Irene Lehto

NARRATIVES OF INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN ENTREPRENEURIAL SELLING
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Abstract
With this study, I provide insights into international opportunities in the context of early internationalising firms and entrepreneurial selling. I study the changing meanings of international opportunities and the mechanisms of international opportunity construction that entrepreneurs narrate when making sense of these opportunities.

I contribute to the international entrepreneurship literature that takes an integrative and processual approach to entrepreneuring and international opportunity. I view international opportunities as socially, temporally and spatially situated. By drawing from the socially situated cognition approach, I direct analytical focus to the contextual, changing interpretations of international opportunity and the dynamic process of international opportunity construction.

I take a narrative constructionist approach to this study. My empirical material consists of five entrepreneurs’ narratives. They describe past, present and future international opportunities in the context of ongoing early international entry or expansion and entrepreneurial selling in international business-to-business sales negotiation.

With this study, I contribute to an in-depth, processual understanding of international opportunities. I identify multiple meanings of international opportunities as product, service, business model, relationship, and/or foreign market opportunities. By describing transformations between these manifestations of international opportunity and the interactions that produce them across diverse intersubjective spaces, I depict journeys of articulated representations of international opportunities becoming concrete opportunities. I find dichotomies within and between different meanings of international opportunities and related actions and interactions. Specialisation versus flexibility, entrepreneurs’ involvement versus professional salespeople’s involvement, and replicated versus contextually adapted processes are problematised with respect to different manifestations of international opportunity.

Keywords: international entrepreneurship, narrative, opportunity, process, selling, sensemaking
Tiivistelmä

Tällä tutkimuksella lisäään ymmärrystä kansainvälisistä mahdollisuuksista yrityksen varhaisen kansainvälistymisen ja yrittäjämäisen myynnin kontekstissa. Tutkin, miten yrittäjät merkityksellistävät kerronassaan kansainvälisiä mahdollisuuksia sekä niiden muutosta ja muodostamisen mekanismeja.

Kontribuoin tutkimuksellani kansainvälisen yrittäjyyden kirjallisuuteen, joka käsittelee yrittäjistä ja kansainvälisiä mahdollisuuksia integroivasta prosessualisesta näkökulmasta. Tutkimuksessani tarkastelen kansainvälisiä mahdollisuuksia sosiaalisesti, ajallisesti ja tilallisesti sijoittuneina. Hyödynänä sosiaalisesti sijoittuneen kognition lähestymistapaa tuodan ana-lyytisen fokuksen kansainvälisten mahdollisuuksien kontekstualisiin ja muuttuviiin tulkintoihin sekä niiden muodostamisen dynamiiseen prosessiin.


Asiasanat: kansainvälinen yrittäjyyys, mahdollisuus, merkityksellistäminen, myynti, narratiivi, prosessi
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I dedicate this work to my late sister Katja.

Oulu, April 2016

Irene Lehto
Abbreviations

etc. et cetera
i.e. id est
e.g. exempli gratia
B2B business-to-business
B2C business-to-consumers
CEO chief executive officer
cf. conferre
EEA European Economic Area
EIF early internationalising firm
eMBA executive Master of Business Administration
EU European Union
GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
ibid. ibidem
ICT information and communication technology
IE international entrepreneurship
INV international new venture
IO international opportunity
MNE multinational enterprise
M.Sc. Master of Science
N/A not applicable
OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ph.D. doctor of philosophy
SME small and medium-sized enterprise
SSC socially situated cognition
US United States
USA the United States of America
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1 International entrepreneuring, opportunities and selling

I begin this research report with my academic readings and empirical notions regarding the rise of early internationalising firms, which is a focus of international entrepreneurship research and public discussion in Finland. Why is it that new ventures seek growth outside of the domestic market? The academic literature and the media are full of success stories about start-up superstars, so-called ‘gazelles’ (Birch et al. 1995, see also Birch 1979), but do we understand the complex experiences, meanings and mechanisms involved in early and continued internationalisation? Do we neglect the voices of entrepreneurs and the perspectives of early internationalising firms when they do not suit our definition of a ‘truly’ international success story? Further, is internationalisation always necessarily a positive thing? What if, instead of looking back on what we know has become a high-growth international new venture, we try to follow the process of international entrepreneuring as it occurs and share the entrepreneurs’ uncertainty as to whether international growth will actually materialise? Finally, could we understand this process better by looking at international opportunities in the context of selling (buyer-seller interaction)?

I want to show how this all links to the start-up boom in Finland and what has become known as the ‘Finnish’ paradox: a supportive environment but little high-growth entrepreneurship. Why it is that Finnish entrepreneurs are said to have low international aspirations when the intention to internationalise may actually be very common? Is initiating and managing the international entrepreneuring process challenging, leading plans to be delayed or not executed, or does success remain moderate?

1.1 Entering the setting

The ongoing evolution of the global marketplace, including technological advances, industry deregulation and the lowering of trade barriers, has led to the increasing internationalisation of entrepreneurial firms, which seek foreign market opportunities in pursuit of growth, competitiveness and profitability (e.g., Madsen & Servais 1997, McDougall et al. 1994, McDougall & Oviatt 2000, McDougall-Covin et al. 2014). While macroeconomic changes have given rise to new market opportunities, they have also imposed new competitive threats that can drive early internationalisation (e.g., Autio et al. 2000). There is more pressure on new and
small firms to sell internationally (Reuber & Fischer 2002) due in part to the widespread acknowledgement of small firms as important international market actors (Fletcher 2004). Entrepreneurial firms’ high-growth orientation is recognised as being increasingly important to economic growth and job creation (Xavier et al. 2012: 52–53). Many governments and public sector entities encourage the internationalisation of small firms in pursuit of the positive effects that can result from successful international growth (Napier et al. 2012, Reuber & Fischer 2002). A small domestic market, such as Finland, typically urges ventures from diverse business sectors (Rialp et al. 2005) to seek growth opportunities in foreign markets (Kuuluvainen & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2011). Apart from the home country size and low domestic demand, the changing market conditions of many industries—increased specialisation and the rise of niche markets in particular—lead to the need to sell internationally (Madsen & Servais 1997). High-technology businesses in particular appear to be influenced by these changes (e.g., Autio et al. 2000, Coviello & Munro 1995, Spence & Crick 2006). However, these market conditions are found to drive the early internationalisation of small, low-technology sector firms as well (Madsen & Servais 1997). Hence, firms in both growing new and mature industries may seek rapid internationalisation (Andersson & Wictor 2003).

Starting international activities upon founding the firm (e.g., Oviatt & McDougall 1994, Madsen & Servais 1997) or within a few years of starting operations (Knight et al. 2004, Zucchella et al. 2007) involves different types of strategic approaches than those adopted to internationalise a domestically established, more traditional small firm (e.g., Bell et al. 2003, Rialp et al. 2005). Despite the need and motivation to internationalise early and rapidly, the process can often take considerably longer than expected, or it can fail. Further, a firm can be successful in initiating international business but less so in maintaining foreign sales or continuing international growth (Andersson 2015). Challenges and failures in internationalisation can relate to, for instance, the entrepreneurs’ lack of relevant experience, knowledge, capabilities and/or networks; insufficient firm resources and networks; innovation mistakes; mismanagement and flaws in the business model or in implementing the international business plan; or extrinsic factors such as timing, market forces, or regulatory, institutional and financial environments (cf. e.g., Andersson 2015, Autio et al. 2011, Cardon et al. 2011, Nummela et al. 2016, Zahra & George 2002). Furthermore, international sales do not necessarily contribute positively to overall firm growth, and small firms in particular are found
to struggle with international growth through foreign sales management (Reuber & Fischer 2002).

In Finland, young innovative entrepreneurial firms enjoy remarkable domestic media attention, high political status and increasingly positive cultural attitudes. The Finnish economy is slowly recovering from the global financial and economic crisis that hit the country particularly hard in 2009 (OECD 2014: 15), followed by the collapse of several large, established information and communication technology (ICT) companies in 2012–2013 (Napier et al. 2012). As a result, thousands of highly skilled individuals were released to the labour market, and these individuals’ entrepreneurial efforts to start growth-seeking ventures have been supported by policy makers along with the continuous development of framework conditions (ibid.). These factors have contributed to an ongoing start-up boom (Lehdonvirta 2013) and good pre-conditions for growth-entrepreneurship (Napier et al. 2012). Despite these developments, there are only a moderate number of high-growth start-ups (Autio 2009, Lehdonvirta 2013), and the performance of internationalising firms is middling (Napier et al. 2012). In 2014, only 13% of early stage entrepreneurs in Finland were found to have a strong international orientation (Stenholm et al. 2015: 22), defined by a proportion of customers outside the domestic market reaching or exceeding 25% (Xavier et al. 2012). Hence, Finnish early stage entrepreneurs have a low international orientation compared to other innovation-driven countries (Stenholm et al. 2015: 24). However, this only tells us that the number of successfully and more ‘highly’ internationalised firms is low, leaving attempts at and even successes in early internationalisation unrecognised when the scope remains lower. It does, however, support the notion that early and rapid international growth is challenging: many entrepreneurs may envision international opportunities and attempt to gain sales abroad but either enact and manage these moderately in the early stage or fail to achieve them.

Against this backdrop of a complex, changing environment and the emergence of new ventures that engage in international business early on, the research domain of international entrepreneurship (IE) began to evolve in the late 1980s (McDougall-Covin et al. 2014, see, e.g., Coviello & Munro 1992, 1995, McDougall 1989, Oviatt & McDougall 1994, 2005). The IE literature has traditionally focused on different types of international ventures and entrepreneurial internationalisation (Jones et al. 2011). The drivers, inhibitors, patterns, and pace of early internationalisation are discussed extensively (e.g., Andersson 2015, Zahra & George 2002), and much of the research has tried to explain the outcomes of early internationalisation processes and to measure the
performance of international new firms (Jones et al. 2011). Over recent decades, the IE field has broadened its initial emphasis on international new ventures and the defining characteristics of age and size (Oviatt & McDougall 1994, Rialp et al. 2005) to include a diversity of international entrepreneurial behaviours on multiple levels and to include the process of IE (Mainela et al. 2014, McDougall & Oviatt 2000, Zahra & George 2002). Notably, the concept of opportunity has received increasing interest in the IE field (Dimitratos & Jones 2005, Mainela et al. 2014) given the widely quoted definition of IE as “the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities–across national borders–to create future goods and services” (Oviatt & McDougall 2005: 540). In much of the research, the concept of international opportunity (IO) remains unspecified and is depicted abstractly, which is why a research focus on the different manifestations of IO per se is encouraged (Mainela et al. 2014). I view these manifestations as diverse and possibly changing economic artefacts (Sarasvathy et al. 2010).

1.2 International opportunities in entrepreneurial selling

In this study, I address a gap in our understanding of IO as being a socially constructed and contextual process. Specifically, my efforts are guided by the following question:

*How do entrepreneurs construct international opportunities in their narratives of entrepreneurial selling?*

First, I will examine the meanings(s) given to IO by entrepreneurs both retrospectively and during ongoing IO processes. My focus is directed on entrepreneurs’ sensemaking–their interpretation and reinterpretation, framing and reframing–of IO during international sales. Hence, I investigate IO in the highly ambiguous context of entrepreneurial selling in international business-to-business negotiations. I study contextual (spatially, temporally and socially situated) meanings through jointly constructed narrative accounts. Prior research has paid limited attention to entrepreneurs’ sensemaking in order to explore IE processes and entrepreneurs’ actions in a social context (e.g., Rasmussen et al. 2001, Zahra et al. 2005), and there is a need to extend the focus to the relational nature of IO-related action and interaction (cf. Ciabuschi et al. 2012, Fletcher 2004).

Second, I aim to gain insights into the (narrated) mechanisms involved in IO processes. Some prior studies have recognised that IO can change over time (Mainela et al. 2014); these usually focus on the origins and nature of
opportunities—discovered exogenous opportunities and/or (inter)subjectively created opportunities—and how these are contextualised (e.g., Zahra 2008). It remains, however, under-researched how IOs are constructed—transformed from perceived opportunities into designed and concrete opportunities—and how they change through sales interactions with prospects and customers. Founder-entrepreneurs’ proactive sales efforts are seen to be crucial to small, new firms’ early sales (Pitkänen et al. 2014) and IO construction in interaction with (potential) customers, but entrepreneurs’ perspectives on international selling as an activity or as a context for international entrepreneuring are neglected in the IE literature.

