Returnees and Local Stakeholders Co-producing the Entrepreneurial Region

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to examine how returning entrepreneurs and local stakeholders are involved in co-producing an entrepreneurial region. A theoretical framework is proposed based on two metaphors: embeddedness and translation. Moreover, the value of the framework is illustrated by a case drawn from a study conducted over a 3-year period. The work is based on a constructionist approach, and the results emerged from a narrative analysis. Our partial ethnographic methodology gives us the opportunity to follow the interaction between entrepreneurs and local stakeholders over time. The findings show that what needs to become embedded to attain regional development is an entrepreneurial attitude to life in the region, not only the embeddedness of the returning entrepreneurs and their firms. Consequently, the framework results in a perspective emphasizing the interplay over time between entrepreneurs and local stakeholders. The value of the article is that it shows how the co-production of the entrepreneurial region between entrepreneurs and local stakeholders results in a continued regional development.

Introduction

This article is a report from a research project where we investigate how entrepreneurship begins to change the way of life in a region (Anderson, 2000; Steyaert & Katz, 2004). In this article, we use an illustrative case to discuss this change in terms of how two returning entrepreneurs revitalized a region and how local stakeholders coped with this influence. In this process, we emphasize the entrepreneurs’ ambition to embed their business in the region as well as the local stakeholders’ effort to translate this same action.

At the end of the 1990s, two successful entrepreneurs returned to their place of origin about 250 km north of Stockholm. At that time, the region was in decline but the partners started there a new business that turned out to be successful. The two entrepreneurs developed their business themselves but collaborated with other local stakeholders.
Later, we saw how further entrepreneurship emerged with none of the initial entrepreneurs being personally present. Our purpose is to examine how returning entrepreneurs and local stakeholders are involved in this place-specific change of direction.

Theoretical accounts of how impossible situations may be turned into opportunities by entrepreneurs in regional settings have mostly problematized the initial steps of the process (Johannisson, 1990; Jack & Anderson, 2002; Hjorth & Johannisson, 2003; Anderson & McKain, 2004). Rather than focusing only on the role of the entrepreneur in the opening phase of regional development, we emphasize actions taken by local stakeholders. In our perspective, this is a result of local stakeholders actively translating and amplifying actions taken by returning entrepreneurs. In other words, we discuss what starts to happen around radical entrepreneurship in a region. Here, we agree with Lawton Smith et al. (2005, p. 450) when they argue that “two processes working together are important in regional development: the creativity of individuals and the effect that their presence has on others”. For this reason we will look not only at returning entrepreneurs, but also at what happens around them and what characterizes that interaction.

Adopting a social constructionist approach has advantages in understanding this process—first, because it calls for the need to understand lived experiences in their socio-cultural context and, secondly, because language is not understood as a transparent medium for communication, but problematized (Berger & Luckman, 1966). The first aspect is particularly important in our perspective, where entrepreneurship is investigated in a regional setting, emphasizing the return of two entrepreneurs to the case region being studied. To us “place” is understood in a symbolic sense, continually recreated by its inhabitants (Aronsson, 2007). The second aspect is underlined by Hjorth and Johannisson (2003, p. 75), who accentuate the roles of generative conceptualizations in entrepreneurship and “argue for a constructionist approach where processes of reality-construction are generated in an active and evocative language with a productive force”. Downing (2005) emphasizes the same argument when he shows how narratives co-produce identity of the self and the organization. In this line of thinking, language is viewed as shaping and giving perspective to identity and the reality people act on (Spinosa et al., 1997; Hjorth & Johannisson, 2003). As argued by Fletcher (2003, p. 128), the focus is on “the process through which organizational emergence is socially constructed through language”. In other words, sensitivity to language is essential in a social constructionist approach.

Our article is structured into five main parts. Following introduction, we introduce embeddedness and translation metaphors, and discuss some of their theoretical relevance to our study. The following part includes our methodological considerations. In the fourth section, we present the empirical setting, followed by a discussion of how returnees and local stakeholders co-produce the entrepreneurial region. In conclusion, we discuss the relevance and impact of our findings.

