For the first association category, out of 326 associations 92 have frequency higher than one. For the second association category, out of 403 associations 75 have frequency higher than one. For the third association category, out of 729 associations 66 have frequency

higher than one. The median frequency for the first association category is 5, for the second is 3.5, and for the third is 3.

The first association category is the one with the highest number of associations with frequency higher than two, and also the category with the highest median frequency for associations.

The list of the stimulus words with their correspondent first, second and third association categories is provided with tables. The total number of associations – i.e. including the associations with frequency lower than two – for the first, second and third association category, per each stimulus word, is provided in Appendix 3.

The stimulus words have the same ordered as Table 1. Therefore, they are paired in their logical dichotomies.

Table 6. Associations for the stimulus word **Sweden**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
home	9	cold	4	home	4
nature	5	nature	4	nature	3
safety	2	safety	3	cold	3
homeland	2	diversity	2	love	3
country	2	safe	2	clean	2
				sea	2

Home is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 9 – above the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. **Nature** is the only association appearing in all the three categories for this stimulus word.

Table 7. Associations for the stimulus word **the world**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
big	5	green	3	planet	2
Earth	3	nature	3	humans	2
global	3	environment	2	scary	2
chaos	2	big	2	environment	2
people	2			complex	2
travel	2			nature	2
globalization	2			Earth	2
possibilities	2			travel	2

Big is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 3 – below the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. No association was repeated in all the three categories, even though some associations were named in two.

Table 8. Associations for the stimulus word **change**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
development	5	exciting	4	exciting	3
new	5	uncertainty	2	forward	3
positive	5	good	2	scary	2
necessary	4	new	2	progress	2
important	3	hard	2	challenging	2
scary	2	development	2	difficult	2
good	2	future	2		
difference	2	difficult	2		

Development is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 5 – equal to the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. No association was repeated in all the three categories, even though some associations were named in two.

Table 9. Associations for the stimulus word **stability**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
money	4	love	2	happiness	3
home	3	comfortable	2	stuck	2
boring	3	physics	2	love	2
family	3	boring	2	safety	2
important	3	foundation	2	family	2
safety	3	calm	2	strong	2
peace	2	family	2		
safe	2	friends	2		
security	2	harmony	2		
comfort	2	trust	2		
strong	2				

Money is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 4 – below the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. **Family** is the only association appearing in all the three categories for this stimulus word.

Table 10. Associations for the stimulus word **tradition**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
family	5	family	3	friends	3
Christmas	5	culture	2	family	2
important	5	boring	2	holidays	2
history	3	Christmas	2	roots	2
old	2	history	2	heritage	2
safe	2			fun	2
Midsummer	2				

culture	2
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Family is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 5 – equal to the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. **Family** is also the only association appearing in all the three categories for this stimulus word.

Table 11. Associations for the stimulus word **innovation**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
new	5	future	5	technology	3
future	4	development	5	technique	2
creative	4	ideas	3	development	2
creativity	4	new	3	improvement	2
technology	3	creation	2	society	2
entrepreneurship	2	imagination	2		

New is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 5 – equal to the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. No association was repeated in all the three categories, even though some associations were named in two.

Table 12. Associations for the stimulus word **family**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
love	17	security	3	home	4
home	3	love	3	safe	2
children	3	safety	3	love	2
safe	2	safe	2	important	2
safety	2	children	2		
unit	2	parents	2		
happiness	2	security	2		
togetherness	2				
parents	2				

Love is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 17 – above the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. **Love** and **safe** are the associations appearing in all the three categories for this stimulus word.

Table 13. Associations for the stimulus word **single**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
alone	7	free	6	alone	5
one	6	alone	5	strong	3
lonely	4	fun	3	searching	3
fun	3	freedom	3	friends	2
independent	2	party	2	one	2

free	2	loneliness	2	longing	2
me	2				

Alone is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 7 – above the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. **Alone** is also the only association appearing in all the three categories for this stimulus word.

Table 14. Associations for the stimulus word **woman**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
strong	12	strong	7	beautiful	4
gender	7	mom	2	mother	3
me	4	independent	2	capable	2
powerful	3	feminism	2	feminism	2
				independent	2
				equality	2

Strong is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 12 – above the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. No association was repeated in all the three categories, even though some associations were named in two.

