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Trapped in the Gaze of Others. Discourses of Shame among Female Entrepreneurs in Austria

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Abstract. This article explores female entrepreneurs' picture of self in the gaze of others. It relies on the narratives of female business owners gained via semi-structured interviews and focus groups, compiled in the framework of an international research project (iFEMPOWER)[1] in Austria. The study reveals that the imagined and perceived gaze of others has a significant power on how businesswomen define both their professional and personal self and how they evaluate their self-worth. The gaze of others becomes a signifier of shame (for not being enough or being too much). The results of this study contribute to a more complex understanding of female entrepreneurship, and with the interdisciplinary character it aims at shaping the contemporary discourse on the gendered entrepreneurial sector.

Keywords: female entrepreneurship, qualitative analysis, shame, self-worth, the gaze of others

Introduction and Theoretical Overview

Anna (name altered) is a therapist with a private practice in Austria. She has established her one-person company right after finishing her studies at the university and obtaining her professional licence from the Ministry of Health. As a single woman with a migration background and a student loan to pay back, she struggles to make the ends meet. The fact that she is not yet fluent in German does not help her find new clients, even though the international community is quite big in this Central European capital city. Anna, to maintain herself, decides to take a part-time job at one of the tourist sites, where she sells postcards to visitors. When one day she encounters one of her clients there, she becomes completely devastated. She realizes that she does not owe an explanation to the person yet feels that her professional reputation has been broken into pieces in a glimpse of a moment. She is ashamed and wishes she could just disappear. The

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seconds while she is serving the client at the cash desk feel like ages, and even though months have passed, she can still feel the burden of that short encounter up to the present day. The gaze of the client stayed with her. Ever since she feels very bad about her inability to hide her private sphere from her client, the financial hardship and the need for a second job. Moreover, she blames herself for losing her professional credibility (since, according to her inner monologue, a "really good" entrepreneur has enough clients and does not need to work in such a "low-status place").

Anna is only one of the female entrepreneurs trapped in the gaze of others, whom we encountered while studying women running their businesses in Austria. From a communication expert in a rural region to an IT specialist working from home office in a big city, we could find traces of shame, which resulted in self-blame, self-questioning, and reflection of self-worth(lessness). Shame is, however, a phenomenon that we rarely want to discuss when we are asked about our professional identity. We try to avoid it by all means – just as we avoid being spotted while having a shower, and if revealed, we cover ourselves right away. Our strong effort for self-presentation is made for a reason: with an attempt to control how our environment sees and perceives us (Rochat 2009). We tend to have others in mind and see ourselves from their perspective, trying to estimate what they would like us to be and to act. We believe that if we manage to estimate it well, we imagine having control over our reputation, thus, on the image people have about who we are.

This major drive for self-preservation in us exists for social reasons given that our reputation contributes to our social acceptance and determines whether or not we might belong somewhere. If we manage to demonstrate qualities, which are highly valued by our society, we believe to have control over our affiliation (Rochat 2014). Therefore, from very early on, we learn to measure our worth through the gaze of our environment. An approving look will make us believe that we have the right to be part of our community and will contribute both to our self-confidence and what we call social well-being. A disapproving or questioning look, on the other hand, can be a humiliating experience. If it stems from a public display of a part of our self that we prefer to hide or keep to the closest environment, it becomes a social experience:

„A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or fantasizing to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience" (Benedict 1946/2005: 223).

In the context of Austria, where male entrepreneurs still outnumber females, establishing an enterprise for women still inevitably involves the gaze (and the judgement) of the environment. Businesswomen on the territory of Austria still have lower income, tend to have smaller companies, and, what is more,

they constitute the absolute majority of the country's self-employed population (Bögenhold–Klinglmair 2015). In a country where the overwhelming majority of the population is employed (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2017), many female entrepreneurs engage in the business activity only part-time, mostly to keep the security of an employment and to balance their work-related responsibilities and the responsibilities of their home environment (ifempower 2019). The company might be set up and then also ran part-time even for a longer time period (Sieger et al. 2016, ifempower 2019), which can be hypothesised to save the new entrepreneur from the full exposure of the gaze and consequently also the judgement of the other.