Entrepreneurial opportunities and innovation are discussed widely both in academic and practitioner outlets—even if the social and relational nature of the IO process remains mostly unaddressed. However, entrepreneurial selling (especially in an international context) has received very little attention in academia, despite its immense practical relevance and although the search for new business opportunities has been recognised as entrepreneurial sales behaviour (Spillecke & Brettel 2013). There appear to be many misconceptions about and strongly slanted attitudes towards selling (cf. Jobber & Lancaster 2009: 12). While the academic literature has neglected entrepreneurs’ perspectives on selling, researchers have discussed the topic in executive outlets. Onyemah et al. (2013) report the results of a global survey that shows that most founders regret waiting too long to start selling; they needed early on to learn from market needs and develop their offering based on prospects’ feedback. Additionally, these founders note that the challenges of generating early sales, such as prospect identification and articulation of a unique value proposition, made validating the offering difficult. Against this backdrop, I see that entrepreneurial selling, particularly in the highly interactive and ambiguous setting of international sales negotiation, provides a very important context for my study: early international business is generated and IOs are realised through entrepreneurial selling across national borders.

1.3 The plot of this study—marking the way through theory and practice

My study is rooted in the IE literature that combines entrepreneurship and international business (IB) research. I begin the theoretical section by reviewing the origins of the entrepreneurial opportunity discussion, which is marked with debates about the nature, origin and effect of opportunity. Much of the existing research views opportunities either as exogenous and pre-existing—eventually being
recognised or discovered by alert entrepreneurs (cf. Kirzner 1997)—or as created by entrepreneurs (Alvarez & Barney 2007). My research is founded on integrative and constitutive processual approaches that avoid being overly objectivist or subjectivist and a view of the entrepreneur as an atomistic actor (Garud et al. 2014a). I examine IOs with an emphasis on the social, temporal and spatial processes of constructing (making and finding) opportunities (cf. Fletcher 2004, Mainela et al. 2015). As IE is a multidisciplinary field, I also draw from the IB field to examine how this literature treats the concept of opportunity. I then turn to review and critically discuss the concept of IO within the IE field. I see that an integrative process approach to IO is needed to gain an in-depth understanding that is not restricted to a deterministic, linear process or a variance-based simplification and decontextualisation of the IO phenomenon.

When discussing entrepreneurial selling in international negotiation as a context of IO construction, I rely on sales and marketing, and entrepreneurship research to argue that entrepreneurial selling deserves attention as being separate from (overlapping but not identical to) professional selling or entrepreneurial marketing. I next discuss how sales is addressed in the IE and the international sales negotiation literature to add a cross-context perspective to the discussion. I then continue with the intertwined concepts of narratives, discourses and sensemaking. In this section, I draw from social psychology and organisation research, which provide rich use of the narrative constructionist research approach (e.g., Rantakari & Vaara in press) and conceptual frameworks for narrative analysis. I use the socially situated cognition approach (Smith & Semin 2004, 2007) to direct the analysis of sensemaking narratives towards those elements that emphasise the dynamic process characterising socially constructed IO. This multidisciplinary approach enables me to develop a holistic conceptual framework to analyse the entrepreneurs’ narratives: the temporal storylines, multiple meanings and process mechanisms (how and why transformations occur). This set of fresh approaches to IO in IE offers room for new perspectives based on the critical dialogue I practice between the theoretical and empirical aspects.

When shifting to the empirical study, I discuss how the narrative constructionist (see, e.g., Fletcher 2006, Sparkes & Smith 2008) research approach guides my epistemological and ontological understanding, my decisions when constructing narrative material, my analysis methods (cf. e.g., Gubrium & Holstein 2012, Riessman 2008), and my strategy when writing this research report (see Hytti 2003: 75–81). I discuss the implications of my underlying assumptions for the research process in detail because, despite the increased use of narrative data and
method in entrepreneurship research (e.g., Vaara et al. in press), my holistic narrative constructionist approach may be poorly understood (cf. Fletcher 2006) and thus judged from realist standpoints. At the very heart of my study are narratives from five entrepreneurs that I recorded over a 1.5 year time period. I re-narrate and analyse the co-constructed narratives, appreciating each as rich and informational in its own right but also comparing the narratives and findings when theorising (cf. Langley 1999). I conclude this report with a summary and evaluation of the contributions and limitations of study.

1.4 My research journey

My research journey started in late summer 2011. I had recently graduated as Master in German Philology and International Business Communication. I had zero work experience related to international business, entrepreneurship or selling, and during my minor studies, I had only had a glimpse of these topics. I was not planning a career in academia after my struggle to write my Master’s thesis. However, it happened that after a few months of searching in the local job market, I contacted a professor in International Business to ask if he could help me out by writing a recommendation—I thought that this would increase my credibility by confirming that in addition to being good in languages and communication, I actually had some business analysis skills. To my surprise, I was offered a job at the business school as a research assistant on a project instead of the reference. The job came with a catch: I needed to engage in doctoral studies. After a few days of consideration, I decided to take the challenge. Although I felt insecure about my competence, I reassured myself that I could do it. Little did I know where the process would land me four years later, after several projects, numerous start-up events, multiple entrepreneur interviews, and endless discussions with my supervisors, colleagues and anyone who would listen to me as I worked to piece the research together. The young linguist now dreams of entrepreneuring for the future. This is how the journey evolved.

Even though this research report follows the traditional order of reporting research by first introducing the theoretical background before moving to the empirical study, the research process was very much non-linear and emergent. My research journey is characterised by abduction, i.e., navigation between a series of dialectical tensions (Klag & Langley 2013). While the process was abductive in general, some phases were characterised by reasoning that leaned more towards induction or deduction (cf. Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010). My journey included
continuous iterations, analysis, critique, reiterations, reanalysis (cf. e.g., Kuusipalo 2008), and matching of theory to reality or realities (cf. Dubois & Gadde 2002), a process supported by the collaborative effort between me and the participants to gain shared understanding. On several occasions, I needed to question my preconceptions and assumptions and search for alternative meanings. Through joint narrative construction and critical reflection on this process, I finally arrived at an elaboration of the alternative, changing understandings of IOs presented in this research report (cf. e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman 2007, Klag & Langley 2013). This process centred on the goal of making conceptual leaps (Klag & Langley 2013) and theorising from the processual narrative material (Langley 1999, Welch et al. 2013, Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2014). I depict the process with the help of Klag and Langley’s (2013: 161) description of the abductive reasoning process as being characterised by the synthesis of opposites, induction and deduction, and as a dialectic “between deliberation and serendipity; between engagement and detachment; between knowing and not knowing; and between social connection and self-expression”. This is a story about my journey bridging these tensions: mixing and matching ideas, personal experiences, skills, social connections, theories and methods ‘collected’ over time and experiencing stimuli and gaining resonance for the emerging ideas from the scholarly community and the local start-up ecosystem (cf. ibid., Houman Andersen & Kragh 2011: 151–152).

The several shifts in my research focus during the journey relate to the core phenomenon and its context as well as to theoretical approaches and methodology. At the very early phase, I was planning to focus on Finnish small and medium-sized enterprises’ (SMEs’) exports and marketing communications but rather quickly shifted the focus of my theoretical readings to the international sales literature. The initial focus stemmed from my participation in a project that I hoped to use to collect data on internationalising SMEs and from my wish to utilise my educational background in philology. The change in theoretical focus particularly related to my attendance at a sales training session, at which I was forced to step out of my comfort zone by participating sales interaction exercises and to confront my biased attitudes towards selling and preconceptions about salespeople (how they are and should be like). With surely the least experience in any kind of selling among my researcher colleagues participating the training, some of who had extensive practical experience in business, I was surprised to get very encouraging feedback on my sales skills. I decided to focus on international selling as the core phenomenon of my research. Simultaneously, my practical experience in another project involved collaboration with entrepreneurs and new growth ventures. I
became actively involved in the local start-up ecosystem, attending events and following local and national success stories with great interest. Partly due to the renewed hope of collecting data from my project work, but mostly due to my awakened interest and intense involvement in the entrepreneurship ‘scene’ (I felt as though I was a part of the start-up boom), I redirected my focus. I dove into the IE literature and turned the empirical focus to founder-entrepreneurs in the context of early internationalising firms (EIFs).

My supervisor suggested that I familiarise myself with narrative methodology, so I decided to conduct interviews to collect narrative data (stories). The more I advanced in my doctoral studies, gained critical insights into different approaches to science, and became familiar with emerging streams of IE, the more I questioned the generally taken-for-granted assumptions of post-positivist and realist research. I found my ‘home’ in interpretive research approaches and set out to conduct a purely qualitative study. In the first interview, I was looking to gain deep insights into (international) entrepreneurial selling as an activity by interviewing the founder of a newly established, internationalising firm. When reading and conducting a preliminary analysis of the transcription, I focused on reflecting it against the international sales literature and the IE literature, but this left me a bit unhappy with the content. I decided to practice narrative analysis with further interview data and another interview with this entrepreneur to ‘dig deeper’ and obtain ‘better answers’ from him with regard to sales interaction. After three more interviews, I worked with the IE and international sales literature to produce the initial empirical conference papers, which had varying foci in the analysis. I then came across the concept of IO in IE literature and found that it resonated with the areas discussed with my interviewees.

I continued interviewing (follow-up and new) and writing conference papers to obtain feedback on the preliminary analysis results, but I grew unhappy with what I was doing with the data. I found the narrative constructionist and constructivist readings to be the most intriguing and influential, but when comparing my papers to these, I was unsatisfied with how I had written out my research approach and empirical study. My approach still strongly reflected conventional, realist or even post-positivist use of concepts and ways of reporting. After the final interviews, I decided to again test my ideas and become more deeply familiar with the narrative material; I no longer viewed this material as data exemplifying the ‘real’ but was comfortable accepting it as social constructions having independent value. These analyses led me increasingly to focus on IOs not as the context of entrepreneurial selling but vice versa. While I had continuously
told the participants that my focus was on their international sales experiences, the narratives appeared to reflect more of a process of developing the business and, particularly, the offering; sales appeared to be an important task and process within which opportunity construction took place. The final shift in my focus on the IO phenomenon in the context of international sales was, in a way, painful. I had fully expected and hoped to write a dissertation to define international entrepreneurial selling. However, the narratives constructed in the interviews, although also addressing this aspect, said more about other areas that I interpreted through the focus on the IO process. These intertwined processes are now discussed in this research report: I truly hope to compellingly demonstrate not only what these interesting stories tell us but also to reflect the holistic narrative constructionist approach, from its view of the world and theoretical discussions to its approach to empirical study and reporting. Fig. 1 provides a simple temporal description of the shifting focus of my process between empirical and theoretical emphasis and between different concepts and phenomena as the core and the context of the analysis.
Fig. 1. My research journey.
2 International opportunity

IE research is situated at the intersection of entrepreneurship and IB research, and the entrepreneurship literature in particular has inspired IE scholars’ focus on the concept of opportunity (e.g., Mainela et al. 2014). In the following section, I introduce the origins of the opportunity discussion—with its debates about the nature and source of opportunities (Alvarez & Barney 2010)—and discuss how the notion of IO has been conceptualised in the IE literature. I recognise the complexity of the IO concept; it requires richer cross-fertilisation of the entrepreneurship (cf. e.g., Coviello & Jones 2004, Jones & Coviello 2005) and IB research to broaden our understanding of opportunity-focused and boundary—not only border-crossing activities and processes (cf. e.g., Mainela et al. 2015). I problematise the dichotomous approaches to IO and present a social constructionist, processual perspective of IO with the aim of joining the emerging discussion of more integrative approaches to the concept (cf. ibid.). Further, I situate IO in the context of selling in international business-to-business (B2B) negotiations to discuss how entrepreneurial selling and IO formation and execution are intertwined. Finally, I suggest how to make sense of IO in entrepreneurial selling, with focus on sensemaking (discursive meaningmaking structures) by taking the socially situated cognition view of narratives.