Table 15. Associations for the stimulus word **man**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
norm	3	strong	3	cool	3
boyfriend	2	father	2	dominant	2
husband	2	sex	2	husband	2
power	2	smart	2	sex	2
father	2				
strong	2				

Norm is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 3 – below the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. No association was repeated in all the three categories, even though some associations were named in two.

Table 16. Associations for the stimulus word **gender**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
sex	5	stereotypes	3	feminism	2
female	3	woman	3	man	2
equality	2	female	2		
stereotypes	2	trans	2		
identity	2	unimportant	2		
label	2	male	2		
man	2	man	2		

society	2
roles	2

Sex is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 5 – equal to the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. **Man** is the only association appearing in all the three categories for this stimulus word.

Table 17. Associations for the image **stimulus**

1st assoc.	frequency	2nd assoc.	frequency	3rd assoc.	frequency
toilet	6	woman	4	stereotypes	3
couple	5	gender	3	equality	2
man	4	sexes	2	love	2
heteronormativity	2	friends	2	boring	2
norm	2	couple	2	two	2
toilet-sign	2	heterosexuality	2	toilet	2
wc	2	stereotype	2	woman	2
toilets	2	man	2		
stereotypes	2	love	2		
love	2				
pair	2				

Toilet is the first association with the higher frequency for this stimulus word, 6 – above the median – out of 45 respondents chose it as their first association. **Love** is the only association appearing in all the three categories for this stimulus word.

Narrative reconstruction

Interviewees' did many observations of a similar nature, therefore the comments that are mentioned in the following table are representative of repetitive observations during the interviews.

Table 18. Narrative reconstruction of the WAS with in-depth interviews

Participants statements	Codes	Category	Theme
'Sweden has, in many ways, very positive, reputation, outside of Sweden. Being a Swede, you kind of look at the negative things, you point out, and it's not that bad.'	On being part of your own culture	Sweden/the world	Spatial

Participants statements	Codes	Category	Theme
<p>‘We are affected by integration issues that are happening in our society. So racism it’s been mentioned now, but I don’t think it would have been mentioned at all, probably, if you would have asked this 6 months ago’.</p> <p>‘It’s been a debate in the news about how it’s a tradition to have graduation in church, in some cities, in Sweden. And, with more and more people with different beliefs, in schools today, we don’t necessarily need to have in church and some people are very conservative about that.’</p>	<p>What changes the world, changes local realities too</p>	<p>change/stability & tradition/innovation</p>	<p>Temporal</p>
<p>‘I know a lot of people who say that “women are like this” and “men are like that” ’.</p> <p>‘What do they say, that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, or something’.</p>	<p>Defining gender roles</p>	<p>woman/man</p>	<p>Feminism</p>
<p>‘It’s very easy to connect the word woman with feminism.’</p>		<p>gender/image</p>	
<p>‘There are men, and there are women, and there are people in between. Why do we need to focus on that?’</p>			
<p>‘I guess I’m influenced by what I hear other people say, what’s in the news, what I think about the words and what they stand for’.</p>	<p>Levels: from the public to the individual</p>	<p>Social representations</p>	<p>WAS</p>

Participants statements	Codes	Category	Theme
<p>‘I think when I answered it, what I thought about was prejudice. The first word that I thought of had to do with my prejudice about the words.’</p>	<p>Prejudices and stereotypes</p>	<p>Social representations</p>	<p>WAS</p>
<p>‘I don’t think too much about stereotypes [...] but if I look at the words, it comes, it makes me think more about stereotypical associations’</p> <p>‘I feel like, people have been thinking the same thing. [...] People have been thinking very differently.’</p>	<p>Constructing reality through contradictions</p>		
<p>‘We probably have a similar viewpoint, just because we live here.’</p> <p>‘You can see a thread somewhere in this.’</p> <p>‘I agree to all of this, pretty much. Which makes me really similar to all the Swedish women out there.’</p>	<p>We all think alike because we are alike</p>		

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Content analysis – First association category as the core of social representations

The results indicate that there are patterns to be found in Swedish women's identity construction. In particular, the first association category appeared to be the core of the social representation that Swedish women hold for the stimulus words proposed in the WAS.