**Embedding and Translating Entrepreneurship in a Regional Setting**

Theorizing entrepreneurship in regional development, we start with two metaphors: “translation” and “embeddedness”. Using embeddedness, we want to direct our attention to the process when entrepreneurship goes native in a region. The translation concept refers to how local stakeholders act in order to live with entrepreneurship as an integrated part of their life. These images indicate that entrepreneurship is an alien phenomenon coming to a new land and being perceived as a guest, an immigrant or maybe even an
intruder. Of course, this is not literally true; entrepreneurship was known to the people in our case region before the returnees came back. But this time, for the period we report from, its presence called for translation and embeddedness. Our arguments for using these metaphors are that what happened had a marked effect on regional identity, for which we saw two interconnected reasons: the returnees brought with them a new industry (tourism and service, instead of forest, plastics, food and iron) and they awakened a national interest (the project was not only of regional but also of national interest). In other words, after the returnees’ activities, people’s picture of the region would never be the same. Hjorth and Johannisson (2003, p. 71) present the view that ‘each ‘opening phase’ is locally-contextually unique, and that this uniqueness comes from the local history and the particular ways through which a collective identity, such as the socially constructed region, is enacted’. In such situations, the vocabulary has to change. Therefore, we argue that what happened in our case region demanded local translation and embeddedness of some kind.

Translation has been used as a metaphor for organizational change (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996). Czarniawska and Sevon’s inspiration was Latour (1986), who discussed narratives about technological innovation based on a diffusion versus a translation model. In the diffusion model, the innovator takes centre stage in the explanation of how technological innovations come about. This model is similar to approaches to entrepreneurship where the entrepreneur is the point of departure in the framework, a framework questioned by Johansson in this special issue. In Latour’s translation model, innovation is developed over time by different people who get involved. Different people will produce different translations, which shape the final innovation and to some extent also the people involved. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996, p. 24) emphasize this aspect when they argue that translation “means ‘displacement, drift, invention, mediation creation of a new link that did not exist before and modifies in part the two agents’ (Latour, 1993), that is those who translated and that which is translated”. What makes the translation metaphor so useful to us is that it emphasizes how “the two agents are modified”, in our case Green (a pseudonym) and the local stakeholders. The object that people work with changes and the people working with the object change. The concept covers learning as well as unlearning. We therefore focus on translation as an activity.

Another aspect of the translation metaphor that fits well with our approach is that the concept has not been discussed earlier with reference to entrepreneurship. Latour (1986), for example, discusses innovation but not its origin. In a similar way, Czarniawska and Sevon (1996) discuss organizational change as a fact, rather than emphasizing how it happened in the first place. Accordingly, we can think of translation as a response to an initial act of entrepreneurship, and as such primarily concerned with activities performed by the local stakeholders in the region.

To discuss the establishment of Green, we use another metaphor: embeddedness. The embeddedness concept “involves finding and taking a place with others: it encompasses belonging” (Josselson, 1994, p. 98). Research shows the importance of embedding to the entrepreneur (Jack & Anderson, 2002; Johannisson et al., 2002; Watts et al., 2006; Witt, 2004). Anderson (2005, p. 592) argues that “at root, entrepreneurship is about creating new realities, transforming ideas into new ventures, transposing old ideas into new situations”. Embeddedness in this respect means, for the entrepreneur (not local stakeholders), to be anchored in a larger structure (Hornsby, 1995, in Johannisson et al., 2002).
Johannisson et al. (2002) discuss the concept of embeddedness in a context of business activities and business networks. However, how returnees anchor their business among other firms is not our prime interest. We want to problematize how entrepreneurship becomes established among people in the region. Our perspective is that entrepreneurship is more than an economic process (Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Johannisson & Olaison, 2007), and we therefore emphasize "social embeddedness".

Jack and Anderson (2002) show how social embeddedness enables entrepreneurs to realize opportunities and how the process gives access to latent resources and resources otherwise not available to entrepreneurs. This is certainly a dynamic perspective; the opportunity is a result of the interplay between activity and structure. In the authors’ perspective, opportunities emerge in interaction with a context or structure, and embedding is the process of becoming part of the same context or structure. This process appears to be particularly pertinent in our case about returnees.