2.1 The roots of entrepreneurial opportunity discussions

Entrepreneurial opportunity research provides IO conceptualisations with a plethora of structurally determinist and agency-focused views of opportunity (Fletcher 2006), the roots of which reach back to different streams of economic literature (Sarasvathy et al. 2010). Competitive imperfections and value creation are often seen as components of opportunity (Alvarez & Barney 2010, Casson 1982), but there is a long-lasting debate regarding distinctive modes of thinking about entrepreneurial opportunity as being recognised, discovered or created (Sarasvathy et al. 2010). In the following, I discuss not only the distinctive aspects of the different approaches to entrepreneurial opportunity but also the many appeals and attempts to integrate these views (Fletcher 2006, Murphy 2011, Sarasvathy et al. 2010).
2.1.1 Debates on nature, origin and effects of opportunity

Entrepreneurial opportunity recognition, discovery, creation, construction, development and/or exploitation have become central to research on entrepreneurial activities and processes (e.g., Ciabuschi et al. 2012, Eckhardt & Shane 2003, Shane & Venkataraman 2000, Venkataraman 1997). The field has moved from a focus on entrepreneurs’ characteristics and traits to a study of the opportunity-individual nexus (Venkataraman 1997), with a reliance on the behavioural approaches to entrepreneurship advocated by Gartner (1988) and Stevenson et al. (1989). Research interest has increasingly focused on the set of actions that create new business (Mainela et al. 2014), i.e., on a process for pursuing opportunities regardless of current resources (Stevenson & Jarillo 1990) or on “how, by whom, and with what effects opportunities to create future goods and services are discovered, evaluated, and exploited” (Shane & Venkataraman 2000: 218). One of the most cited definitions, drawing from Casson (1982) and Shane and Venkataraman (2000), is provided by Eckhardt and Shane (2003: 336): they conceptualise entrepreneurial opportunities as “situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, markets and organizing methods can be introduced through the formation of new means, ends, or means-ends relationships.” This implies that entrepreneurs construct new means, ends, or both, and their decisions involve the creation or identification of new, undetected or unutilised (not previously developed) means and ends (cf. Gaglio & Katz 2001).

Entrepreneurial opportunity studies often present a dichotomy between innovation and arbitrage opportunities (Anokhin et al. 2011) and/or between created and discovered opportunities (e.g., Eckhardt & Shane 2003, Garud et al. 2014a). Both the sources and the nature of opportunities have raised discussion (Companies & McMullen 2007). The roots of this debate lie in the classical entrepreneurship essays (Etemad 2004: 228–229) that inspired different approaches to the study of opportunities.

Discussion on the effects of entrepreneurial actions (Stevenson & Jarillo 1990) and the source of opportunities (Eckhardt & Shane 2003) is dominated by economists who see entrepreneurship as the generation of new economic activity (Mainela et al. 2014). One of the most cited debates on the foundation of new economic activity is between the proponents of Schumpeterian disruptive innovation opportunities (‘creative destruction’) and those of Kirznerian equilibrative arbitrage opportunities (fixing existing market inefficiencies) (Chiles et al. 2007, Mainela et al. 2014, Stevenson & Jarillo 1990).
Schumpeter’s (1934) seminal work on entrepreneurship proposes that an innovative combination of resources tends to create market disequilibrium. Venkataraman (1997) calls this ‘the strong premise of entrepreneurship’: while markets may approach equilibrium, entrepreneurial profit seeking and the drive to advance knowledge and technology create disequilibrium. New information about opportunities to use resources differently emerges from changes in, for example, technology or regulations and is used to create new solutions (Schumpeter 1934, see also Eckhardt & Shane 2003). These new solutions are innovated in response to changes in supply or demand (Ardichvili et al. 2003, Eckhards & Shane 2003) and are driven by entrepreneurs’ motivations, attitudes and risk propensity (McMullen & Shepherd 2006); entrepreneurs have the aim of selling them at a profit and creating new economic value in the market (Schumpeter 1934, see also Etemad 2004, Mainela et al. 2014).

In contrast to innovation opportunities arising from knowledge asymmetry, Kirzner (1973, 1997) argues that alert entrepreneurs identify market opportunities, such as unfulfilled needs, and that these opportunities exist even without new information; arbitrage opportunities are objective and result from exogenous shocks in existing industries or markets (see also Alvarez & Barney 2010, Eckhardt & Shane 2003). Venkataraman (1997: 121) names this the weak premise of entrepreneurship, as it assumes that “in most societies, most markets are inefficient most of the time, thus providing opportunities for enterprising individuals to enhance wealth by exploiting these inefficiencies.” An arbitrage opportunity is not about creating novelty value (Mainela et al. 2014) but about modifying existing resource combinations to address market inefficiencies and move the market towards equilibrium (Kirzner 1997, cf. Anokhin et al. 2011, Eckhardt & Shane 2003).

Sarasvathy et al. (2010: 79) identify three streams of economic literature relevant to entrepreneurial opportunity research: the market as an allocative process and opportunity as a function of putting resources to better use (Hayek 1945); the market as a discovery process and opportunity as a process (Knight 1921); and the market as a creative process and opportunity as a set of decisions (Buchanan & Vanberg 1991). These early economic works have influenced scholars’ attempts to bring together the micro-macro approaches to entrepreneurship (Garud et al. 2014a), resulting in studies that advocate for either a discovery-oriented or a creation-oriented perspective, i.e., for individual-opportunity nexus theory (e.g., Shane & Venkataraman 2000) or for opportunity creation theory (e.g., Gartner 1985), to explain how opportunities are formed (found or made).
A behavioural perspective of entrepreneurship and opportunity has been proposed by researchers who see that changes in pre-existing industries and markets or new inventions give rise to an opportunity discovery process during which entrepreneurs form and exploit opportunities that exist independent of them (Alvarez & Barney 2007, 2010, Mainela et al. 2014). Opportunities arise from exogenous shocks that result in competitive imperfections (Kirzner 1973), and the alert entrepreneur (Kirzner 1997) recognises and exploits these opportunities, hence, introducing agency (Shane 2003, Shane & Venkataraman 2000). Austrian economists in particular have contributed to the opportunity discovery discussion since the early works of Hayek (1945) on knowledge enhancement through market interaction, Mises (1949) on the market as an entrepreneurially driven process, and Kirzner (1973) on entrepreneurs’ alertness (see also Kirzner 1997). There are two alternative explanations of the discovery process, with authors focusing on intentional search or on the recognition of pre-existing opportunities (Shane 2000). Kirzner (1997: 72) argues that unknown profit opportunities are discovered and do not result “from successful search (relevant to the deliberate production of information which one knew one had lacked)”. Hence, the entrepreneurial process of equilibrating the market is characterised by opportunity discovery involving the element of surprise. “The notion of discovery, midway between that of the deliberately produced information in standard search theory, and that of sheer windfall gain generated by pure chance, is central to the Austrian approach” (Kirzner 1997: 72). Park (2005) notes that this arbitrage opportunity model, which emphasises the entrepreneur’s knowledge and natural alertness as an enabler of opportunity recognition and exploitation, later evolved towards a model with a more active entrepreneur: calculated and systematic search became involved in the identification of value differences.

A newer approach to opportunity-focused entrepreneurial behaviour assumes the endogenous formation of opportunities by entrepreneurs through enactment processes (Alvarez & Barney 2007, 2010). These ‘creation opportunities’ (Venkataraman 2003) result from entrepreneurs’ imagination and activities (Venkataraman & Sarasvathy 2001) and are attributed to, for example, individual’s beliefs, capabilities, and understanding of resources (Garud et al. 2014a). Buchanan and Vanberg (1991: 167) describe the “nonteleological open-endedness, creative, and nondetermined nature of evolutionary processes” present in market creation. They claim that choice and action can be creative instead of reactive; this leads to a continuous outward push on the “potential value frontier” and modification of “the parameters to which reactive participants must respond” (Buchanan &
Vanberg (2002: 123). Another highly subjective view is proposed by Chiles et al. (2007: 467), who stress how Lachmann’s approach, according to which “entrepreneurs create opportunities through expectations of imagined future and exploit opportunities through continuous resource combination and recombination”, enables the examination of patterns of entrepreneurial activity while taking into account subjectivity, context and multiple levels of analysis (see Lachmann 1976, 1990). Lachmann shares other Austrian economists’ view on entrepreneurial action driving the market as economic process but extends “subjectivism beyond individuals’ interpretation of past experience, to include expectations of an imagined future”; ‘creative imagination’ (Lachmann 1986) is joined with choice in “subjective mental [ex nihilo] creations” (Chiles et al. 2007: 473).

Sarasvathy’s (2001) approach partly connects with the Lachmannian view in terms of its focus on the entrepreneurial process, including creative action and imagination, and on the temporal aspect (future-orientation) of the process (Chiles et al. 2007). Bricolage, i.e., making do with the things at hand (Lévi-Strauss 1966) to e.g., recombine resources in order to create new ones (Baker & Nelson 2005), and effectuation, i.e., controlling an unpredictable future by making use of resources within one’s control in combination with the commitments and constraints of networks to create new artefacts (Sarasvathy 2001, Sarasvathy et al. 2014), are creative processes. Their outcomes are moderated by the external environment because, e.g., feedback “serves as the basis for the modification of entrepreneurial beliefs” (Garud et al. 2014a: 1180). However, while the creation view tends to treat context as moderating the viability of opportunities–as opposed to moderating the availability of opportunities, as in the discovery view–a more dynamic view is taken by, e.g., Chiles et al. (2010). These authors treat context as both the medium and the outcome of action and treat the process of entrepreneurial opportunity creation as ongoing and changing (Garud et al. 2014a). While there are theoretical efforts that discuss the co-emergence of entrepreneurial agency and context (e.g., Chiasson & Saunders 2005, Chiles et al. 2010, Shane & Venkataraman 2000), these co-creation perspectives of opportunity “stop short of theorizing how entrepreneurs contextualise their activities” (Garud et al. 2014a).

As noted by Mainela et al. (2014), while many studies treat opportunity discovery as contradictory to creation views (e.g., Alvarez & Barney 2010), some see opportunity formation and recognition as complementary processes (e.g., Chiasson & Saunders 2005) and point to an integrative recognition-construction mechanism in entrepreneurial behaviour (e.g., Vaghely & Julien 2010). Some scholars see that the Schumpeterian and Kirznerian entrepreneur are
complementary and must coexist, as the former creates disequilibrium and the latter initiates movement towards a new equilibrium (Chiles et al. 2007). Zahra (2008) proposes integrating the creation and discovery approaches, stating that discovery and creation form an ongoing, dynamic cycle that is self-regenerating and self-reinforcing: discovery stimulates future creation and vice versa. However, while research on both types of opportunities and their formation mechanisms may be complementary, Alvarez and Barney (2007) see that one opportunity cannot have the attributes of both. Situations promote either the creation or the discovery of opportunities because these largely rely on different, mutually exclusive sets of epistemological assumptions (Alvarez & Barney 2010). Berglund (2007: 243) also notes the ontological dichotomy of objectively existing versus socially constructed opportunities and suggests a framework that sees opportunities “as both existing and created in the evolving set of perceptions and projections, sometimes fixed and sometimes mutable”; he further acknowledges cognitive and practical drivers of entrepreneurial action. Multiple and partly contradictory approaches to opportunity are encouraged, as they carry the potential to generate insights that would not be reached by taking a unitary theoretical approach, but it is necessary to be explicit about the ontological and epistemological stances used in conceptualising opportunity (Alvarez & Barney 2010, Mainela et al. 2014, see also Alvesson & Deetz 1996).

2.1.2 A call for an integrative approach to opportunity

Sarasvathy et al. (2010: 77) note that much of the literature drawing from Schumpeter and Kirzner assumes that new information/inventions will be traded or become embodied in economic goods but do not discuss the mechanisms or processes through which this new information transforms into new economic goods or entities. The allocative process view focuses on the effects of opportunity creation; the discovery process highlights the source of opportunity, taking the end result as inevitable; and the creative process view stresses decisions and actions, thereby accounting for both the origins and the results of these decisions and actions (ibid.: 94). Steyaert (2007: 470) stresses that the creative process view fundamentally differs from the “mainstream approaches that conceive of entrepreneurship as being located in a stable world, that work with a logic of causation and that, consequently, emphasize entrepreneurial activities as a kind of allocation or discovery.” Sarasvathy et al. (2010: 94) suggest taking an integrative approach to enable emphasis on the contingencies in these approaches. They see
entrepreneurial opportunities as consisting of ideas or inventions with potentially valuable results, beliefs enabling the achievement of these results, and actions that generate and implement (create) the results through specific, envisioned new economic artefacts such as products, services and/or firms and markets (ibid.: 79, cf. Venkataraman 1997). This definition goes beyond strictly subjective or objective ontological notions and takes a pluralistic stance by both considering the agent who perceives opportunities and addressing the requirement that the agent act for the opportunity to take shape and have meaning (Sarasvathy et al. 2010: 79).

Further, Murphy (2011) rejects one-dimensional logic and emphasises the role of both subjective knowledge and objective externalities in both purposeful and unanticipated opportunity discovery.