Past research on female entrepreneurs (Bloch 2011) pointed out that the regular renegotiation of traditional gender roles, expressions of power, and the meanings attached to the breadwinner roles in the families are inevitable. This negotiation process, however, is not easy, as it occurs under a strong radar of both personal networks and professional society. Upon stepping into a self-employed role, besides being watched and seeking for approval (Rochat 2014), managing the demands of the professional and personal life constitute a burden for many women (Noor 2004, Welter 2004, Frone et al. 1992). This often results in negative consequences for the welfare of women (Hammer et al. 2004).

In the past decades, scholars have described how women deal with emotions emerging from the double burden of having to perform well in care-related (private) areas and at the same time having to manage a profitable business. Numerous authors also discussed the coping mechanisms of entrepreneurial women as well (Stoner et al. 1990, Greenhaus–Beutell 1985, Ashforth et al. 2000, Edwards–Rothbard 2000, Greenhaus–Parasuraman 1999, Kossek et al. 1999). We know how tactics, such as segmentation, compensation, accommodation, and boundary management, are frequently applied in search of balance between profession and private life (Lambert 1990), and we are also aware of the importance of social support as well as psychological resources in coping with these challenges (Ruderman et al. 2002). Postponing childbearing, employing assistance with the household and care, or reducing working hours have been identified as common strategies internationally (Becker–Moen 1999, Moen–Yu 2000).

Nevertheless, much less is known about the sources of the conflict that emerges within the individual when working towards a leading position in her field, let alone the methods of dealing with it. If the conflict between profession and family is likely to be significantly higher for those female business owners who aim for high growth (Shelton 2006) and if start-up entrepreneurs in general have to deal with a higher workload than those employed in white-collar, blue-collar, or professional positions (Harris et al. 1999), then how do they reflect on themselves, on their personal and professional self? If their newly established business requires them to invest more time in their new projects to attract clients

or accessing capital (Bates 2002), yet the outcome of the investment is highly questionable, then what meanings are attached to the entrepreneurial lifestyle and work–family conflicts? How important role does the gaze of the other play in self-narratives? These were the questions that have mostly fallen out of the scope of past enquiries and motivated this research.

Methods

The research was conducted within the framework of an EU-funded international project (iFEMPOWER) and aimed to map the lived experiences of female entrepreneurship. The current article, however, focuses only on the data collected in Austria.

Purposeful sampling with maximum variation (Palinkas et al. 2015) was applied, whereby researchers could rely on their networks (convenience sampling) yet mind aspects of diversity. The objective was to reach women who have been active in the field of entrepreneurship for at least a year in Austria. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in the homes and workplaces of the Austrian female entrepreneurs. The interviews lasted from 40 to 120 minutes. Besides that, two focus groups were organized, with an average length of 2 hours.

The female entrepreneurs selected in the sample worked in various fields, ranging from the healthcare industry to art management and food production, and all had been self-employed or running their own companies for more than a year. Due to purposeful sampling with maximum variation, a proportion of them came from urban environments, while others lived and worked in rural areas of Austria. Their marital status also varied: part of our sample was married or lived in partnership, and many of them cared for at least one child. The sample also involved single participants as well as women who were single parents at the time of data collection. All but two of the interviewed Austrian entrepreneurs worked locally or within the boundaries of the country.

All participants of the study were informed about the aim of the meeting, its approximate length, consent and confidentiality criteria. Written informed consent was obtained by the researchers at the beginning of each meeting. The names of the subjects together with names of their companies and exact places of residence have been replaced by pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith–Osborn 2003) was applied to understand what the lived experiences are and to map the dynamic meanings that participants attach to their entrepreneurial experiences. The texts were coded for explicit and implicit mentions of the gaze of others. These descriptions of the "essence" or core commonality of the lived experience of entrepreneurship were then further studied to understand the relationship between the subjects and their

environments. For the interpretations to stay grounded within the narratives of the interviewed subjects, a selected set of criteria was adopted from the repertoire of grounded theory (Corbin–Strauss 1990). They helped the researcher to structure the emerging ideas and conceptualizations from data to theory.