First associations amounted to 325 associations, whereas third associations amounted to 729 associations. There is quite a big gap in the number of associations between the first and the third category. This might be an indication of the socially constructed identity proposed by social constructionists (Andrews, 2012). When debating the stages of identity construction, social constructionists argue that first we are given an identity by our nearby social context – i.e. parents, nurturers or protectors –, and we later internalize and customize this given identity to our individuality (ibid). The results of the WAS might infer that this process of merging our social identity with our individual identity is a never ending one, and that the contradictions generated by this social-individual dichotomy might be more likely to emerge when individuals are asked to define or describe concepts, as for instance in the WAS:

“It's really interesting when you do this kind of tests and you think about the first words that come to mind, and then you think about it, and then you kind of doubt yourself 'Is that really what I would think of?'. Evidently, it was, so.” – P1

Participant 1 (P1) has repeatedly remarked her uncertainty with the associations that were coming to her mind while answering the WAS. P1 was concerned with the congruency that her associations had or did not have with her individual perception. She repeatedly and rhetorically asked herself whether the associations she gave for the stimulus words were really what she meant and, if not, where those associations came from. Again, social constructionism could answer P1's issues by saying that individuals collectively forge their identities (ibid). Adding to this concept, the results of this research project might indicate that individuals feel the need to put forward their collective identity, rather than their individual one, when faced with descriptions or definitions of concepts.

P1 and participant 2 (P2) in the interviews have often repeated that they recognized or agreed with the answers to the WAS:

“I never liked to put, to talk about a group of people and say 'everyone is like that' because there are always exceptions [...] But it's very easy to make those connections when you're supposed to, when you see a word and you're supposed to connect another word to that word.” – P1

“I think I've been thinking similarly to most of the others I would say.” – P2

“I agree to all of that.” – P2

P1 and P2 repeatedly stated they agreed with the other Swedish women who took part in the WAS. P1 and P2's need to state that their associations fit in with other Swedish women's associations might be both a cause and a result of the process of identification (Hall, 2011).

Identification is the process through which individuals affiliate themselves with other individuals or groups. In this study, P1 and P2 identify themselves with the group they think, or know, that they belong to, i.e. Swedish women. Therefore, P1 and P2 were again and again checking that their own personal perception was in line with the collective perception of the sample of Swedish women participating in the study. They were doing so by skimming through the associations, stating that they agreed with the associations, or that there was nothing standing out or surprising them.

The content analysis highlights that there are patterns found in Swedish women's identity construction. These collective patterns are put forward when a sample of Swedish women were asked to reflect upon concepts of a general nature, in the WAS. More importantly, the sample of Swedish women participating in the in-depth interviews repeatedly sought recognition and agreement on behalf of their social representation, and with the social representation of the group of participants in the WAS.

Structural reconstruction – Family, woman, Sweden & the Other

The results indicate that the first association category represent the core of the social representations of the stimulus words for the sample of Swedish women who took part in this study, for two reasons: first, the content analysis showed that the first association category is the category with the highest number of clusters of associations. Second, the first association category also have the highest number of frequency for associations.

FAMILY, WOMAN and SWEDEN were, in order, the three stimulus words with the highest frequency for their first associations.

The first association for the stimulus word FAMILY was **love**, which was repeated also in the second and third association category. There were no negative associations with the word family. All the associations that refer to the family unit and to the family components, had to do with a sense of togetherness, and safety.

WOMAN was the second stimulus word with the highest frequency for its first association that is **strong**. The other associations to the stimulus word woman focused on her society role, her status and the meaning of the stimulus word itself. In particular, first associations were focused on the status of women as strong and powerful human beings. Also, the sample of participants in the WAS identified their sex and gender assignment in the stimulus word woman, as the association **me** was present (Paechter and Paechter, 2002). **Gender** also appeared among the first associations, which could be interpreted as a description of the stimulus word woman itself. Among the second and third association category to the stimulus word woman, the political aspect was put forward as the association **feminism, independent** and **equality** emerged. Also, physical features were mentioned, as the association **beautiful** was the one with the highest frequency among third associations.

The stimulus word SWEDEN was first associated with **home**. The WAS participants identified Sweden has their home, as a safe place, with nature as its main characteristic. **Nature** was the only association for the stimulus word Sweden that appeared in all the three categories.