An integrative and processual approach is called for (e.g., Fletcher 2006, Zahra 2007) because entrepreneuring as a concept enables a ‘thicker’ understanding of the entrepreneurial process by avoiding the object-subject dichotomy and locating the process in time, the lived world and experience (Steyaert 2007). The pursuit of opportunity is seen as a permutation of the emergence process and entrepreneurship as the emergence of organisations (Gartner et al. 1992). Gartner et al. (1992: 25) ground the opportunity process in an expectancy-oriented model: “entrepreneurs interact with different types of individuals who have different expectancies of the outcomes of interaction in an emerging organisation”; for example, the entrepreneur must understand the reasons that potential customers will buy from the new firm. A further step towards a more holistic approach to the opportunity process is taken by Dutta and Crossan (2005), who propose a multilevel, social perspective on the formation, development and realisation of entrepreneurial opportunities. While the origin of action towards entrepreneurial opportunity is in the entrepreneur’s preconscious reflection, opportunity formation is a conscious, iterative process circling between creation and discovery, as network actors interact with one another. The process consists of opportunity development, involving individual entrepreneurs, firms and public institutions and of opportunity exploitation, involving the deliberate decisions of individuals (cf. Åkerman 2015).

### 2.1.3 The entrepreneurial opportunity process from the narrative perspective

Garud et al. (2014a) propose taking a narrative perspective of opportunities. This allows appreciation of the entrepreneurs’ own efforts to organise and make sense of their experiences (see also Bruner 1986, Czarniawska 2004) instead of using the
researchers’ a priori assumptions regarding the context and boundaries of opportunity formation. Through relational, temporal and performative efforts, entrepreneurs contextualise opportunity and locate the boundaries of their agency (Garud et al. 2010, 2014a, Garud & Giuliani 2013). This approach responds to Steyaert’s (2007: 472) call for the use of notions such as enactment, narration and discourse to make concrete the conceptual potential of the entrepreneurial opportunity process. In this approach, “processual theories are not in a dominant position”, but their value is recognised (e.g., Fletcher 2006, Steyaert & Katz 2004, Zahra 2007).

There are a variety of approaches used under the umbrella of narrative and social constructionist research (Fletcher 2006), and while they share the avoidance of determinist and dualist explanations of entrepreneurial processes, they “differ in the amount of agency they ascribe to individuals and in the ways they explain the interplay between agency and structure” (Steyaert 2007: 462). Whereas the social constructivist approach directs attention to the (usually individualised) cognitive processes of mentally constructing meaning through the use of ‘socially mediated categories’, the social constructionist approach focuses on the interplay between agency and structure and takes practices as being socially and culturally situated (Steyaert 2007: 461, see also Fletcher 2006). The relational constructionist approach (Fletcher 2006) focuses on the relatedness of individuals and their past and future interactions, relations (Fletcher & Watson 2007) or discourses and the relational processes that represent and enact the social and material world (Hosking & Hjort 2004); it enables a view of opportunity emergence as a relational activity. The notion of relatedness connects the narrative, relational constructionist approach to actor-network theory and radical processual studies (Steyaert 2007). The various narrative approaches enhance our understanding of entrepreneurial processes as being embedded and contextual (Steyaert 1997) because stories are not merely individual ‘voices’; they re-enforce (macro-)cultural metaphors and discourses that simultaneously limit and facilitate the thinking and narrating of entrepreneurs (Steyaert 2007).

Steyaert (2007) encourages scholars to embrace relationality, recognising the possibilities of the social ontology of reality (becoming) in entrepreneuring research. Social constructionist approaches allow one to step away from the individual-opportunity nexus to study the entrepreneurial opportunity process from a dialogical/conversational perspective. Garud and his co-authors (Garud & Giuliani 2013, Garud et al. 2010, 2014a) have taken a narrative perspective accompanied by relational ontology, informed by actor-network theorists such as
Latour (2005), in studies that focus on two drivers of the entrepreneurial opportunity processes: the boundaries of opportunity and agency emerging in and through (inter)actions (Garud & Giuliani 2013), i.e., ongoing relational processes between individuals and artefacts, and meaningmaking (cf. Weick et al. 2005). In other words, agency is constituted through existing and expected relationships across elements (social and material) that are recombined from different contexts (Garud et al. 2014a). Entrepreneurs contextualise opportunity and establish credibility and identity through narratives that emerge from interactions with different stakeholders and, hence, “reflect not just the aspirations and motivations of the entrepreneurs, but also bear an imprint of the inputs that stakeholders offered” (ibid.: 1182).

As time (past, present and future) is an endogenous aspect of narratives, the narrative approach enables entrepreneurial agency and opportunities to be examined as temporal, distributed and emergent (Garud et al. 2014a, Garud & Gehman 2012, Garud & Giuliani 2013). Meaningmaking takes place “in the interaction between relational space and durational time” (Garud & Giuliani 2013: 158). Narratives also encompass a performative aspect because they prompt action towards (continuously changing) goals (Garud et al. 2014a). Entrepreneurial journeys are dynamic, unfolding processes that involve both the discovery and the creation of opportunities. They require constant adjustments by entrepreneurs (Garud et al. 2014a, Garud & Giuliani 2013).

2.2 Opportunity in the entrepreneurial internationalisation process

The rapid international expansion of new ventures has received increased scholarly attention, particularly since the late 1980s (e.g., McDougall-Covin et al. 2014) and McDougall’s (1989: 387) seminal paper defining international new ventures (INV) as “new ventures or start-ups that, from inception, engage in international business, thus viewing their operating domain as international from the initial stages of the firm’s operation.” Investigation of this type of entrepreneurial behaviour led to the emergence of the IE discipline, which combines entrepreneurship and IB research (McDougall & Oviatt 2000, Jones & Coviello 2005) In particular, the early papers by McDougall et al. (1994) and Oviatt and McDougall (1994: 49) catalysed IE research, the latter defining the “international new venture as a business organisation that, from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and sale of outputs in multiple countries”. Existing internationalisation theory has been criticised for its inability to explain the
formation of INVs—particularly the young age at which internationalisation is important (Oviatt & McDougall 1994, Zahra 2005); this criticism has been directed at assumptions that a firm needs to own resources to internationalise or that internationalisation is primarily explained by experientially increasing foreign market knowledge and thereby gradually increasing foreign market commitment (Johanson & Vahlne 1977). The early research focus was on the INV, or born-global firm (Knight & Cavusgil 1996): the young age of the firm at the time of internationalisation was seen as the source of competitive advantage along with the antecedents and pre-conditions—the push and pull factors (e.g., Rialp et al. 2005)—of INV emergence (Mainela et al. 2014). Zahra (1993) took on the notion of corporate entrepreneurship. Later, the IE research focus shifted to actions and behaviour more generally, and McDougall and Oviatt (2000: 903) defined IE as “a combination of innovative, proactive and risk-seeking behaviour that crosses national borders and is intended to create value in organizations”. Hence, regardless of the firm age and size, focus now extended to include corporate entrepreneurship (e.g., Jones & Coviello 2005) and individual, group, and firm-level activities (Oviatt & McDougall 2005).

While IE studies often heavily rely on concepts and lines of thought stemming from entrepreneurship research, the theoretical interest complementing IB research should not be undermined: both include behaviour and the processes of value creation through unique resource combinations for opportunity exploitation (Jones & Coviello 2005, see, e.g., Johanson & Vahlne 2003, Morris et al. 2002). While the process view remains implicit in McDougall and Oviatt’s (2000) behavioural definition of IE, sharing behavioural process as a foundation allows a conceptualisation of entrepreneurship and internationalisation as interdependent processes (Jones & Coviello 2005). Jones and Coviello (2005) emphasise the process view by taking a temporal lens to entrepreneurial internationalisation: they offer a more behaviouristic view by incorporating change as the result of external, environmental triggers and causing adaptation as a response. It is, however, important to view entrepreneurial internationalisation as time-based and time-dependent. Further, they note that time has a cyclical impact on the interaction between environment, firm and entrepreneur and on their impact on internationalisation behaviour. Jones and Coviello (2005: 299) see the latter as a firm-level activity “manifested by events and outcomes in relation to time”.

The notion of opportunity was already discussed by early internationalisation process theorists (Mainela et al. 2014), who observed that perceived opportunities and risks in foreign markets impact firms’ internationalisation behaviours and that,
in turn, market commitment influences the perceived risk and opportunities (Johanson & Vahlne 1977). Additionally, research examined how managers learn about export market opportunities by interacting with their international business counterparts and by exploiting these opportunities (e.g., Wiedersheim-Paul et al. 1978). Bloodgood et al. (1996) depicted marketing-oriented firms’ internationalisation as a response to their external environment and as a pursuit of emergent market opportunities. In this line, internationalisation is a “means to pursue new market ventures, compensate for domestic market share loss, and generally increase profits” (Knight 2000: 20). The risks and uncertainty caused by contextual differences in the international market have been a persistent topic in internationalisation research (Ellis 2011, Mainela et al. 2014), but these differences can also provide Kirznerian discovery opportunities by producing unexpected events during the international expansion process (Hohenthal et al. 2003). In the updated internationalisation process model, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) place more emphasis on opportunity—an aspect from the original paper often ignored and indeed under-emphasised in its explanation of experiential learning—and combine it with the network perspective. They view opportunity in internationalisation as follows (ibid.: 1420):

“[…] opportunity development is an interactive process characterized by gradually and sequentially increasing recognition (learning) and exploitation (commitment) of an opportunity, with trust being an important lubricant. It follows then that the process of opportunity identification and exploitation in the network perspective is very similar to the internationalization process and to the relationship development process.”

Hence, internationalisation research—with its increased focus on interaction, on international networks as enabling access to and exploitation of contextual knowledge, and on unexpected occurrences caused by foreign market uncertainty as a source of opportunity—inform IE research, whereas the conceptualisation of opportunity stems from the entrepreneurship discipline (Mainela et al. 2014).

Simultaneously with developments in the IB field, behavioural process-focused examinations of IE, stemming from the strategic management literature (Oviatt & McDougall 2005, see, e.g., Covin & Slevin 1989), started incorporating the notion of opportunity. For example, Zahra and George (2002: 261) define IE as “the process of creatively discovering and exploiting opportunities that lie outside a firm's domestic markets in the pursuit of competitive advantage”. Noting the increased emphasis on entrepreneurial opportunity in the entrepreneurship
discipline, Oviatt and McDougall (2005: 538) also offered an updated and widely cited definition of IE as “the discovery, enactment, evaluation and exploitation of opportunities—across national borders—to create future goods and services.” This definition draws from the entrepreneurship literature (Shane & Venkataraman 2000) by incorporating both opportunity discovery and enactment into behaviour beyond new firm creation and activities (Oviatt & McDougall 2005). Soon after, Mathews and Zander (2007: 389) provided a dynamic, processual conceptualisation of IE as the discovery and exploitation, i.e., resource (re)deployment and engagement with competitors, of new business opportunities in a cross-national context. They connect this process to organisational and industry immaturity.

2.3 International entrepreneurial opportunity

Opportunity studies in IE can stem from the intersection of IB and entrepreneurship research, but many particularly rely on conceptualisations adapted from entrepreneurship research. There are alternative approaches to IO; these often stem from dichotomies and discussions in the entrepreneurship literature. Next, I discuss the varying conceptualisations of IO, focusing on how they are particular to IE. Thereafter, I address the more recent, calls for, and attempts at, integrative approaches to IO and the promising focus on the boundary crossing nature of IO activities. I summarise how the theoretical background for IO conceptualisation in this study draws from the entrepreneurship and IB literature in Fig. 2.

2.3.1 Conceptualising international opportunity for international entrepreneurship

The notion of opportunity has gained increasing interest in the IE field (Dimitratos & Jones 2005), particularly among studies that adopt Oviatt and McDougall’s (2005) opportunity-centred definition of IE. Although many studies incorporate the concept of IO, it is often depicted in an abstract, unspecified way (Mainela et al. 2014). Mainela et al. (2014) review IO related articles from 1989–2012 and group them in four streams: (1) the realisation of IOs in INVs and MNCs, (2) international market arbitrage discovery as the basis for international business, (3) context embedded IO development through entrepreneurial processes, and (4) IOs resulting from actions and interactions in daily activities. The first group views IO as the combination of distributed knowledge and latent resources used for the formation of INVs (e.g., Di Gregorio et al. 2008, Knight & Cavusgil 2004, McDougall et al. 2004).
1994, Oviatt & McDougall 1994) or the renewal of MNCs (e.g., Birkinshaw 1997, Webb et al. 2010, Williams 2009). These studies acknowledge IO discovery as central to starting international entrepreneurial behaviour but do not examine IO as such. The second group of studies examines the capture of arbitrage opportunities in foreign markets and focuses on the captured external market opportunities (e.g., Crick & Jones 2000, Dimitratos et al. 2010, Ellis 2011, Oviatt & McDougall 2005). These studies treat IOs merely as opportunities to internationalise and suggest that entrepreneurial cognition and networks explain new market entries. The third and emerging stream of studies focuses on the dynamic and socially constructed nature of IOs and treats entrepreneurial activity as contextually embedded and cross contextual (e.g., Baker et al. 2005, Mainela & Puhakka 2009, Zahra et al. 2005). IOs are seen as the result of iterative cognitive processes (sensemaking) and enactment in changing social settings. The fourth stream of research looks at the IOs developed in internationalisation processes through daily actions and interactions (e.g., Fletcher 2004, Johanson & Vahlne 2006, 2009). Placing varying attention on the role of context(s), these studies separate IOs from (entrepreneurial) opportunities based on their cross-border (-national) character.