Results

In this section of the article, the results will be divided into subcategories and will all be illustrated by quotations from the respondents. Three overarching "Gaze of the others"-related themes emerged during data analysis: 1. self-representing in the light of powerful gendered stereotypes about entrepreneurs, 2. shame felt about struggling to achieve a work–life balance, and 3. shame over struggling to become independent and self-sustaining in a long-term perspective. Each theme is described in detail below.

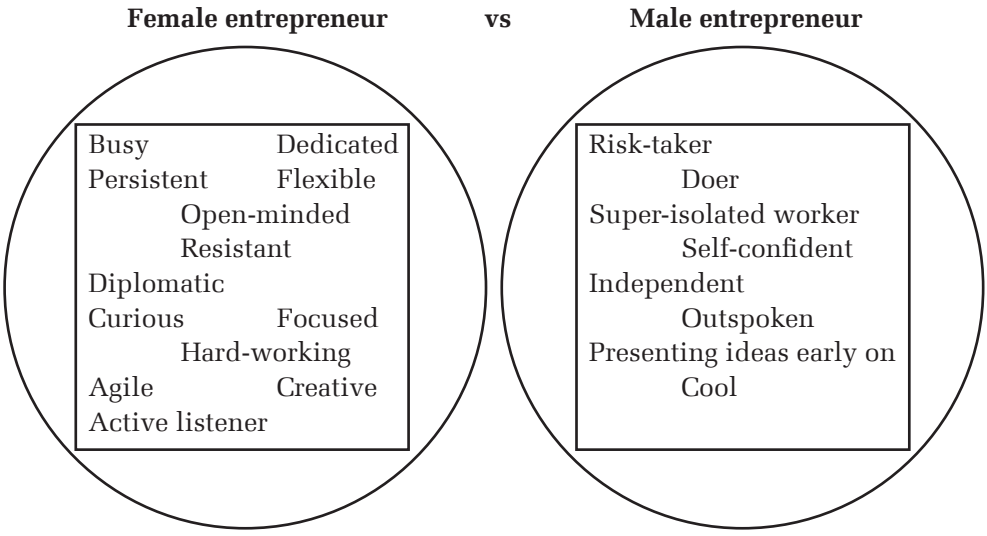
Self-Representation in the Light of Existing Social Structures and Stereotypes

The participants' longest narratives in both the interviews and the focus groups depict how the individual has to adjust as a person (I) and as an entrepreneur (me) in a social structure, where she becomes gendered (the woman), and depending on her partnership and parental status might also face the roles of the wife/partner and/or the mother (among other relational aspects that are beyond the scope of this article). When asked about the characteristics of an entrepreneur, the discussions immediately started to revolve around the topics of contrasting the "female" vs. "male" entrepreneur. The participants intensely discussed their perceived gendered and relational characteristics, habits and traits, and what it means in their perspective to do business with an ascribed gender.

The majority of them revealed that the "typical" female entrepreneur is self-confident, organized, vision-based. Someone who is not self-centred, but who has a higher meaning behind her business. A person who wants to make the world a better place. Even though they agreed that most of the mentioned traits and characteristics could also be applied to a male entrepreneur, the majority of their descriptions of businessmen still revolved around stereotypes of all-male-clubs of "Millennial" Start-Uppers seeking to "change their bank accounts". They also saw them as "super-isolated while working" in contrast to women, who "care about many things in parallel".

This portrayal of female versus male entrepreneurs inevitably created a strong binary opposition between "female" vs. "male" businesses as well. The described self-centred male entrepreneurship and the partially lived (and experienced)

– partially envisioned self-sacrificing female counterpart turned out to be a paradox. The female interview subjects expressed that they were aware that, theoretically, there was only one business, without gender, yet they could not describe themselves and their endeavours in any other light than women who are ought to be focusing on "changing a community or a society for the better".