Bringing new ideas to the region (Anderson, 2005), the entrepreneurs were dependent on reactions from local stakeholders. They needed to develop credibility in the local context and to acquire knowledge of local specifics. It was in this interplay that the opportunity emerged. The opportunity was so to speak "contextual", dependent on the context, and embeddedness was then naturally vital for the entrepreneurs and their activities. Jack and Anderson (2002) illustrate this when they talk about how entrepreneurs combine local history with visions about the future in a process of embedding. Further, as suggested by Jack and Anderson, it is possible to see how the embedding gave access to local resources, some of which were otherwise unavailable to either the entrepreneurs or the region. They also raise the question of over-embeddedness, indicating how anchoring could be a pitfall.

To sum up, the embeddedness metaphor helps us to discuss how the returnees establish themselves in the region.

In the discussion of context, "place" becomes a theoretical point of departure (Anderson & McKain, 2004; Lawton Smith et al., 2005). A place has its spatial coordinates but also a symbolic position in relation to some point of reference, in our case, for example, the small neighbouring community, the nearest big city or other communities with similar characteristics on a national, but also on an international basis. This symbolic position can be understood as relational, recreated by the people acting in that particular place. "Places encapsulate our history; they are the sites of agglomerated experiences, concrete palimpsests writ in stone" (Anderson & McKain, 2004, p. 77). This recreation of a place is not always an innocent sum of people’s actions, however, but sometimes a manipulated product in the hands of marketers working with "place marketing" (Aronsson, 2007). This shows how places can be consciously created and designed for a specific purpose. For us, it is enough to accept that place can be volatile. Rather than a place marketer or a conductor in our region, we see negotiation efforts as embedding activities and acts of translation.

To sum up, using the two metaphors of translation and embeddedness, we will discuss how entrepreneurship may begin to change the direction of local life. Our purpose is to examine how returning entrepreneurs and local stakeholders are involved in this place-specific change of direction. This calls for a view on entrepreneurship that includes societal aspects of regional development (Johannisson et al., 2002; Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Chell, 2007; Johannisson & Olaison, 2007). Our ambition is thus to discuss how place-specific traditions and radically new ideas combine—how local culture is recreated when entrepreneurship becomes a reality.
Methodology

When it comes to aspects of entrepreneurship sparsely investigated, exploratory studies are argued for (Johannisson, 1995; Huse & Landström, 1997; Steyaert, 1997). The same argument is raised in connection with studying process issues as in our work (Alvesson, 2002; Johansson, 2004). We therefore used a qualitative, partially ethnographic approach (Alvesson, 2002; Jack & Anderson, 2002; Gaddefors, 2005). A range of sources was used, including observation, interviews, participation in formal meetings and listening to and participating in informal conversations (Silverman, 1993; Alvesson, 2003).

The work was conducted in our case region over a 3-year period, 2005–2008. We began the work by conducting 25 interviews in the region with people from small/large and new/old firms, the municipality, schools and non-profit organizations, as well as the two returning entrepreneurs. One year later we conducted five additional interviews targeting new ventures in the region. Notes were taken from all interventions and catalogued in the order of occurrence. The face-to-face interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

Three months after we had finished the interviews in the middle of 2006 one of the authors began a part-time position as a project leader within the municipality. The project had to do with sustainable development in the region and included daily contact with people living there. The project lasted for 1 year and 5 months. This connection gave us the opportunity to further develop our ideas, to complement all questions imaginable on a day-to-day basis and to follow the change process in real time. We talked to people about what they had done as a result of the establishing of Green, as well as their thoughts on the returnees and related activities. Even in this phase of our study, notes were taken and catalogued in the order of occurrence.

We refer to our documentation, from our interaction in the region, as being “narrative accounts”. Our analysis deals with the stories that people have told us (Gartner, 2007). In our story (Czarniawska, 1997) about what happened in the region, we focused on the articulation (Spinosa et al., 1997; Hjorth & Johannisson, 2003) of what was taking place. We therefore emphasized story-making (Steyaert, 1997; Johansson, 2004) among people and the co-production of identity (Alvesson, 2002; Downing, 2005). In our work with “writing it up” (Czarniawska, 2007), we reread the stories from the field as well as our story of the field and discussed the relatedness between the stories along with making theoretical reflections. Going through this iterative process over time in the research project required a reflexive stance (Fletcher, 2007; Gartner, 2007), that is, a critical view of our own work. In the next section, we use our narrative to illustrate how returning entrepreneurs and local stakeholders are involved in the place-specific change of direction in the region.