The cross-fertilisation of IE with the entrepreneurship discipline is often called for (e.g., Coviello & Jones 2004, Jones & Coviello 2005), and entrepreneurship research does provide multiple conceptualisations of opportunity that could be used as a basis for defining IO in IE. Mainela et al. (2014), however, note that there is a need to build on the particularities of IE when expanding the understanding of IO in the field. Because the concept of IO has only recently been considered in the core of IE research, IO has rarely been used as the unit of analysis and defined as distinct from entrepreneurial opportunity. Mainela et al. (2014: 120) provide a broad definition of IO as “a situation that both spans and integrates elements from multiple national contexts in which entrepreneurial action and interaction transform the manifestations of economic activity”. They acknowledge IO as a complex concept and emphasise the different and changing (cf. Zahra 2008) manifestations of opportunity. Thus, their definition allows for different approaches–innovation, arbitrage, discovery, creation, and combinations thereof. The researchers also encourage future research to examine IO per se (see also Chandra et al. 2012).

Whereas entrepreneurship studies have indicated that opportunities may change over time (Zahra 2008) and that transformation is the core of entrepreneurial opportunities (Klein 2008, Venkataraman et al. 2012), the process of transformation is largely omitted from the scope of IO studies. Etemad (2015: 172) notes how IO realisation systems are progressively generated: an IO that is
Kirznerian or Schumpeterian at the outset will gradually converge into hybrid processes and “gradually transcend contextualization and transformations” for local settings. Mainela et al. (2014, 2015) note that transformations address the change of an object based on its relationship with its context. Future studies of these relationships are encouraged, as border-crossing IOs present a particularly fruitful setting. It is crucial to explicate the international element with more than a simple notion on exchange across country borders and to clarify “the features of the cross-border situation” and its impact on IOs and their development (Mainela et al. 2014: 120). Hence, a contextualised and situational view is needed in studies that address evolving IOs and their realisation in highly ambiguous settings. IOs require a dynamic view that captures how they span diverse contexts and integrate elements across them and how this affects the nature and development of the IO (ibid.).

2.3.2 Towards an integrative approach to boundary-crossing international opportunities

While the IE studies addressing IO introduce important and promising notions, the concept of IO remains abstract and the discussion of IO-related behavioural (e.g., Schweizer et al. 2010) and cognitive processes (e.g., Zahra et al. 2005) is limited. Despite repeated calls for integrative theoretical and methodological approaches to IE (Coviello & Jones 2004, Wakkee 2006) and IO (Mainela et al. 2014), few studies address “both the material and social construction of international opportunities” (Mainela et al. 2015: 175). Moving towards an integrative approach to IO in this study, I rely on Mainela et al.’s (2015) dynamic perspective that IOs are both made and found, comprising action and interaction and emerging through transformative processes (see also Venkataraman et al. 2012). I particularly emphasise the social constructionist (Fletcher 2006) point of departure and distinguish my approach from a strictly subjective (constructivist) view that focuses on individuals’ cognition or a purely objective (post positivist/realist) aspect that emphasises the causal logic of actions and events.

Only few studies discuss IO as socially constructed and context-embedded (Mainela et al. 2014), although entrepreneurship is seen as social and spatial (Low & McMillan 1988). With this study, I join the still underdeveloped streams of IE studies that see IO envisioning and enactment as the result of actions and interactions over time (e.g., Fletcher 2004) and located in a wider social context that is continuously changing (e.g., Zahra et al. 2005). In contrast to most IO studies, which propose the discovery vs. creation dichotomy, I do not view opportunities as
inherently pre-existing, exogenous and purely objective realities awaiting deliberate or unanticipated exploration by alert entrepreneurs (cf. e.g., Chandra et al. 2009). IO discovery studies often discuss entrepreneurial agency in relation to IO perception: the alertness and intention of individuals are essential to opportunity search and discovery (Dimitratos & Jones 2005, Shook et al. 2003), but the role of individuals’ imagination, actions and interactions is underemphasised in the IO formation process. Neither do I consider opportunities as a merely subjective result of entrepreneurs’ imagination and knowledge (Klein 2008), i.e., as something formed ‘in the head’ of the individual, influenced by their actions and interactions with others. The opportunity enactment perspective directs attention to the entrepreneur in a context and sees interplay between the entrepreneur and that context (e.g., Baker et al. 2005; Zahra et al. 2005), but it overemphasises the individual entrepreneur’s cognition and action at the cost of neglecting the relational nature of opportunity and the process of co-creation (Ciabuschi et al. 2012).

Integrative approaches avoid the dichotomy of IOs’ nature and origin by accepting both the ‘found’ and the ‘made’ approaches and treating some opportunities as discovered and some as created (Oviatt & McDougall 2005, Short et al. 2010, Whittaker et al. 2009) or by viewing discovery and creation as coexisting and mutually enriching IO processes (Zahra 2008). For example, Oyson and Whittaker (2015) escape the discovery vs. creation debate by treating the objective and subjective elements as intertwined. They see that entrepreneurs discover IOs either by acquiring knowledge about them (through networks, market knowledge, queries, solicitation by foreign distributors or customers) or by imagining them. After discovery, these potential opportunities are evaluated and created, i.e., transformed into concrete IOs that embody the elements of customer, product and capabilities, for exploitation. This view provides the basis for a stronger processual view for examining IO behaviour. However, discovery (deliberate or spontaneous) is seen as a solely cognitive process, which emphasises constructivist epistemology and undermines the social and relational, intersubjective and contextual perspective on the ‘source’ of IOs. The subsequent transformation, i.e., the creation of IOs, is seen as a purposeful and deliberate process involving both cognition and action. Again, the emphasis on the individual undermines the relational nature of IO, but the researchers’ recognition of the process of transforming perceived/potential opportunities emerging in different ways into concrete IOs and exploiting them inspires the behavioural process view of my research.
I see cognition and action as central to this process but feel that it is necessary to consider the contextual embeddedness as well as the social and relational aspects of the IO process. I will further elaborate on the underlying philosophical underpinnings of the similarities and differences; these enable me to draw from these types of integrative approaches but also distinguish my research focus from the above examples. Here I briefly note that Oyson and Whittaker (2015) rely on critical realism and ‘epistemological constructivism’, assuming an external reality that exists independent of individual knowledge but that is subjectively experienced and created. I share their view in recognising that there is a physical reality, but I emphasise that this coexists with a social reality. Hence, I emphasise socially constructed meanings, local and community-found forms of knowledge, ‘interacting forms of truth’ (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010: 101) and socially situated cognition (Smith & Semin 2004, 2007) rather than purely subjective cognition and a single objective external reality.

Mainela et al. (2015: 174–175) also formulate an integrative approach to move beyond viewing IO “as either a sophisticated manipulation of dispersed information or a social construction of a previously non-existent concept”. I follow their argument that IO is a combination of elements from both views (cf. Venkataraman et al. 2012). IOs are made and found at the “borderline between existing and potential objects” (Mainela et al. 2015: 177). They are designed at the intersubjective boundaries of shared experiences, a context that brings together different intellectual, linguistic and practical views as well as conflicting elements and interests (cf. e.g., Williams & Lee 2011). In this space, new meanings are created by transforming symbolic and concrete resources for IOs (see also Selden & Fletcher 2015, Venkataraman et al. 2012). This integrative view allows my study to take a more ‘social’ and contextual approach to the IO process, in which I particularly incorporate the notions of intersubjective boundaries and transformation. In addition, Mainela et al.’s (2015: 175) notion of “historically produced and institutionalized actions and artefacts”, which provide the symbolic resources utilised in the production of practices and discourses when creating new economic activity, supports my approach to the narrative construction of IOs.

The found or made dichotomy stemming from the entrepreneurship literature is not the only aspect that requires an integrative approach to overcome unidimensional logic. A further integrative aim relates to the interdisciplinary nature of the area under study and can be addressed with the perspective described by Mainela et al. (2015). IE studies involve behavioural processes focused on
opportunities and border crossing (Mainela et al. 2015, Oviatt & McDougall 2005), but many studies appear to focus on one of these at the expense of the other.

A focus on operations that involve crossing national borders—an activity that is usually considered to be challenging due to contextual differences—originates from the IB literature and represents an early but enduring theme of IE studies (see, e.g., Zahra 2005). Less focus has been given to IO, as noted in the review of Mainela et al. (2014). In this study, I also combine the IB and entrepreneurship discipline by examining both border crossing and the opportunity process (see Fig. 2). Opportunity is a concept with a positive connotation and is considered to be a future-oriented activity, whereas border crossing can have a negative connotation and is seen as present-oriented: an entrepreneur crossing a border that complicates business at present is assumed to be forming a business opportunity for the future (Mainela et al. 2015). Mainela et al. (2015), however, suggest an opposite approach to conceptualise IE. Border-crossing activity, on the one hand, is seen as a productive, future-oriented activity because unexpected events and ambiguous environments are assumed to influence expansive learning processes that will enable the emergence of new practices and circumstances (see, e.g., De Clercq et al. 2012). Opportunity, on the other hand, is viewed as a complex issue to be solved at present, as suggested by scholars describing effectuation (Sarasvathy 2001), bricolage (Baker et al. 2003) and serendipitous entrepreneurial behaviour (Dew 2009). In this study, border crossing is not simplified merely as crossing country borders to combine resources and markets but can mean crossing cultural, historical, social, and imaginative borders (Mainela et al. 2015). The productive setting of the borderline between the entrepreneur’s will and ambition and reality is located in an intersubjective space in which novelty and value are created through experimentation, i.e., through questioning, the formation of objects, the generation of instrumentality, and expansive learning through integrating and spanning multiple contexts at the borderline (ibid.). Hence, context and social situation are highlighted as being essential (cf. Baker et al. 2005, Lee & Williams 2007, Zander 2007).

The integrative approach elaborated above supports my view on IE as a highly contextual process of socially constructed (see Berger & Luckmann 1967) envisioning and enacting of opportunities that occur through coordinated cross-border (inter)actions (Fletcher 2004). I see IOs (the central box in Fig. 2) as socially constructed in relation to past, present and future actions, interactions, events, ideas and experiences (Fletcher 2004, 2006), and hence I see them as located in a broader setting that enables a search for deeper insight into IO processes over time (Mainela
et al. 2014). Entrepreneurs’ perspectives are essential to this process, as individuals are seen as the focal actors creating and (inter)acting in the intersubjective spaces of IO, envisioning and then transforming the visions into concrete, enacted IOs (cf. Fletcher 2004).
Fig. 2. Theoretical background for IO conceptualisation in this study.
2.4 International opportunity in entrepreneurial selling

Entrepreneurial selling in an international context is a particular type of boundary-crossing activity involving the joint envisioning and enactment of IOs. International buyer-seller interaction—international sales negotiations in particular—provide a fruitful setting for IO processes (cf. Lehto 2015). Problem-solving and relationship-centred sales interaction at the border-crossing space includes ambiguity and joint meaningmaking efforts that can be viewed as productive, particularly because of (and not always despite) contextual differences.

In order to address IOs in the context of entrepreneurial selling in international sales negotiations, I first turn to review how entrepreneurial selling has been studied in marketing and entrepreneurship literature. Thereafter I examine how sales has been discussed in the IE literature, adding a cross-context perspective to the discussion. I then focus on selling in international sales negotiation through cross-cultural communication, relationship and process perspectives.

2.4.1 Entrepreneurial selling

The interface of entrepreneurship and marketing has raised scholarly interest since the 1980s (Hill & Wright 2000, Hills et al. 2008), but studies examining entrepreneurial selling are scarce despite the decade-old notion that the entrepreneurial perspective is one of the new directions of sales research (Ingram et al. 2005). The concepts of entrepreneurial selling and marketing can apply to individuals, groups, and organisations of different ages and size (cf. Morris et al., 1990). There is a clear difference in the research emphasis between the two related concepts. Whereas entrepreneurial marketing studies have focused on small firms’ and owner-managers’ marketing behaviour and linked it to a strong focus on the customer interface and selling (e.g., Carson 1998, Hills & Hultman 2006: 222, Hisrich 1992; Hulbert et al. 2013, Liao & Welsch 2008), those few studies concentrating on entrepreneurial selling have examined sales managers’ entrepreneurial orientations in large, established organisations (Altinay & Roper 2005, Bonney & Williams 2009, Ingram et al. 2005, Morris et al. 1990, Spillecke & Brettel 2013). Because marketing and sales tasks are often intertwined in the new venture setting (Pitkänen et al. 2014), a sales orientation is often included in the concept of entrepreneurial marketing. Although definitions of entrepreneurial marketing often include selling (e.g., Liao & Welsch 2008), marketing is seen to
‘go beyond’ sales activities to encompass, e.g., promotion and distribution (Hisrich 1992).