Source: author's graph based on the narratives

Graph 1. *Narrated characteristics of female versus male entrepreneurs in Austria*

Having to cope with the requirements of the social structure they live in (thus ought to have a social mission, and caring for family members, mostly children, is also required) results in a frequently articulated, business-oriented characteristic feature, named by almost all of the interview subjects first: being busy. If the female entrepreneur wants to accomplish her gendered entrepreneurial mission, she has much on her shoulder and her working time includes endless hours of service. She has to be dedicated, persistent, resistant, and flexible, yet optimistic, diplomatic, actively listening, and persevere to succeed. Whether she will be considered an entrepreneur by others in the entrepreneurial scene is, however, still questionable:

> The ones who earn more in the family are allowed to focus more on the job, and the girls, when they are at the start-up phase, are just girls. They are not considered entrepreneurs yet. When I'm at those pitching events, and I say that I want to open a psychotherapy praxis, they are like… how are you going to prove that you can make money with that? (…) It seems to me

> that women have more idealistic projects in mind, while men think more in terms of money-making. (M., female entrepreneur in her late twenties)
>
> I know that I should be doing something else or maybe work in a diverse team with men. Because getting funding is really difficult if you are not the next Google or Facebook, even though those idealistic projects would deserve it even more because they are trying to change society. (E., female entrepreneur in her mid-thirties)

In both of these narratives, female entrepreneurs express that what they do and what they wish to represent is considered by the majority (and business) society "not enough". They acknowledge that they are being looked down on and devalued by the male-dominated business environment based on the mere assumption that their envisioned business will not be profitable. Their abilities to prove and present that their social business will be profitable are also questioned. The fact that as a consequence these interviewed women borrow the perspective of (significant) others and even call their own business ideas "idealistic" indicates that they might have to cope with internalized shame. They make up the possibility of "doing something else", thus hiding what they wish for. Instead, in order to be approved, some of them are prepared to change their objectives in a way that their environment expects them to. Others, such as Renate,[2] who is determined to accomplish her business idea with a visually impaired female business partner, has to deal with the severe disapproval of her environment: "It was a horror. They were telling me that I should not even try establishing a company with a partner who is disabled because it is very risky. It is very risky for healthy people too, but in this case, they were telling me that I really should think twice about it. I should not do it. They were asking how I would manage it. It was a horror. Really. It was a horror" (R. entrepreneur in her mid-30s).

In search of social and financial approval, some of the respondents spoke about situations when they associated with others in their businesses and thus gave up their independence – a quality that is highly valued by them in entrepreneurial men. The interpretative analysis shed light on the phenomenon of a sense of losing control and the lack of choice exercised. When women in the early phases of their entrepreneurial careers feel anxiety about being seen as "not capable enough", "dreamy", or "way too social" and want to gain control over their image, some consider teaming up with a male entrepreneur even if they originally wanted to accomplish their goal alone. This way, they seemingly exercise their own choice. Nevertheless, they act upon an image they think the world has about them when they finally decide to be partners of a "born" entrepreneur, a self-confident man. Therefore, the often-articulated qualities of female entrepreneurs,

2 The names of the interviewees were changed/altered.

such as being able to actively listen to (the requirements of) the environment, being always nice, flexible, and diplomatic, come in handy in re-evaluating their entrepreneurial image in the gaze of others and then also when reshaping their self-representation as a businesswoman. The perceived gendered qualities of female entrepreneurs at the end of the day might become both the inhibitors and the catalysts of personal entrepreneurial success.

> I have a marketing agency, and it is quite funny to say, but I have never spent any money on advertising. Me and my husband, who is a photographer, by the way, live in a small region, where everybody knows each other. We know each other from school, we know how the other person is. So, when you meet someone, you always have to be nice because you never know who your next client is going to be. You have to be nice but not too nice because that is also not too good. (K., an entrepreneur in her early 40s, co-owns a company with her husband)

Shame Felt about the Struggle to Maintain Work–Life Balance

"But no one has ever told me that if I become a business owner, I have to face and deal with such things. They do not teach you at the university what you will be doing as soon as you become independent. They teach you to draw and paint, but they never prepare you for managing and promoting yourself" (A., entrepreneur in her mid-30s).

Anita, an entrepreneur in the art sector, voices the struggle of many of the respondents. In a lengthy narrative characterized by a circular argumentative style, she tries to justify her unpreparedness for juggling personal and business obligations.

The (lack of) work–life balance is a theme that emerged in all of the narratives, irrespective of the age, marital status, number of children, place of residence, and professional orientation of our interview subjects. And "I should have known it before…" is how shame appears on the scene. They are searching for covering up, thus explanations, why – even though holding a number of university degrees and having international work experience – they are still unqualified, untrained for running their business, and, as a consequence, they still struggle to manage their time.