FAMILY, WOMAN and SWEDEN were the three stimulus words with a defined social representation for the sample of participants in this study. On the other hand, THE

WORLD and MAN were the two stimulus words with the lowest number of frequency per associations, and with the most scattered associations.

The stimulus word THE WORLD was first associated with its description: **big**. Participants had a tendency to describe this stimulus word with its description. Big was followed by **earth**, which also appeared among in the third association category. **Planet, green, nature, people** and **humans** appeared in the second and third association category. However, these words might as well have been grouped with the associations big and earth mentioned above to comprise the core of the description for the stimulus word the world. Among others, negative associations such as **chaos** and **scary** are also part of the answers for this stimulus word.

The stimulus word MAN finds its first association to be **norm**. Norm is the first and only association that refers to man from the point of view of gender. Norm might be referred to the status of men as the determinant constituent for gender definition (Hall, 2011). The association **dominant** appears among third associations, while **strong** is mentioned in both the first and second category of associations. Citing Beauvoir (2010):

‘It is understandable that the duality of the sexes, like all duality, be expressed in conflict. It is understandable that if one of the two succeeded in imposing its superiority, it had to establish itself as absolute. It remains to be explained how it was that man won at the outset.’ (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 30)

The associations for the stimulus word man do not describe a defined social representation for the sample of respondents to the WAS. However, having norm as its first association might give a clue to the reason why the associations are so scattered for this stimulus word. Since man is the norm, he does not need to be defined, and he can be what he decides and wants to be. The other associations to men referred to his society role as **boyfriend, husband, and father**. Physical attributes such as **smart** and **cool** were also mentioned.

The stimulus words THE WORLD and MAN might stand as *the Other* to their counter logical dichotomies, which were among the strongest social representations for the participants in the WAS – i.e. SWEDEN and WOMAN (Beauvoir, 2010, Paechter, 2007, Millett, 1970). The concept of *the Other* has been theorized as the opposition to a norm. For instance, when it comes to movements of people across the globe, citizens are the norm, while *the Other* is represented by immigrants. The status of immigrants and immigration policies are much debated today (Koutonin, 2015). The reason could be that since immigrants represent *the Other*, they can only be defined in oppositions to the norm, i.e. citizens (Beauvoir, 2010). Thus, the definitions of “immigrant” does not stand alone, as it is for the concept of the world and the concept of man.

It is interesting that in these pairs of logical dichotomies – i.e. Sweden/the world, woman/man – *the Other* is represented by what is outside: outside the participants’ homeland for Sweden/the world, and outside the participants’ gender assignment for woman/man. This result might infer that social representations of concepts that are particularly attached to the participants’ identity have more of a need to be stable and shared, whereas concepts that are outside one’s identity can be more flexible and various.

Narrative reconstruction – “We all think alike because we are alike”

The results indicate that the participants in the interview oriented to the WAS content – i.e. the stimulus words and their associations – as well as to the WAS as a method of investigation.

Spatial and temporal themes – The spatial and temporal themes appear to be particularly tied together. When observing the results, both P1 and P2 focused on the associations that for Sweden/the world, change/stability and tradition/innovation were not coherent with their line of thoughts, or with the WAS participants’ repetitive association. P1 initially noticed some negative associations with the stimulus word SWEDEN. She discussed what she perceived as negative associations by narrating the tradition of celebrating graduation from school in church. P1 connected the stimulus word Sweden with the stimulus word TRADITION, and discussed them together using the narrative aforementioned.

“I kept thinking about Swedish traditions and how some people are really conservative about it, how that might be a bad thing because those kind of people are not open to change and I think that many traditions that we have we could change. It doesn’t matter to me.” – P1

Also, the stimulus word CHANGE was tied to this narrative, as P1 discusses the increasingly amount of people with different beliefs that are now part of the Swedish social arena. P1’s discussion brought together three stimulus words – i.e. Sweden, tradition and change – and evaluated them by referring to her own lived experience (Bruner, 2004). Narratives are used by individuals to construct the world they are living in, and also to make sense of it (ibid). P1’s narrative in the above extract provides us with an example of one trying to make sense of the world she is living in, and of the changes that are affecting it.