A Region Changing Direction

The region studied is a small municipality with a population of 6000 in the lower part of northern Sweden, which is characterized by a number of small industrial districts, municipalities often dominated by one large company. In addition to this large and dominating industry, farmers with manifold pursuits are typical of this kind of community. Our case region is a good illustration of this structure. From the eighteenth century onwards the region was dominated by iron and forest industry. The local ironworks actually started as a small smithy run by a returnee, a doctor who returned from Stockholm after his
family had died of the bubonic plague. In the mid-twentieth century, a plastics industry was successfully established by a man who immigrated from a nearby region. These businesses produced snowmobiles and boats which acquired a strong national reputation. Despite a glorious past, however, the region was hit in the 1990s by a drain of young people, investments and perhaps also of hopes. Similar to other Swedish regions in the same situation, the local government worked actively (with moderate success, though) to solve the problem. However, in the region being studied, something happened around the turn of the millennium. One indication was the appointment as Årets företagar-kommun (a recognition awarded to Sweden’s most enterprising municipality of the year) in 2004.

Our story begins with the returning entrepreneurs at the end of the 1990s. With them, we argue, the direction of the region changed from a pattern of decline to one of growth. One of the entrepreneurs, with the support of the other, started up Green, which included gardens, a forestry park, a restaurant, a hotel and a garden library, and ran courses, workshops, exhibitions, concerts and other events at the facility. This represented the introduction to the region of what has been termed the “experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Our theme is to understand how entrepreneurship was involved in this change of direction in the region.

The two entrepreneurs returned to our case region from running their own separate businesses in Stockholm. One of them had run a successful garden and the other a marketing agency. Their idea was to establish a garden at the old estate, previously the residence of the ironmaster. However, a garden with roses was not expected to work this far north in Sweden. Neither was a garden in line with the technical competence that dominated the business structure in the region. Such awkward facts about Green made people suspicious about what was happening. One of the entrepreneurs emphasizes the importance of allowing fuzzy, implicit ideas in the opening phase of the venturing process, but he also argued that this curiosity should prevail in Green.

When everything is still wide open, as it is in the pioneering phase, I mean when—to be honest—you don’t really know what you’re going to do, at least not in a practical sense. There’s a multitude of invitation cards fanning out, which naturally attracts people. And as things start to gain structure and a direction, this is where we’re going—not there, we decided against that along the way ... then those openings start to narrow down. But for us, it’s important to keep opportunities open, and along the way. (Gardener returnee)

Green was not the kind of project that could be started on a small scale and then developed as time went by. On the contrary, it was highly visible from the beginning. Well aware of this, the entrepreneurs introduced the project to everyone interested at a meeting in the local church. Over 100 people came to listen, and together they started up a large number of project groups in order to solve practical problems related to the project. In other words, local stakeholders got involved in the venture as they interacted in the groups. This start made the project a regional concern rather than an internal affair for the entrepreneurs.

Parallel to the development of Green, we saw how people from the region reacted to what was happening. Almost everyone had an opinion about the events going on. Some were impressed and happy about it, others were angry because of the attention given to
the returnees, and still others said they did not care. People asked questions and made comments like: “Is this good? Why? It’ll never work. Finally something promising is happening. We’ve never done anything like this before—why should we do it now? Do we like it?” We might say that people needed to make sense of what was happening to their region.

Some of them did more than just talk: they either joined the entrepreneurs or started something up on their own. Adopting the vocabulary being introduced above, entrepreneurship was translated by local stakeholders. This translation occurred in the meeting between people. In the case region, there is a tradition of, and pride in, coming together in solidarity, e.g. in the form of volunteer associations.

You can see by the involvement in clubs and associations in the region, it’s amazingly high. There are countless groups—someone said that we had over 200 here. That also means that people are meeting and talking, and discussing things. (Citizen 1)

Often it is the same people who take part in different groups. In the small municipality one and the same person can be a politician, entrepreneur, parent, visitor to a local event as well as a member of projects, clubs and other associations. Thus, the third sector becomes a central meeting place for what we have called “translation”.