I claim that entrepreneurial selling deserves research attention in its own right: sales activities link the entrepreneur and the firm directly to their customers and create relationships that generate revenues, whereas marketing activities link the firm to the market. I focus on the problematics of entrepreneurial selling as a set of activities including, for instance, prospecting, setting targets for buyer-seller negotiations and maintaining existing customer-relationships (for more detailed discussion on selling as activities in the process of sales see chapter 2.4.3). These are highly relevant day-to-day sales activities, and different from marketing activities, such as developing formal marketing plans and initiating strategic marketing activities, that often occur gradually in new firms as sales support functions begin to take less time from the marketing role. (Biemans et al. 2012). Small business-to-business firms often have marketing and sales performed by the same individual(s) and emphasise tactical sales activities, such as communicating with customers and channel members, over strategic marketing issues, such as identifying market segments, targeting customers and developing the marketing mix (Biemans et al. 2012).

Entrepreneurial selling is seen as opportunity-focused, processual and market-driven, and an entrepreneurial orientation is required from sale managers confronted by a dynamic, changing business environment (Carson et al. 1995, Ingram et al. 2005, Spillecke & Brettel 2013). It is believed that sales managers need a proactive approach to find new ways to gain and use sales resources (Morris et al. 1990). Researchers have considered entrepreneurial salespeople (e.g., Altinay & Roper 2005, Hill & Wright 2000) to be professionals who ‘run a business’ within overall corporate operations (Ingram et al. 2005). They exhibit an entrepreneurial orientation (Schultz & Good 2010) when adapting to market changes and seeking new (Morris et al. 1990) sales approaches and business opportunities (Spillecke & Brettel 2013). Entrepreneurial selling is a boundary-spanning behaviour that involves much interaction with the firm’s environment (cf. Hills & LaForge 1992) and in which customers often serve as consultants and business partners (Jones et al. 2000). However, this boundary-crossing activity has received limited research attention to date.

Bonney and Williams (2009) make one of the first attempts to define salesperson opportunity recognition by relying on entrepreneurial opportunity research. They describe it as cognitive process in which the salesperson detects resource misallocations, defines customer problems, and develops solutions for
value creation and profit generation. This solution-oriented approach relies on the individual to be the recogniser of opportunities and does not consider the role of the customer and other relevant stakeholders in selling and opportunity construction and enactment. Still, this represents the first sales study to follow more recent developments in the entrepreneurship discipline by integrating the concept of entrepreneurial opportunity with sales behaviour.

Even though early sales made by the founder-entrepreneurs of new small firms are found to be crucial to sales growth, entrepreneurs’ perspectives on selling are largely neglected in the literature. Pitkänen et al. (2014) focus on new venture’s first sales in a rare example of a study that focuses on the founder’s commercial (marketing and sales) capabilities and proactive sales orientation. They discovered that the founder’s commercial capabilities drive his or her proactive sales orientation towards the first sale. This finding links to those entrepreneurial effectuation studies that show the positive connection between new venture success and “the key commercial capabilities of opportunity identification and evaluation, stakeholder-network development, and the co-creation of value” (Pitkänen et al. 2014: 689, see, e.g., Read et al. 2009, Sarasvathy 2001). Further, founders who actively interact with potential customers, i.e., exhibit a proactive sales orientation, from early on to gain a comprehensive understanding of the customer and to identify improvement opportunities are more likely to apply successful sales techniques, credibly offer new solutions and increase the significance of the first sale for a new venture’s performance. A proactive sales orientation is also found to be more effective in combination with a value-based selling approach: both the explicated product value and its value from the customer’s perspective must be considered in a dual-goal selling process (Pitkänen et al. 2014). This implies the need for entrepreneurs to treat their first customers as partners. Interestingly, the researchers do not find a direct connection between the founder’s entrepreneurial capabilities (related to opportunity recognition and exploitation and a proactive orientation towards commercial activities) and a proactive sales orientation. One reason for this could be that experienced, entrepreneurship-oriented founders, particularly in high-tech ventures, are more focused on technology and product features than on commercialisation (ibid., cf. Autio 1997, Freel 1998). Pitkänen et al. (2014: 689) encourage “a fine-grained analysis of the selling practices of new venture companies” to further examine the important concept of the first sale and to measure its impact on new firm performance. The academic literature has addressed entrepreneurs’ perspective on domestic selling (e.g., Pitkänen et al. 2014) or on international selling (see, e.g., Lehto 2015) to a very limited extent, which is
why entrepreneurial selling in a border-crossing context remains largely unexplored within or at the intersection of the international sales and entrepreneurship fields.

2.4.2 Sales in international entrepreneurship research

An international perspective is largely neglected in both the entrepreneurial marketing and the selling discussion, despite the increasing practical importance of international sales (Baldauf & Lee 2011, Javalgi et al. 2011, Panagopoulos et al. 2011, Reibstein et al. 2009). Few studies directly combine international entrepreneurship and marketing to focus on in-depth investigation of how new firms’ marketing and entrepreneurial capabilities (Zhou et al. 2010) or orientation (Kocak & Abimbola 2009) drive successful early internationalisation and growth. ‘Sales’ is a frequently used concept in the IE literature, but it is treated as an indicator of success or failure in entrepreneurial internationalisation and not as an action, behaviour or process. Hence, entrepreneurial selling has not been the focus of analysis, conceptualisation or theorising efforts in the IE field.

While sales trainings and tools–developed primarily for sales representatives based on sales professionals’ experiences–can benefit a novice owner-entrepreneur in her sales tasks, I think it is crucial to acknowledge that entrepreneurial selling can differ from professional selling, particularly in a new firm setting. An owner-entrepreneur is faced with different types of challenges (Loane et al. 2007, Reuber & Fischer 2002) and possibilities in international selling, and it is vital to understand the particularities and motivations of her behaviour. Small firms trying to enter their first foreign market are found to struggle particularly with growth management in relation to foreign sales (Reuber & Fischer 2002), but owner-entrepreneurs’ sales behaviour remains unaddressed. IE studies classify firms according to the timing, extent and degree of international sales (Di Gregorio et al. 2008, Madsen 2013) and measure early international growth and success by sales numbers (e.g., Autio et al. 2000, Sapienza et al. 2006) but rarely focus on sales as a context or activity that includes IE processes.

Luostarinen and Gabriëssson (2004) study high-tech born-global firms–that internationalise from inception or after a very short domestic period–and note the major challenges they confront. For example, there is a need to reallocate resources when the offering is ready for introduction to international markets, but for a technologically oriented entrepreneur, it may be difficult to know when and how to do so. For new firm that lacks credibility and trust among prospective customers,
it is crucial to gain the first reference customer; this involves correct customer and pricing strategy (ibid.). While the resources to establish own international sales and/or marketing channels are limited, the born-global firm needs to target customer segment(s) that enable rapid international growth with limited resources.

An individual level approach to new firms’ international marketing and sales can be drawn from the scholarly discussion on marketing and technology entrepreneurs (Andersson 2000, Andersson & Evangelista 2006) and the debate on whether personal traits or experience and learned skills make a good salesperson (Bragg 1988, Loveland et al. 2015). Andersson (2000) recognised different types of entrepreneurs according to their knowledge base, interests and behaviour: marketing entrepreneurs are proactive in international marketing, whereas technology entrepreneurs focus on technology development rather than international marketing activities. Furthermore, small firms—particularly high-technology companies and industrial product firms (Hirsch 1992)—are characterised by weak market awareness and practice (McCartan-Quinn & Carson 2003). I find these discussions on firm- and individual-level elements relevant to entrepreneurial selling in international context despite the anecdotal role of sales in these studies. However, a more holistic processual perspective that draws from the international sales literature is needed. Next, I turn to the international sales negotiation literature to gain a deeper processual insight into international sales and IO in this context.

2.4.3 Selling in international negotiations

Changes in the business environment have made international sales a vital but complex issue for practitioners (Ingram 2004, Baldauf & Lee 2011). This increases the need for international sales research (Javalgi et al. 2011), which still remains scarce (Panagopoulos et al. 2011, Reibstein et al. 2009). Studies on cross-cultural communication (e.g., Hall 1981, Hofstede 1991, Redpath & Nielsen 1997, Rhodes et al. 2005) have been particularly well received by those who examine culture’s effect on international sales. One of the most discussed topics within the international sales domain is negotiations (Ghauri & Usunier 2003, Panagopoulos et al. 2011), and particularly salespeople’s skills and behaviour in international negotiation (Simintiras & Thomas 1998). Firms, particularly small enterprises, are found to struggle to manage growth through foreign sales (Reuber & Fischer 2002) due to a lack of sales and marketing capabilities for international markets (Loane et al. 2007).
In addition to the knowledge, skills and competences required for domestic selling and sales management, sales in an international context call for abilities referred to as, for instance, cultural understanding (Jobber & Lancaster 2009: 157), cultural sensitivity (e.g., Harich & LaBahn 1998), or cultural intelligence (Hansen et al. 2011). The breadth of international sales experience is also highlighted as a critical feature (Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer 2004). As Harich and LaBahn (1998) note, cultural sensitivity should not only be understood as general open-mindedness and recognition of cultural differences but also as appropriate behaviour according to the situation, i.e., an ability to “anticipate, understand and effectively remove” culture-related obstacles in cross-cultural sales (Simintiras & Thomas 1998: 10).

The cross-cultural communication approach to international sales negotiation

International sales negotiations offer a particular setting for selling (Ghauri & Usunier 2003, Simintiras & Thomas 1998). For example, international selling is affected by diverse economic, political and legislative contexts and more subtle sociocultural contexts (Jobber & Lancaster 2009: 173, Johnson et al. 2006). Ambiguity related to buyer-seller interaction increases due to contextual differences (Kumar & Patriotta 2011), and the selling processes and their outcomes (Adler & Graham 1989) often differ from those in domestic sales. During negotiations, the participants discuss common and conflicting interests to generate potential options to address their concerns, needs and interests (Moore & Woodrow 2010: 12) and to reach an agreement that achieves shared benefit (Moran et al. 2007: 80). Negotiated agreements between firms are at the vanguard of international business opportunities (Gulbro & Herbig 1995, Herbig 1997). Nevertheless, inconsistencies in expectations among negotiators with regard to, e.g., approaches to problem solving or the negotiation outcome are inherent in international sales negotiations and can hinder the construction of mutually beneficial solutions (Moore & Woodrow 2010: 18). These inconsistencies can be attributed to a variety of environment- or organisation-level factors and are highly situation-dependent (Reynolds et al. 2003). A co-operative and adaptive orientation is often required from all participants (Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer 2002, Shankarmahesh et al. 2004).

The academic discussion highlights culture–or psychic distance (Hallén & Wiedersheim-Paul 1979) or cultural distance (Hansen et al. 2011)–as the source of
obstacles to international sales. A large body of research builds on Hofstede’s (1986) or Hall’s (1989) cultural dimensions in an attempt to determine whether culture impacts cross-cultural negotiation. Cross-cultural communication studies, particularly the seminal work of Hall (1981, 1989), who explains culture as communication and explores different conceptions of space and time, have been highly influential on international negotiation studies. Hofstede (1991) created a global model to help business professionals distinguish the cultural differences of individual countries. His vastly cited work provides four dimensions to explain cultural differences: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism and masculinity. International negotiation studies have explored culture’s effect on negotiation styles, planning and strategy (Guang & Trotter 2012). These studies have found that negotiation style is influenced by the nature of negotiation, individual’s roles, time, uncertainty, trust, communication, protocol and outcomes (Sobral et al. 2008). Negotiation strategies are found to be influenced by cultural differences (e.g., Ott 2011) and religious beliefs (Tu & Chih 2011).

While Hofstede’s (1986) parameters of culture have served as a good basis for further research, there is a need for a more complex concept of culture that not only focuses on cultural dimensions but also views culture as comprising multiple layers and facets and as being contextual and dynamic (Leung et al. 2005). It has been suggested that focus should be shifted from determining if and how culture impacts negotiation to determining the circumstances under which culture matters (Engelen & Brettel 2011, cf. Hansen et al. 2011). This type of understanding could have a major influence on a practical level; it could shift the emphasis from sales representatives’ and managers’ ability to acknowledge cultural differences (Walle 1986) to their ability to adapt in a situation-dependent manner to international sales situations (cf. Hallén & Wiedersheim-Paul 1979).