P2’s discussion on the stimulus words Sweden and change sounds somehow similar to the P1’s one. P2 has connected her thoughts on these stimulus words to the movement of people coming into her own society, as P1 did. P2 was stricken by the association of the word **racism** to the stimulus word Sweden:

“It also says something about the changes that are happening here in Sweden, and that we have to be careful about what we do next. Because if these words have started to pop out, we need to do something. This shouldn’t be associated with any country in the world, and especially my home country, it makes me react. Because I don’t want to be a Swedish person if racism is associated with my country.” – P2

The collective construction of reality that is associated with the stimulus word Sweden is not in line with P2’s point of view, which makes her react. P2 recognizes *the Other* inside the group she is supposed to belong to, identified by the association racism to which she strongly disagrees (Hall, 2011). P2 feels that if the changes affecting her society are going towards that direction – i.e. of becoming a racist society – she can no longer contribute and participate in the collective construction of reality made by the group she is part of – i.e. the Swedish society.

Feminism theme – This theme was the one that took most of P1 and P2’s focus and time during their interviews. Both participants were reading and discussing the results by

following the order that was presented to them in the results sheets, that is the same order that the stimulus words followed in the WAS. Both participants were asked which order they preferred to follow in discussing the results, and P1 and P2 both answered that they liked to go page by page, as it was easier. When they got to the stimulus word WOMAN though, P1 and P2 ceased to follow the order that they had aforementioned, and jumped forward to read the responses to the stimulus word MAN. The interviewees' discussion on the logical dichotomy woman/man somehow followed the same development: from circumscribing gender roles in their respective boxes, they went on trying to define gender identity, and later challenged it.

[Referring to the stimulus word woman] *"Maybe you think about feminism a lot more than the actual gender. Because there are a lot of words, there is strength and powerful, a lot of the words feminism is about."* – P1

"This person believes that women have mental strength, and guys have physical strength. Don't know if I agree with that, but I can understand why people think like that." – P2

"I think there's a huge changing movement in the perception of the sexes. Women are becoming more and more independent and strong in comparison to how it's been before. The feministic movement has also had a huge impact on how we perceive [the] sexes." – P2

In the WAS, the social representation to the stimulus word woman is composed of associations such as **strong, gender, powerful, independent, equality** and **feminism** among others. All these associations are connected with the concepts that the Western feminist movement and its subsequent waves were advocating for, which are equal rights for women, and the ways in which we construct women's identities (Elliott, 2012). When P1 and P2 were asked to associate three word with Swedish women, both found of a compelling importance that of mentioning the word **equality** and the word **independent**. P1 and P2's narratives in discussing the stimulus word woman and the stimulus word GENDER, was strongly influenced by the feminist narrative. Participants in the WAS and participants in the interviews have defined genders with a narrative that might exemplify reality. However, they are giving answers that define the ideal that women are striving to become. Bruner remarks 'narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative' (Bruner, 2004, p. 691). These results might indicate why the first association for the stimulus word woman was **strong**.

WAS theme – Throughout their interviews, P1 and P2 continuously discussed how the social representations are constructed in the WAS. Firstly, P1 immediately identified the process through which social representations are formed. That is, from the public sphere to an internalized and individual act of agency, which is rather similar to how social constructions think of identity construction – i.e. from the social to the individual (Andrews, 2012). Both P1 and P2 discussed the influence of stereotypes and prejudices when answering these type of surveys, and have often contradicted themselves:

"I don't think too much about stereotypes." – P1

"I'd have to say, it's a stereotype, but beautiful. Swedish women are beautiful, but that's what you hear a lot when you go abroad." – P1

P1's contradiction in her narrative might be a result of the process of combining her given social identity with her personal achieved one (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). P1 could mean that she does not think about stereotypes, but because stereotypes are collective social representations, she still holds and uses stereotypes when asked to define concepts of a general nature, such as Swedish women.

“We all think alike because we are alike” is the last code on the table, pertaining to the category of social representations and to the theme named WAS. This code summarizes the continuous effort made by the interviewees' of checking if they were fitting in with the responses in the WAS. P1 and P2's might have felt that the WAS responses were defining their given social identity, that is the collective identity of the society they are living in (Taylor, 2009). During their interviews, P1 and P2 readily agreed with the answers, by saying that they recognized them or that they understood them. This might be an indication of how the given social identity is constantly working with the achieved personal identity to integrate each other, and adapt to the context in hand (ibid).