A lot of people are involved with volunteering in our region, in cultural and association activities. This also spawns creativity. It does. So it opens your horizons and boosts your knowledge. I think that culture is an incredible source of energy. (Citizen 2)

This translation was manifested in the start-up of small firms and cooperatives, and in projects run by the municipality. A lot of people in the region saw Green as a symbol of the positive development in the region. But, the fact that the public responded by starting companies can also be explained as a result of the region being the fertile ground for enterprising.

I have a feeling that, in our region, the ironworks didn’t dominate in the same way as in other factory towns. There was an opposing team here too, which I think is significant from a historical standpoint. There has existed a “they’d bloody well better not” movement alongside heavy industry. I think this is the culture we are living off now, kind of like a fertile ground. It’s not the industrial culture we live on that’s been recreated, but that very resistance movement—the one that wrote a different history … (Municipal Commissioner)

This underlines how the region was revitalized by Green in that it reminded people of or revived existing innate capacity. But Green also serves as an inspiration to others that move to the region and operate businesses there.

And then I think that Green has a role in that, too, of course. For example, artists and craftspeople that have moved in fairly large numbers and formed a collective here this spring, and that rent exhibition space from us down here that we’ve sort of taken up with even in the form of a contract. That’s often how it is with activities
that create culture, I mean—authors never get paid but they inspire and influence business activities or what you have. That’s the kind of role we have—and should have here. (Gardener returnee)

This shows how Green inspires and gives support to people to develop new organizations in the region and by those means takes a collective responsibility, an aspect emphasized by Bill, Johannisson and Olaison in this special issue. Some of the firms that were started were strongly influenced by the spirit of Green, developing art- and design-related ideas. Two cooperatives run by indigenous people have emerged, one a tourist association and the other a centre for rural interests in the Swedish countryside. Others were attracted to the region because of the general sense of movement. One example of the latter are firms related to the food industry. Parallel to the development in Green, several further food companies have moved into the region and established production there. These firms are important to the region since they employ a considerable number of people.

The municipality has started up a number of public projects with the purpose of developing the region. For example, they are working on the bus and train station as well as eldercare in the municipality being developed in the spirit of Green. In this case, they emphasize the healing aspects of gardens: the cycle of the seasons, the calming colours, the link to an older culture, a slower pace, etc. Another unexpected development is a horticultural programme run in cooperation with the nearby regional university.

I think that Green and the cooperation with the university will enable us to have an internationally known garden and international tourists here in 5–10 years, and I hope that leads to us then being forerunners—in rural development, socially, a model for how to deal with eldercare in the future, how we can solve the problems of rural areas and depopulation by developing a new industry. (Municipal CAO)

This example shows how Green has become an integrated part of the region. There are additional new firms in the region that are related as well as unrelated to Green. Some of the firms in each category are the outcome of cooperation with the local government.

We could see how people’s attitudes towards entrepreneurship changed over time. It was a strong voice in the social construction of the region. Our examples illustrate how the returnees and the local stakeholders jointly provided the local population with an understanding of what entrepreneurship may be.

Concluding Discussion

Around the returnees, entrepreneurship is highly visible, provoking to some people and exciting to others. In our case, we might say that the entrepreneurs were both loved and feared by local stakeholders, because of the spectacular actions taken. We observed three aspects related to embeddedness that seem to be of importance regarding the returnees: first, being returnees, the entrepreneurs have an advantage when it comes to assessing and developing the potential of the opportunity in the actual regional setting; second, the initial embedding of their business in the region is easier and third, returning with knowledge new to the region opens the way for the development of opportunities not (yet) recognized locally.
Jack and Anderson (2002) show how embeddedness enables the entrepreneur to interact with and create some kind of value in a region. We saw how returning to a familiar place offers an advantage when it comes to local knowledge of all kinds, such as whom to talk to, finding your way around, weather conditions, local history, local stakeholders’ capacity, etc. This knowledge is closely related to the possibility of judging the potential in the region for a specific idea. The alternatives would either be to be exposed to someone else’s judgment or possibly to know too much, resulting in a focus on shortcomings. Being a returnee also gives the entrepreneur a fair chance to make a realistic evaluation of how his life will turn out in the region. This was particularly important in our case because the returning entrepreneurs were developing not only a business activity, but a whole new way of living for the local population.