> Work–life balance, that is a really hard thing. The hard part is that you do not have a 9-to-5 job, so you can work anytime, so it is very hard, in the beginning, to just divide between free time and working time. And in the beginning it is not possible. So you work every time and anytime, whenever it is possible. But then you feel it is not possible to do this

> for more than a few months, or a year or so, and then you need to cut out time for yourself. And it is a cutting out. So you always have the feeling that you should work, but you have to do things for yourself. And that is a really really important and a really hard part to let go. (K., an entrepreneur in her early 40s)

Having a feeling that one has to work all the time, experiencing guilt for not being available at times when personal obligations take over, and having to deal with shame when "you have to do things for yourself" is a lived experience of our respondents. What is more, the seemingly supportive entrepreneurial/start-up scene of Austria even accentuates the problem by offering free events during such parts of the day when many women traditionally still have care obligations. For example, the popular wine down events, which involve pitching sessions, networking opportunities as well as project presentations in front of potential investors, all happen after the conventional working day, thus, in the late evening hours. Renate disclosed that having to perform well in all areas of her life creates an incredible burden for her. She acknowledges that working on her doctoral research, having a full-time job, and, parallel to that, developing and promoting her start-up "is crazy", while at the same time, internalizing the gaze of others, she blames herself for not being able to perform equally well in all areas. Consequently, guilt appears whatever she does because if she focuses on her research, she is not working on her business, which then appears to be "less advanced" than the enterprises of those who are privileged to manage their start-ups only. Feeling shame for not being enough becomes a constant and significant variable in her life:

> You know, it is already very challenging, writing a business plan, pitching, going to these crazy networking events, having a job, because neither of us have quit our jobs yet, so we are also working, and then me writing a dissertation at the same time. This is crazy, a lot at the same time! If we could also quit our jobs and focus only on the business, we would be already far away. But this is an awful lot at the same time. (R., an entrepreneur in her mid-30s)

A dense net of beliefs and convoluted requirements is traceable in the female entrepreneurial narratives connected to not being present at (mostly predominantly masculine) networking events.

Source: author's graph based on the narratives

Graph 2. *Trapped in the gaze of others and a dense net of beliefs*

The analysis also pointed out that those female entrepreneurs who juggle the responsibility of their business and being single parents at the same time face even harsher inner criticism when trapped in the gaze of others. Anita describes how the day before the interview she failed, actively caring for her kindergarten-aged daughter, and had to miss an important children's programme that happens once a year and which is very much awaited by the youngest generation in Austria. Anita could not participate in the spectacular procession, even though her daughter had been preparing for it for weeks with her teachers and friends, and the small girl could only attend it because the neighbours volunteered to accompany her. Without the active assistance of a partner or the extended family, her entrepreneurial life is filled with experiences of "hopeless juggling":

> Yesterday I was working for 16 hours, could sleep 5 hours, and unfortunately I could only actively attend my daughter for a mere hour. I had many appointments, and I was dragging her everywhere in the city until my neighbours pitied her and told me that "Hey, there is the Lantern festival today, let us take your daughter there." And by the time I was back from my last appointment, she fell asleep on the couch of the neighbours, and I had to carry her all the way up to the 3rd floor so that she does not wake up. Well, this is how it is. (A., an entrepreneur in her mid-30s)

Struggle of Becoming Self-Sustaining, Successful, and Recognized Professional in the Long Run

The interviewers asked every participant to talk about their past, which led them to start their companies. The majority of the interview subjects chose entrepreneurship after having gained experience in various sectors (e.g. state institutions or big corporations) and had hoped for "something better and easier" upon becoming independent. For some of them, it was the struggle of long and unpaid internships in the public sector, where they were appreciated neither financially nor professionally. Eva's narrative below also shows the strong wish for being seen, noticed, and respected by others as the major force behind starting her business. Being trapped in the gaze of others is also emphasized by claiming the strong urge for being able to satisfy the needs of others:

> I was so tired of working for free – I did that for five years in X [big state institution, name hidden]. (…) So, it was not that much the wish for freedom and independence. And I realized at the beginning that I still needed employment on the side to sustain myself, but the fact that I could give someone something and that was appreciated was really good. So that was my motivation first and foremost. (E., female entrepreneur in her early fifties)

In other cases, it was the continuous failure in various sectors that led women to entrepreneurship. Iris wholeheartedly believed for many years that she could contribute to the well-being of her country after it had experienced a war. After finishing her studies at the university, she worked at the non-profit sector, then at a powerful state institution, and finally at a multinational corporation, having concluded everywhere that she was not able to succeed in what she had aimed for. After migrating to Austria, gaining another degree, and opening her company, the fear of disappointment leaves its marks on how she defines her business and how she prevents herself from growing. She turns away from her primary wish to "give something to society" (a mission to which she was fully devoted) and claims that by now she has achieved her goal by "having a small child" and "not taking up much space".

> (…) And Ok, I am self-employed for six years now, but I do not imagine it as a business. I am not really developing my business. (…) My dream was exactly this: to be self-employed (…) to be able to develop myself but not too much. (…) And I have a small child, and I reached my dream. I do not want to take up more space and to develop. I was never thinking about this big business as being an entrepreneur. (I., an entrepreneur in her late 40s)

The decision to remain small, to do business, but not "such" kind of business might be an indication of buried shame in the individual. Remaining small is a metaphor for covering and protecting oneself and holding onto a false belief that if one does not even see and position herself as a competitive business, if one does not grow big and dream about changes on a social level, then she will not have to be ashamed (on a personal and social level) for not being able to succeed and triumph. Paradoxically, if her muted desire is still to contribute on a higher level, then "remaining small" purposefully will further fuel her dissatisfaction and guilt that she could have done something but failed. If her definition of success remains connected to measurable results on the social level, if she still believes that her reputation as a professional is dependent on her actions on a group/societal level, her self-evaluation might suffer in the long run.

Taking into consideration the articulated message ("what was told") and taking a further step to reveal the meaning behind the narrated segments and strategies, one can shed light on a strong, approval- and appreciation-seeking pattern. After leaving behind the academic and/or corporate world and launching their own companies, it is much more difficult to gain professional recognition and appreciation from others, especially if the person also has to juggle responsibilities of care and professional work without particular external support. Their multiple roles and often contradictory social expectations attached to these roles make it increasingly difficult to maintain well-working strategies, which might lead to such recognition, as they received previously. As entrepreneurs, the women in our sample feel that they are required to start new projects, build up a strong professional network, and be present with their product everywhere to attract prospective customers. Yet, at the same time, they also perceive the contradictory pressure to be humble and caring with their environment (professional and private) and be present for their families whenever needed.

These narratives refer to such belief systems that are articulated on a personal level but relate to a complex system of social norms and behaviours. For example, Anita, an Austrian entrepreneur, explains how her presence in the art scene is sometimes interpreted wrongly and how her entrepreneurial, maternal, and sexualized self can coexist yet occasionally even create tension and make her decide between self-respect or urge to generate rapid income. She disclosed a story of a recent event when a sudden decision had to be made and when the possibility of making a profitable business was pushed to the second place. Interestingly, in the depiction of the situation, she also relies on rather stereotypical, gendered characteristics. Firstly, she portrays herself as a talented and beautiful woman who invests in her physical appearance. Then, she refers to the image of a supporting male, her own (already elderly) father, whose presence and caring help enabled her to focus on her business. She also positions herself as a caring mother who does not neglect her child but brings her along to

venues of her enterprise, even internationally. The fact that she has arranged the exhibition and manages a team puts her in the shoes of a gifted leader. Besides, she is dominantly present in the narrative as a sexualized subject and object. On the one hand, her emphasized femininity is a result of a conscious and carefully constructed self-representation, while, on the other hand, her female body also becomes objectified and almost even monetized as an act of misinterpretation and symptom of toxic patronizing and machoism.