**Relationship and process approach to international sales negotiation**

There is a clear shift in research from treating sales as individual transactions towards a relationship focus: sellers aim to build long-term and mutually supportive relationships with customers. The problem-solving approach to negotiation can be understood as meeting the buyer’s needs and preferences by adapting behaviour through a collaborative, needs-focused and information-sharing orientation (e.g., Graham 1985, Graham et al. 1994, Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer 2000). This approach is seen to foster the development of a long-term relationship, but organisational and national culture in addition to individual salespersons’
characteristics influence negotiation styles and the adoption of this approach (Chaisrakeo & Speece 2004). The increasing focus on relationship building and maintenance in sales is evident through the widespread use of problem-solving approach-related concepts that emphasise the negotiation goal of a mutually beneficial outcome (Chaisrakeo & Speece 2004, Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer 2000); the integrative approach (Walton & McKersie 1965), cooperative orientation (Rubin & Brown 1975), a problem-solving orientation (Graham et al. 1994), the customer orientation approach (Saxe & Weitz 1982), and adaptive selling (Levy & Sharma 1994) are just some examples of the multiplicity of negotiation styles identified as contributing to long-term relationships. Salespeople interacting at the company-customer interface possess a key role in relationship building (Chaisrakeo & Speece 2004). Negotiation is a crucial part of buyer-seller relationship development (e.g., Chaisrakeo & Speece 2004), but capabilities- and behaviour-focused approaches have also directed attention to the processual nature of negotiations as a relationship development processes relying on deterministic and linear perspectives.

International sales negotiation is commonly understood as consisting of prospecting and negotiations between the seller and the potential buyer. This interaction is usually divided into three general stages (see, e.g., Ghauri & Fang 2001, Reynolds et al. 2003, Simintiras & Thomas 1998). Relationship and trust building start in the pre-negotiation stage, which involves non-task related interaction. In the formal negotiation stage, seller and prospect exchange information, engage in problem solving, negotiate a common understanding, persuade and make concessions, and finally, reach or do not reach an agreement. In the post-negotiation stage, the agreement is implemented and new rounds of negotiation may be initiated. These stages occur over time, and non-task- and task-related interactions can take place simultaneously during buyer-seller encounters.

The seven steps of selling (prospecting, pre-approach, approach, presentation, overcoming objections, close and follow-up) underlie the stages approach to (international) negotiation. This doctrine is possibly the most widely adapted in the sales field, but some suggest updates are necessary to reflect the changed business environment. Moncrief and Marshall (2005) suggest the following steps to better suit current negotiation styles: customer retention and deletion, database and knowledge management, relationship selling and nurturing, marketing the product, problem solving, satisfying needs and relationship maintenance. Although the traditional process approaches to sales negotiations provide insights into the different actions performed by the seller during the different stages of negotiation,
they are too deterministic and often assume a linear stepwise model (cf. e.g., Batonda & Perry 2003, Borg & Freytag 2012). The evolved seven steps of selling bring relationship selling to the forefront and do not assume a sequential process (Moncrief & Marshall 2005), but they continue to overemphasise the seller’s behaviour and focus inadequate attention on interaction as the basis for relationship development. Moreover, the approach assumes that salespeople have access to large organisational support systems and existing customer networks—which are both generally unavailable to a new venture and a founder-entrepreneur engaging in international sales negotiation.

The international sales negotiation literature has paid limited attention to dynamic approaches to negotiation and relationship-development processes. A look at the industrial marketing management literature enriches the process view (cf. Lehto 2015), as it treats negotiations as episodes in or a process of a continuous buyer-seller relationship (Ford & Håkansson 2006, Herbst et al. 2011). Hence, negotiations are not to be seen as isolated episodes or transactional processes but as a dyadic relationship development process (Håkansson 1982) that takes place on (Borg & Freytag 2012) and between (Norén 2007: 267) the individual, group and organisational levels but can also involve a network of organisations (Håkansson 1982). The interaction process consists of episodes of social, information, product, service and financial exchanges (Håkansson 1982) that occur in a continuous flow on and across different levels (Borg & Freytag 2012), and it can result in cooperation in long-term relationships. A collaborative atmosphere, information exchange and (perceived) product importance usually lead to adaptations in the exchanged elements or the exchange process (Metcalf et al. 1992). Batonda and Perry (2003) propose the following states in a sales process: search, start, development, maintenance, termination and dormant processes. The process is cyclic, meaning that the relationship can stay in one process state for an unanticipated time or can move between states unpredictably (Batonda & Perry 2003). A sales process, however, always has a beginning, an exchange cycle and an end (Borg & Freytag 2012). It can take place multiple times within a continuous relationship development process (Herbst et al. 2011).

2.5 Making sense of international opportunity in entrepreneurial selling

In this study, I adapt Gephart et al.’s (2010: 284–285) definition of sensemaking as “an ongoing process that creates an intersubjective sense of shared meanings” when
“people seek to produce, negotiate, and maintain a shared sense of meaning”. Unlike these authors, I do not limit sensemaking to face-to-face settings but believe it occurs in a variety of situations. Sensemaking is about presumptions guiding future action, the constant updating of mental maps, enacting order on ongoing events, and retrospectively rationalising and classifying events and actions (Weick et al. 2005). I view sensemaking as a social activity: people create meaning in interaction with others rather than individually (Weick 1979) in order to sequence previously unordered environmental cues into a representation that suggests a particular view of reality (Holt & Macpherson 2010). Due to the action orientation of sensemaking, it is characterised by interpretation rather than rational, issue-contingent evaluation or choice (Sonenshein 2007, Weick et al. 2005). Interpretation is driven by the plausibility of accounts; they should be socially acceptable, comprehensive and credible rather than accurate (Weick & Sutcliffe 2001). Reasoning is often nonmonotonic in that it allows further information to invalidate earlier conclusions (Lundberg 2000) and initial intuitive judgements (Sonenshein 2007). I view the social context as highly relevant to sensemaking, which is why I join the critique of traditional approaches to sensemaking that do not consider if, how and when the context influences sensemaking (cf. e.g., Parry 2003) and behaviour, as these are not simply based on disembodied, individual sensemaking mechanisms (Semin & Smith 2013). I understand cognition as being socially situated and sensemaking as an intersubjective process that provides meanings through discursive constructions, conversations and narratives.

Sensemaking is triggered as a response to ambiguous conditions and equivocality (Cardon et al. 2011); these conditions involve mediating among multiple simultaneous interpretations, uncertainty and a lack of information, which make it difficult to construct plausible interpretations (cf. Sonenshein 2007). Mitchell et al. (2011) seek to extend Cornelissen and Clarke’s (2010) more dynamic perspective of entrepreneurs’ sensemaking as a means for explicitly comprehending a situation (verbalising) and as a basis for action. As opposed to the traditional focus on the object (such as persona, events and relationships) of the entrepreneurs’ subjective, even static (Mitchell et al. 2011), cognition, the emerging approach used in this study views cognition as social: the ability to represent and adaptively co-regulate (inter)action (Semin & Smith 2013). A similar situated view of cognition has been recently adapted from, e.g., social psychology for entrepreneurship studies (e.g., Cornelissen & Clarke 2010, Cornelissen et al. 2011, Dew et al. 2015, Mitchell et al. 2011, Mitchell et al. 2014). The early sources of the approach are traced to 19th-century philosophers and psychologists (Dew et al. 2015, Prinz 1987). In
entrepreneurship research, these ideas have been proposed from a realist stance of individual, body-embedded cognition situated in a real-world context (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2014).

Socially situated cognition (SSC) is understood as action oriented, embodied, situated and distributed (Semin & Smith 2002, 2013, Smith & Semin 2004, 2007). Examining cognition as socially situated shifts focus to (buyer-seller) interactions in specific settings (international sales negotiations) that induce a constellation of motivational states and representations expressed in actions (IO construction); these actions are, again, influenced by the situation and by other actors (Semin & Smith 2013). Representations of objects and persons do not reflect their abstract ‘objective’ qualities but reflect their relation to the entrepreneur (ibid.).

Entrepreneurs’ sensemaking is action oriented (Mitchell et al. 2011): it represents their evaluation of and motivation towards IO construction. Cognitive representations of IO are flexibly shaped by action and interaction, making adaptation to changing circumstances possible (cf. Semin & Smith 2013). This extends the focus beyond the isolated individual and brings attention to situated interaction and mutually coordinated adaptive behaviour by the selling entrepreneur, the (prospective) buyer and possibly other relevant actors (cf. ibid.). The embodiment of cognition suggests that mental representations are shaped and constrained by the entrepreneur’s bodily actions, which are determined by the objects or by interactions with people (Smith & Semin 2004, cf. Cornelissen & Clarke 2010). For instance, in IO construction in face-to-face interaction, a physical presence and actions, such as demonstrating solutions or gaining an understanding of prospects by physically holding or manipulating an object (cf. Cornelissen & Clarke 2010), can influence intersubjective sensemaking.

The notion of situated cognition can be examined on three interpersonal levels: communicative, relational, and the broader group context (Mitchell et al. 2011, Smith & Semin 2004). Semin and Smith (2013) describe how situational effects on behaviour can occur in two situations: when adjusting messages and behaviour according to the audience, its attitudes and locally salient information or during self-categorisation in reaction to other people. Communicative context influences, for example, the ways in which entrepreneurs’ articulate their motivation and rationale for establishing relationships and constructing IOs. Relational contexts can be considered when studying social networks’ effects on IO construction, while group level contexts can be observed in, e.g., the influence of group perceptions on IO desirability and feasibility and hence on entrepreneurial intentions (cf. Mitchell et al. 2011). Dew et al. (2015) also note the embeddedness of entrepreneurial
activity in the environment of material objects. Cognition is also distributed across the environment of sensemaking (Mitchell et al. 2011, Smith & Semin 2004); it includes cognitive agents that are distributed to, e.g., group decision-making and brainstorming (Semin & Smith 2013). When constructing IO in a buyer-seller interaction, cognition is distributed, for example, through the negotiation of shared understanding(s) and an intersubjective envisioning of IO (cf. Lehto 2015). In this study, I apply the SSC approach to IO construction—for the first time to my knowledge—to understand the phenomenon more holistically from an integrative perspective (cf. Mitchell et al. 2011). Taking a cognitive perspective is suggested to “induce greater depth and variety into future IE research, further improving its scope, relevance and rigor” (Zahra et al. 2005: 143) because little is known about entrepreneurs’ situated cognition in entrepreneurship (Dew et al. 2015) and IE research on opportunity.

My focus is on the process, the ‘journey’, of IO construction rather than merely its beginnings and ends. This requires attention to the dynamics between actions and interactions because they create and recreate the entrepreneur’s understanding of the (emerging) IO: the individually and jointly imagined prospective IO, the evaluated and created IO, and the exploited IO (cf. Mainela et al. 2015). Further, attention must be paid to the dynamics transforming discursively articulated representations of new meanings into concrete, objectified opportunities (cf. Puhakka & Stewart 2015). Sensemaking taking the SSC view enables me to study dynamics between the understandings of IOs, actions and interactions in IO construction in selling, and other moments (experiences, actions and interaction) across international entrepreneuring (cf. Crouch 2012). I borrow from Feldman’s (2003) approach to process dynamics between performances—here, actions/interactions to draw focus away from process outcomes to ‘doing’—and understandings by focusing on the (re)production of understandings about IO in the context of entrepreneurial selling in international sales negotiation.

In Fig. 3, I depict socially situated cognition that is embedded in the entrepreneur, interpersonally and contextually situated, directing action and interaction, and distributed across the sensemaking environment through interaction. The figure particularly emphasises the dynamics between meanings of IO and action and interaction (e.g., designing, transforming, enacting) in IO processes that transform content and constructions. Entrepreneurs’ enact the perceived IO (its meaning) in interaction with (prospective) customers, which in turn influences their understanding of what they are doing during this enactment. IO-focused sales actions and interactions create and recreate the understanding of
IO, whereas these understandings constrain and enable the actions and interactions of creating and enacting IO (cf. Feldman 2003). Not only do entrepreneurs’ and other actors’ exhibit relevant (inter)actions directly related to the IO process but also other (inter)actions occurring during the process of entrepreneuring contribute to entrepreneurs’ (socially situated) understanding of IO. The conceptual model enables an explanation of why IO-focused entrepreneurial sales behaviour may or may not change based on re-interpretations or more stable understandings of how IOs should be created and enacted in the pursuit of desired outcomes.