In the second respect, we saw how local stakeholders’ suspicion of new ideas was somewhat reduced as a result of the entrepreneurs being returnees, as opposed to being part of the regional population (known) or strangers (unknown). In a way, this weak relationship made the encounter with entrepreneurship less complicated. In the beginning, when the idea seemed strange and unbelievable to local stakeholders like civil servants, the fact that the entrepreneurs were known in the region lent credibility to the project. We saw the importance of being a returnee in the beginning of the process of finding and taking a place in the region (Josselson, 1994). However, we also saw that belonging to the local structure, or being over-embedded (Jack & Anderson, 2002), could be a drawback. For example, there were periods in the venture when the entrepreneurs had to ask people to leave project groups. The reason could be scarce resources or a change of strategic direction. This of course resulted in great disappointment among those involved, and the frustration affected the returnee’s degree of belongingness in the region negatively. In other words, the entrepreneurs arrived in the region with ideas which local people appreciated, but also with proposed actions which people did not like. This shows that embeddedness can be laborious and take time and also that its characteristics may differ over time. It is not only a question of getting into the region, but also of staying there for a fairly long period of time. Our argument is that being a returnee is a question of striking a balance over time between being embedded and over-embedded. To us this process can be characterized as a dialogue or negotiation between entrepreneurs and local stakeholders, a process affecting the structure or the context in the region (Jack & Anderson, 2002). In our case, this process revitalized the region and made it more entrepreneurial.

In the third respect, returning with new knowledge (Anderson, 2005), we show how an old idea, a garden, set in a new context is developed into something entirely new. On the one hand, Green is in part a copy of one of the entrepreneurs’ previous businesses. On the other, Green has developed into something completely different from his old business. One obvious reason for this is the geographical location, which borders on the northern limits for this type of cultivation (at least for roses), the garden in our case being situated further north in Sweden in a colder climate than the entrepreneur’s previous one. Regarding the possible recycling of competence, we tend to think of things such as how he handles the press, accepts uncertainty, learns from his mistakes, relates to employees, colleagues and competitors, and copes with paradoxical situations and failures. From his point of view, the entrepreneur’s involvement in the entrepreneurial process is probably better recognized as valuable expertise than as actual horticulture-related solutions to different practical problems. If we acknowledge entrepreneurship as a way of life, rather than as a business project, the copying of a previous idea has less explanatory
value, because one of the motives for moving back to the region and starting up Green was to take on a new challenge in life.

Furthermore, we saw how local stakeholders started to translate the entrepreneurial actions taken by the returnees. These processes of translation (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996) followed different patterns. One route was to follow the returning entrepreneurs, join a project group run by them or try to imitate or develop some part of their concept. Another approach was to take action without being directly in contact with the returning entrepreneurs. A third option was to do nothing. Independently of strategy, however, people frequently used the returning entrepreneurs as points of reference—when talking and acting. Actions taken were often compared with what the returnees had done and how they had done it. This conversation was constantly present and evolving, partly dependent on the topical outcome in Green. As such, the returning entrepreneurs were an important resource in the recreation of the region.

Because of their radically new approach, the returnees at Green were far more discussed among local stakeholders than, for example, some of the new firms in the region related to the food industry. Green was experienced as a new characteristic of the region (Lawton Smith et al., 2005; Aronsson, 2007), while a new food company merely added to the existing body of companies in that line of business. In other words, Green was a provoking change that no one had thought of before. The initiative was also inextricably bound to the place. It would not have been possible to relocate Green had things not turn out as planned. In our perspective, this change of the region introduced by Green had an influence on the regional identity (Fletcher, 2003; Hjorth & Johannisson, 2003). This role of Green was a frequent and engaging topic in our interactions with people from the region.

The stories of what happened in Green were an inspiration to people and they were in a way given the status of a role model (Hjorth & Johannisson, 2003). We argue that this evolving image of entrepreneurship is essential for the development of the region. At the same time, the attention and support from the media and local government were reduced compared with the attention given to the returnees. After Green it was difficult to get attention from the media unless there was something really exceptional happening. However, local people involved in entrepreneurship did not see themselves as entrepreneurs or as copying someone else’s dream (or Green). Rather, when asked, they tended to emphasize managerial virtues such as control, planning and stability in their work, although the actions they had taken were entrepreneurial. Even the local government was influenced by and even cooperated with Green on various issues, for example, work on the bus station, eldercare and the horticultural education. Story-making and the articulation of what was happening naturally continued, but the mystery of entrepreneurship receded as it took on a more familiar tone. We see this as examples of how people translated what they saw in Green and gave it meaning in their own lives (Spinosa et al., 1997; Hjorth & Johannisson, 2003). This process also gave Green access to the region, or we might say “embedded” Green in it. In other words, our example shows how history is being written in a dialogue between people from the region, returnees and others moving into the region and how tradition and radically new activities combine and change the direction of life in the region.