Table 1. *Utilized strategies, ascribed meanings, and aims in the gaze of the other*

	Strategy		Meaning	In the gaze of other	Aim to be	Meaning
If I (am)	flexible	I can	serve the needs of my family	And I will be considered	a good mother	Consequently, I deserve to be loved and appreciated.
	nice and kind to all		please all		a good person	
	always there for my children		be seen as caring, loving		a good entrepreneur	
	working all the time, everywhere		be productive		a successful entrepreneur	
	start a new venture, project		be seen as moving forward, growing		a good, kind, loving person	
	always avoiding conflicts					
	doing all the housework on my own		remain kind and caring		a good wife	
	smiling and nice all the time		please my husband and save resources		a "feminine", kind woman	
	not materialistic at all		save my husband from shame	and HE will be seen MASCULINE	and I a good wife	

Source: made by the author based on the narratives

In the spring, we were at an international art fair in Saint Tropez. I arrived there with my father – who always comes with me to help me with babysitting –, my small daughter, and an assistant. I prepared very much for this event: I collected the artefacts of many international artists, let them transport to France, prepared catalogues in English and French. And you know, I pay much attention to how my exhibition looks and also how I look. I always wear a tight black dress, high heels. As you see, I have long dark brown hair, and I always let it and my make-up done by a make-up artist before I board the plane. And then this young French guy, he was around 40 or so, rushes there. He is dressed in Gucci and Louis Vuitton, makes three rounds in my gallery to check everything, but I know he

> spotted me right away. You know, we had two mobile galleries there, right next to each other. My daughter was playing with a puzzle on the ground, my father just left for the restroom, and my assistant was busy with a client. And then this young French comes up to me and says that he will buy my entire gallery if I have dinner with him that night. And then I told him that I was very sorry but I was not for sale. I sell art but not myself. He was very pushy and was becoming aggressive. He gave me his business card, but I did not want to take it. When it fell to the ground, he raised his voice, so that the male owner of the neighbouring stand came over and asked whether I needed help. And then I told this young French that I was very sorry, neither I nor my daughter can be bought, because he kept pushing and telling me that he saw my daughter and that I did not have a wedding ring on my finger. (…) This is just one example of many from the past sixteen years. I got many invitations and offers. If I accepted it all, I would have become a millionaire. Whatever my artist made, I could sell them all at any price. But my self-respect is very high, and I never went into such a business, and I tell every woman and girl that they should not do it either. If you can reject such offers, you will become stronger. Believe me, you will be able to make better decisions in the future, but you will not be filthy rich. This is why I established an art project on sexuality so that men can keep themselves busy with that and can invest rather in that than me. (A., entrepreneur in her mid-30s)

Her strong wish to be respected as a woman, a business owner as a mother is articulated as the opposite of easy business success and long-term financial well-being. She continuously apologizes to the intruder even when she narrates the (for her seemingly upsetting) story in the interview setting. She utilizes the idea of the good mother and daughter, who serves the family and conducts the business in parallel. Yet, she acknowledges that by rejecting sexualized offers she also fails to generate income and sell the products of her subcontractors. The woman, who is proud to be supported by an elderly male and (offered to be) protected by another man (colleague) when feeling anger for having been objectified seeks the empathy of the audience: she builds the image of a good, caring mother and a supportive fellow businesswoman by providing lifestyle and entrepreneurial advice to her peers. Fearing to lose the business opportunity, nevertheless, she proposes to sell art to the (again, stereotypical) hungry male eye, in the long-run contributing to the same toxic masculine culture which objectified her and robbed her of a correct business opportunity.

Discussion and Implications

The Austrian female entrepreneur interview subjects have expressed their various coping responses either overtly or covertly with regard to the toxic work culture, which requires them to work all the time and everywhere. The analysis pointed out that many of the interviewed individuals pay a relatively high toll for having to adjust to and cope with the overwhelming pressure of the convoluted net of social requirements on the personal and professional level.

When initiating their enterprises, they all needed to reconsider their psychological and social contract with their past identities. Having learnt from past failures and challenges and having mapped the gendered expectations of their environment, some participants of this study decided to let the highly stressful pressure go by a freeze (Selye 1936, 1937) or role reduction response (Moen–Yu 2000, Becker–Moen 1999). By defining their business as non-competitive and by living with this highly restricted definition of what they are as entrepreneurs, they also prevent themselves from growing. They will continue working but by avoiding taking risks and avoiding going into situations, which might contain conflicts to preserve their preferred "small and invisible" status. In the long run, in the competition-based entrepreneurial environment, the freeze mode will inevitably result in decreased income (besides "wasted" degrees and misspent funds), which will then further increase the stress level and the unspeakable but powerful inner wish to be seen as a good entrepreneur.