CONCLUSIONS

This research project is only a small step in the analysis of women's identity construction. The nature of this project was exploratory. The methods and the discussion of the results ultimately provided the answers to the research questions that first opened this study. Even so, it is not possible and advisable to generalize the answers to the research questions of this study from the sample of participants to the reality of Swedish women as a whole.

What could be theorized from this research is that Swedish women might hold some social representations better than others because they are part of what defines their social identity, and also because they must hold on to them. In particular, when it comes to the stimulus word WOMAN, respondents might have felt the need to give the association **strong**, because as for now women cannot be other than that. Women must be strong, or else they would be kicked out from their rather new roles in the society, as leaders, as intellectuals, as workers, as politicians, among others. But do Swedish women, and in particular the sample of participants, really believe that women are strong, or have they just felt that strong was the most appropriate word to associate? Are women constructing their social identities based on the dichotomy woman-man, or have women become independent from that? My take is that women might not be there yet.

This study analysed one national reality, but there are many more realities that need to be looked into. It is possible that exploring women's identity construction across the world would give different or quite opposite results, in terms of social representations for the first research question, and in terms of deciding and feeling part of the group that is analysed for the second research question. It is also possible that the exploration of local realities would say that similarities are more than differences. One more hint given by this type of study could be that women's identities across the world are mutually influencing each other, either for good or bad.

To sum up, in this research project the answer to the first research question is that there are indications of women's collective patterns in their identity construction, for the sample of Swedish women who took part in this study. These indications infer that the sample of Swedish women investigated hold some solid social representations for some of the concepts contained in the WAS, which are FAMILY, SWEDEN and WOMAN. Furthermore, the discussion of the results highlighted that participants in the study has generally put their given social identity ahead their achieved personal identity when answering the WAS, or discussing it in the in-depth interviews. The answer to the second research question is that the patterns, or social representation, resulting from the WAS, are understood and recognized by the sample of participants investigated in the in-depth interviews. Participants in the interviews wanted to fit in the answers to the survey. They felt that they belonged to the group under analysis. An alternative answer to the second research question would have been that

women under analysis decided not to recognize the answers from the WAS as the answers given by the social group that they are part of. This has not been the case for this study.

This research was based in Sweden. The same method could be reproduced in other countries of the world, the aim being that of tracing a map of women's identity construction across the globe. One of the aims and researches conducted by the feminist movements was that of digging into women's identity (Elliott, 2012). Exploring women's identity construction across different times and spaces might be just a romantic act of curiosity, pushed by an interest in the various realities that women inhabit all over the world. At the same time, this investigation might also provide more of a practical use. The communication and sharing of women's identity constituents, women that inhabit different spaces across the globe, could be of help in accommodating transnational policies.

In conclusion, this exploratory study has answered some questions, but also opened many doors for further investigations. For instance, why participants in the in-depth interviews wanted to fit in? Because they felt that they were Swedish, or because they felt that they were women? Closing the discussion with a quote:

“There is not enough space for me to describe what a woman is in three words” – P1

Observations for future research

The aim of this study was to investigate Swedish women's identity construction in a sample of participants. The research questions that opened up this research project have been answered by the results. At the same time, these same results have given way to other questions and considerations. This study has been conducted on a small sample of participants. This small sample leaves us questioning if the results would have differed with a larger group of subjects of varying age groups. I argue that the results to the WAS would probably have if not the same, at least similar results. If it was possible to retrieve social representations from a sample of 45 participants, it is very likely that a sample of 1000 participants would provide analogous indications. However, the number of in-depth interviews has been much limited, and so the narrative reconstruction could have suffered further insights in the discussion on the associations to the WAS.

What if the same study, with the same methods, were to be conducted in Italy? Or Rwanda? Or China? And what if the same study had men as participants? It is very interesting that the sample of Swedish women who took part in the WAS, and even those who contributed to the in-depth interviews, emphasized that the stimulus word WOMAN needs to have **strong**, and **independent**, among its first associations. Were the participants in the study describing reality as it is, or were they giving the associations they felt the need to give in order to change how genders are actually now? In conclusion, this research project scratched the surface of a vast territory that is the construction of identities. It is important to keep up with this type of research, in order to gain knowledge of others across times and spaces. This I believe is a key component to progressivism, to cooperation and to understanding.