We are in agreement with Johannisson and Lindholm-Dahlstrand in this special issue when they emphasize the importance of balancing the functional and the territorial rationales. In our case, Green is a good illustration of this balance, showing a strong
commitment to place and an ambition to have people connected with strong ties. At the same time, their business demands re-organizations from time to time, a fact that disappointed people in the beginning when they saw, for example, that the project groups were not permanent. We see more of a local than a global outlook, but, as we have indicated in the empirical section, with the entry of Green a global perspective is emerging in the region. As for competence, before Green arrived our region was clearly dominated by focused competences. Now the combination of different fields of knowledge is a stimulating and inspiring fact, along with the focused competence tradition that is still present. We could use the local food industry to exemplify a different combination of functional and territorial rationales, but this is not the focus in our article. However, we can see the act of balancing in that illustration as well. On another level of abstraction, one might say that together Green and the food industry show how the region balances between the functional and the territorial rationales.

Our ambition in this article is to discuss how entrepreneurship begins to change the direction of life in a region, how two returning entrepreneurs revitalize a region and how local people cope with this influence. We see three aspects of social embeddedness. As returnees, the entrepreneurs in our case have a fair chance of judging the potential for the success of their idea as well as anticipating how their life in the region might turn out. A second aspect is the advantage at the beginning of the process of being a returnee. However, later on, we saw how the interaction became more demanding and that the returnees had to strike a balance between being embedded and over-embedded. By discussing the balancing act we take a step away from the positive connotations that often follow with the concept. It is not the case that more embeddedness is always better than less, or that one of the goals for entrepreneurs is to be completely embedded. This would take us to a point where entrepreneurship becomes totally integrated and as such invisible. In our case this is not what we see. On the contrary, the entrepreneurs in our case appear to be struggling with their status as entrepreneurship role models in the region. This aspect again raises the question of entrepreneurship as a way of life and the region as the place for this effort. How this struggle develops remains to be seen. We have argued for the importance of embedding entrepreneurship in the region. However, the entrepreneurs’ struggle with balancing embeddedness and over-embeddedness shows that entrepreneurship must be recreated over and over again. Thus, entrepreneurship is not like other regional assets, as, for example, investments in infrastructure, a type of resource with a long-lasting value. Our case rather indicates the importance for an entrepreneurial region of being willing to accept unexpected and provoking entrepreneurial acts again and again. When it comes to our third aspect of embeddedness, we agree with entrepreneurship scholars who claim that entrepreneurial opportunities are about taking knowledge to, and developing that knowledge in, a new context.

We argue that to achieve continued regional development, there is a need for local stakeholders to translate entrepreneurship. In our region various people are involved, and “translators” come from a rich body of people, complicating the construction of one viable story. Translation is particularly pertinent, because Green comes with a new type of industry that influences people’s image of the region. We see how local, place-specific identities are provoked and influenced by entrepreneurial action. In such a situation, story-making is subject to pressure and in this process the returnees play an important role as a point of reference. We show how local, place-specific narratives emerge in acts of co-production involving the returning entrepreneurs and local stakeholders.
We emphasize this collective translation, embedding and history-making when we show how entrepreneurship becomes accepted, almost expected behaviour in the region. From our point of view, what needs to become embedded to attain regional development is an entrepreneurial attitude to life in the region, not only to returning entrepreneurs and their firms. Our perspective might add to the discussion in entrepreneurship theory about continued social embeddedness.

In our search for entrepreneurship in the region in a broader sense, our partial ethnographic methodology has given us the opportunity to follow the entrepreneurs as well as the local stakeholders’ actions over time. Following the interaction may be a difficult task; however, this approach has made it possible for us to do so.

We are continuing our investigation of developments in the region. It is particularly interesting to see how ideas mature: how a new competence is being upgraded and how new ideas start to develop in this new setting.

References