Others opted for renegotiating their newly emerged entrepreneurial identity through trying to obey the imagined needs and rules of the predominantly male business (and start-up) scene. These subjects reacted to the long-term and anticipated stressors of their environment with a fight response (Selye 1936, 1937): they tend to work endless hours, are available all the time, and try to achieve more and more, which might lead to an even more elevated stress level, and, if not able to find the balance (e.g. with the cooperation of a supporting environment, therapist, a more experienced mentor, etc.), they might demonstrate exhaustion and burn-out (Selye 1936, 1937; Hammer et al. 2004), particularly when lacking social support. If the situation occurs across a longer time-span, affected individuals might leave the entrepreneurial scene.

Observing other female entrepreneurs' struggle and feelings of fear could also be spotted among the respondents of this study. Afraid of not being able to make it, of not being able to combine all, and of losing more than gaining are among the frequently mentioned fears. In this situation, which is also characterized by a continuous and elevated level of stress, next to the above-mentioned freeze and fight response, some react with a flee (Selye 1936, 1937) or role reduction (Moen–Yu 2000, Becker–Moen 1999) response. The subject will either quit her company early on or not even launch an enterprise to protect oneself from the

seemingly dangerous situation. If the sense of helplessness is coupled with a high level of stress (Seligman 1975), prospects of entrepreneurship might also be affected negatively.

Being trapped in the gaze of others, thus, internalizing stereotypical and socially prescribed characteristics of women doing business, and not living their true identity but trying to estimate the needs of their environment and act accordingly is a lived reality of our respondents, where feelings of shame (e.g. for not being enough) and guilt (e.g. imagining that they should have tried harder) are constant companions on their entrepreneurial journey. When being explicitly asked about their private lives or the "life" in their entrepreneurial work–life balance, most answers included details of housework and care work. In other words, private life was considered to equal invisible and unpaid work. If further questioned by the interviewer what constituted life, a few responses of not sufficient sleeping hours were enclosed, along with rare mentions of visits to beauty treatments, such as hairdresser's and cosmetics salons. In this latter case, the need for spending time at such venues instead of working was always supported by the argument that appearing physically beautiful can also contribute to success in business. Hence, even self-care is sacrificed on the altar of the gaze of the other in the search for approval, self-preservation, social acceptance, and belonging.

How can one escape from the maze of searching for approval? Role sharing, such as delegating venture roles or outsourcing family obligations (Hornsby–Kuratko 2003), could be helpful, yet they are not enough. If the toxic work culture can stay outside the homes of individuals, if one does not need to gain much money and be highly successful in order to receive a look of approval and love, then there is a chance that the content of life can be reconsidered in the work–life balance duo, achieving as much appreciation as work gets nowadays. If the toxic environment changes, and not only the "best of the best" get positive feedback but also the existence itself (irrespective of the entrepreneurial performance), if the society approves also of role models without particular (world-leading) accomplishment, the corresponding social discourse can serve as a compass for all who consider stepping on the pathway of entrepreneurship.

Conclusions

This paper elaborated on the results of a study on the lived experiences of female entrepreneurs in Austria. Specifically, it illustrated and discussed the meanings that female business owners attach to their enterprise and zoomed into how the glimpse of others is incorporated, verbalized, and reflected upon. By relaxing the assumption that female entrepreneurs are homogenous, relying on maximum variation sampling sheds light on the complexity of psychological consequences

that female business owners face in contemporary Austria. When studying this population in the future, it seems inevitable to apply a multidimensional and multidirectional framework that can indicate the complex set of processes and factors, internal and external to the individual, which can influence the reality of this group during planning, establishing, or running a company. Based on the findings, the article suggests that a more complex interpretative repertoire is needed to understand and then design measures (including offerings of incubation centres, school curricula, or mentoring programmes) aiming to assist this highly specific group.

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