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Appendix 1

Valentina Schiavo – gusschiva@student.gu.se

WORD ASSOCIATION SURVEY

Topic: Women's identities

Department of Applied Information Technology

MSc in Communication - Master Thesis Project



I am Valentina Schiavo. I am a master student in Communication, currently writing my thesis on women's identities from a communicative perspective. This survey is an essential part of my research. Thank you for taking the time to fill it out, your contribution means the world for my project.

Contacts

072-0214851

gusschiva@student.gu.se

Please, do not esitate to contact me for questions or clarifications.

Estimated time of completion: 8-10minutes

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION & CONDITIONS

(Please, fill out the boxes ONLY if it applies to you)

I am a woman

My first language is Swedish

I have studied English up to grundskola level

or another level

(Please, specify)

My profession is

My age is

I understand and fulfil the relevant conditions to participate in this survey, and I am willing and able to answer it.

All the data relevant for this study will be handled anonymously. Also, retraction from this study is possible at any point.

WHAT TO DO

The survey is composed of 11 words+1 image, to which you are to associate 3 words each, in order of importance.

It is necessary that you associate 3 and only 3 words for each word given, and you may NOT rely on other technological means (e.g. dictionaries, Internet, etc.), or third parties. You may take as much time as you need to fill out the survey, but try and do it all at once.

INNOVATION	1.	<input type="text"/>
	2.	<input type="text"/>
	3.	<input type="text"/>
THE WORLD	1.	<input type="text"/>
	2.	<input type="text"/>
	3.	<input type="text"/>
WOMAN	1.	<input type="text"/>
	2.	<input type="text"/>
	3.	<input type="text"/>
SWEDEN	1.	<input type="text"/>
	2.	<input type="text"/>
	3.	<input type="text"/>
FAMILY	1.	<input type="text"/>
	2.	<input type="text"/>

	3	<input type="text"/>
	1	<input type="text"/>
	2	<input type="text"/>
	3	<input type="text"/>
MAN	1	<input type="text"/>
	2	<input type="text"/>
	3	<input type="text"/>
CHANGE	1	<input type="text"/>
	2	<input type="text"/>
	3	<input type="text"/>
GENDER	1	<input type="text"/>
	2	<input type="text"/>
	3	<input type="text"/>
STABILITY	1	<input type="text"/>
	2	<input type="text"/>

	3.	<input type="text"/>
SINGLE	1.	<input type="text"/>
	2.	<input type="text"/>
	3.	<input type="text"/>
TRADITION	1.	<input type="text"/>
	2.	<input type="text"/>
	3.	<input type="text"/>

THANK YOU !

Appendix 2

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Topic: Women's identities

Department of Applied Information Technology

MSc in Communication - Master Thesis Project



I am Valentina Schiavo. I am a master student in Communication, currently writing my thesis on women's identities from a communicative perspective. This interview is an essential part of my research. Thank you for taking the time to participate, your contribution means the world for my project.

Contacts

072-0214851
gusschiva@student.gu.se

Please, do not esitate to contact me for questions or clarifications.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION & CONDITIONS (Please, fill out the boxes ONLY if it applies to you)

I am a

My first language is

I have studied English up to

or

(Please, specify)

My profession is

My age is

I understand and fulfill the relevant conditions to participate in this interview, and I am willing and able to do it.

All the data relevant for this study will be handled anonymously and confidentially.

Also, retraction from this study is possible at any point.

The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes, and it will be audio recorded for later transcription and analysis.

Appendix 3

Table 19. Number of associations for each stimulus word and category, after condensing identical associations

Stimulus words	1st association	2nd association	3rd association
family	19	35	38
woman	23	35	35
image	23	28	31
change	25	34	37
single	26	28	31
tradition	27	37	36
stability	27	34	35
Sweden	27	32	31
innovation	28	29	32
the world	31	38	34
gender	32	35	39
man	37	38	37
TOTAL	325	403	728
MEDIAN	27	34.5	35