As I focus on the changing meanings and mechanisms of the IO process, I am particularly interested in the productive intersubjective settings of entrepreneurial selling where IO processes (also) take place. The dynamics between buyers’, sellers’ and other relevant actors’ joint sensemaking and IO activities, i.e., between meanings and (inter)actions based on communicating and constructing existing or potential objects, need to be understood to understand the changes in envisioning and enacting IO within and across international customer relationships. The transformations in IO content and construction bring greater focus to the mechanisms between IO (inter)actions.

Now, how do I study the changing or stable meanings assigned to IO and the dynamics related to this process? By taking a narrative approach to this research, I
allow appreciation of the discursive sensemaking efforts of entrepreneurs by studying how they narrate IO processes—construct meanings of IO and justify decisions and actions throughout the process—and how the narrations reflect socially situated cognition. Following Rantakari and Vaara (in press), I define narratives as “discursive constructions that provide means for individual, social and organizational sensemaking”, i.e., for the continuous temporal describing, ordering and explaining of some (inter)actions and events in relation to other (inter)actions and events in a particular context over time (cf. Gergen & Gergen 1997). Broadly defined, a discourse is “a specific series of representations, practices and performances through which meanings are produced, connected into networks and legitimized” (Gregory 2000: 180). I focus particularly on the discursive representations (re)producing meanings—the socially situated understandings—by analysing narratives, their content and their meaning-making structures as the objects of my study. With this approach, I draw attention to the discursive strategies entrepreneurs use to (re)frame and (re)interpret IO as they construct narratives in attempt to make sense of past and present experiences and to anticipate the future. I am interested in seeing if and how the elements of action-orientation, embodiment, situatedness and distribution are implicitly or explicitly narrated.
3 Narrative constructionist research

I now turn to discuss the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions guiding my research. I feel that an extensive consideration of narrative constructionist research as a holistic approach to my study is needed because although narratives as data, methods of writing up ‘a case’, and the constructionist approach underpinning the interpretive research design may be familiar to an experienced reader, narrative constructionism tends to be a less familiar approach. This may be due to the persistent ‘paradigm war’ (e.g., Shepherd & Challenger 2013, cf. paradigm model of Burrel & Morgan 1979) in studies that maintain the dichotomy between objective and subjective, or between extreme positivist and naive relativist approaches; these leave little room for more moderate and integrative approaches that do not reproduce the juxtaposition of subjective/individual and outside reality. I explain my standpoint in detail to clarify how this approach pervades this research report: it is reflected in how I theoretically and conceptually position the study, approach the research (e.g., aims, boundaries, limitations), understand the empirical material and its construction in interviews, conduct my analysis, report the findings, and evaluate it. The transparency and reflexivity (cf. e.g., Larty & Hamilton 2011) of my research process and decisions are, indeed, quality criteria that can be used to assess the study.

3.1 Introduction to narrative inquiry

The ‘linguistic turn’ or the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences starting in the early 1980s increased appreciation of narratives (Czarniawska 2004, Deetz 2003, Hyvärinen 2009, Riessman 2001). Subsequently, narrative inquiry has become an established and polymorphous research orientation, an umbrella term, within the social sciences (Hyvärinen 2009, Sparkes & Smith 2008). Among the varied research efforts, there appears to be a shared interest in narratives and agreement on the key aspects of ordering, sequence (Czarniawska 1997, Riessman 1993) and temporality in narratives (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007, Rantakari & Vaara in press), although some studies view the theme(s) in the (episodic) narrative as being more central than time (Flick 2006, Hytti 2003: 52). A narrator orders experiences and creates plots by temporally and spatially structuring events (Laslett 1999) or thematically and episodically organising them (Riessman 2001). I view both the thematic and the temporal aspects of narrative as essential in the study of entrepreneurial processes.
Narratives are situated and produced through interaction to communicate meaning to a particular audience (Holstein & Gubrium 2012, Riessman 2001). They are a collaborative product of the narrator and the listener(s).

“In its broadest sense, narration can be an action as well as product in the form of a text, film, dance, and the like […] With narrative, people strive to configure space and time, deploy cohesive devices, reveal identity of actors and relatedness of actions across scenes. They create themes, plots, and drama. In so doing, narrators make sense of themselves, social situations, and history.” (Bamberg & McCabe 1998: iii).

Even though narratives are used to assign meaning to events, these meanings are not necessarily coherent and fixed but are often contradictory and blurry (Hytti 2003: 53). Personal narratives are accounts of lives, events (Laslett 1999, Riessman 2001), experiences and interactions (Ollendorf & Creswell 2002), which is why narrative inquiries provide a unique contribution to social science. They allow an understanding of the histories of individuals, their social spaces, and the societies they live in as well as of the intersections between the three (Laslett 1999: 392). Because narrative constructions are a means of sensemaking and sensegiving, connecting antecedents and consequences and defining and ordering events, they provide an understanding of processuality even if they are not necessarily complete and coherent stories (Boje 2008, Rantakari & Vaara in press). Emphasising the construction process rather than the structure (Czarniawska 1997) enables the study of how and why lives, as well as the stories about them, are constructed as they are (Laslett 1999). Czarniawska (1997) notes that many interpretive studies fail to examine the process of construction; they instead study the constructs–the results of the process–which is why they may also miss the historical situatedness of narratives and, hence, the meanings that emerge and change over time. Narrative inquiries enable us to learn about “individual and collective actions and meanings, as well as the social processes by which social life and human relationships are made and changed” by social actors and, in particular, about the social, cultural and institutional contexts that shape actions and their outcomes (Laslett 1999: 392).

Narrative inquiry has gained increasing recognition in the entrepreneurship domain (e.g., Gartner 2007, 2010, Hjort 2007, Hjort & Steyaert 2004, Hytti 2005, Larty & Hamilton 2011, Steyaert 2007) but has remained underutilised in the IE domain. Studies have focused, for example, on entrepreneurial narratives to examine identities (Czarniawska 1997, Hytti 2003, 2005), legitimacy and resource acquisition (Garud et al. 2014b, Herzenstein et al. 2011, Martens et al. 2007), and
success/failure (Mantere et al. 2013, see also Steyaert 2007, Vaara et al. in press). Martens et al. (2007) contend that entrepreneurs can use narratives to elaborate the logic of business opportunities and to lodge their activities in a societal discourse. Narratives can be examined not only as promoters of EIFs and enablers of their growth and legitimacy but also as a means to describe entrepreneurial IO and sales experiences. Further, they can be seen as reproductions of or diversion from the prevailing understandings of how international entrepreneurship and opportunities are seen within social institutions (cf. Hyvärinen 2009, Vaara et al. in press). Garud and Giuliani (2013) note the continued interest in entrepreneurial processes and opportunities and argue that the narrative perspective is a particularly promising enabler of insights into the boundaries that constitute entrepreneurial agency and that are pertinent to entrepreneurial opportunities. Through narratives, one can examine the boundaries emerging through action and interaction (Garud et al. 2010). Further, narratives endogenise time and focus on meaning-making (Garud & Giuliani 2013), making narrative analyses important for tracing entrepreneurial narratives when growth-oriented EIFs expand or even dissolve over time (cf. Vaara et al. in press).

3.2 Narrative constructionist research approach

There are various epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches to narratives (Rantakari & Vaara in press, Riessman 2001). With the scarce use of interpretivist approaches in IE research (Coviello & Jones 2004; see, e.g., Baker et al. 2005, Zahra et al. 2005), the utilisation of narrative and discursive approaches also remains rare in the field (see, e.g., Buttriss & Wilkinson 2006). However, to gain an understanding of entrepreneurs’ complex socially produced realities as they lived them and of the multiple, changing meanings (cf. Alvesson & Deetz 2000; Cassell & Nadin 2008) assigned to IO, an interpretivist approach is needed. An interpretive approach—in a wide sense referring to social constructionism and constructivism, critical realism, postmodernism and postcolonialism (cf. e.g., Welch et al. 2011)—is considered to be closest to what Bruner (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988) describe as narrative knowing and discourse, in contrast to the paradigmatic (logico-scientific) knowing usually studied in (post-)positivistic research (Czarniawska 1997: 54–55). Narrative knowing can, on the one hand, be connected to a constructivist view of “world making” as people construct narratives in their heads (Bruner 2004), i.e., narrative is a cognitive structure that individuals use to understand the world and that directs action (Gergen & Gergen 2006). On
the other hand, it can connect to a social constructionist view of narratives as discursive actions that “derive their significance from the way in which they are employed within relationships” (Gergen & Gergen 2006: 118). People build thematic, temporal narratives out of a flux of ideas, actions and experiences (Hytti 2003: 51–52, see also Bruner 1986).

I take a social constructionist approach to this study. I acknowledge that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman 1967) in a constant process in which social and physical reality coexist without an essence ‘out there’ to be discovered (Czarniawska 1997). Taking a social constructionist approach to narratives, I focus on the narrative constitution of social realities (cf. Hyvärinen 2009: 447). Thus, I aim to escape the ‘paradigm war’ still prevalent in qualitative studies. A dualist ontology is often reinforced, first, by positivist studies emphasising the objective reality ‘out there’ (cf. e.g., Gergen 1999: 8) with the aim of explaining (erklären) causal relationships and allowing context-free generalisation and, second, by interpretivist studies highlighting subjective reality, i.e., private, interior consciousness (Gergen 1999: 8), with the objective of understanding (verstehen) subjective meaning and experience as a particular, context-specific phenomena (see, e.g., Welch et al. 2011). The linguistic turn shifted the research focus from analysing narrative accounts as “empirical evidence of lived life”, i.e., as a way of telling about life (Sparkes & Smith 2008), to the narrative itself (“told life”) and interpretation of the narrative account (Nilsen 2009: 89). This also shifted the epistemological focus towards constructionism. Whereas extreme relativism treats reality as a purely human construction (Nilsen 2009), the narrative approach and its focus on language allows a view that includes a reality beyond language.

Fletcher (2006) notes the inclination to malign and misappropriate social constructionist ideas; I see this as linked to simplification of the approach into naive/extreme constructionism/relativism. Critique of constructionist studies’ inability to state ‘facts’ about reality is an example of maligning, and the tendency to label any qualitative study with an emphasis on language, discourse, context and meaningmaking under social construction is an example of misappropriating the term. I follow the social constructionist work that recognises the “relationality between people, institutions, material objects, physical entities and language” (Fletcher 2006: 422) and do not limit my focus to individuals’ subjective perceptions, experiences and sensemaking. This turns the focus to social processes through which meanings are shared and negotiated and that contribute to the social construction of reality (Fletcher 2006). Hence, my focus is on narratives told about events and not on the events themselves.
Following Gergen (1999: 222), I see that

“constructionism doesn’t try to rule on what is or is not fundamentally real. Whatever is, simply is. However, the moment we begin to articulate what there is – what is truly or objectively the case – we enter a world of discourse – and thus a tradition, a way of life, and a set of value preferences.”

A sense of what is good and true in a community is continuously subject to self-reflection (Gergen 1999: 221). Unlike the narrative constructivist approach that views a narrative as an individual’s cognitive construction of the world (cf. Fletcher 2006; Gergen 1999: 237) or as a mental structure that guides action, the narrative constructionist view takes narratives as a socio-culturally shared resource for constituting and making meaning of experience (Sparkes & Smith 2008). The narrative constructionist approach is not concerned with ‘mental life’ or whether the discourse of understanding is objectively valid because concepts such as ‘objective’, ‘true’, ‘valid’ or ‘real’ cannot be justified in their conventional usage (Gergen 1999: 225). Narratives are not mirrors of independent reality or of a mental world (Sparkes & Smith 2008); there are multiple ways of framing one’s ‘experience’ through discursive practices, i.e., a variety of alternative constructions (Gergen 1999: 226). While a narrative constructivist would see narrative as a mode of thought and an effort to explicate meaning from individual experience, narratives as social action and as an “ontological condition of social life” are seen to constitute realities and modes of being (Sparkes & Smith 2008: 295).

“Whether mental concepts are true – whether experience or agency are real, for example – are simply questions that do not require answers. The more important question for the constructionist concerns the consequences in cultural life of placing such terms into motion.” (Gergen 1999: 225).

From the narrative constructionist point of departure, I see narratives as contextual, socially situated, temporal, emergent and socially constructed in interaction (cf. Garud et al. 2014a, Sparkes & Smith 2008, Rantakari & Vaara in press). Narratives are lodged within relationships and used by individuals in particular contexts to produce meaning in interaction—not to ‘transmit’ meaning from one’s interior to others (Sparkes & Smith 2008). Viewing narrating as a sensemaking process removes focus from the ‘finished’ storyline (Ochs & Capps 2001), which so often receives the sole emphasis in those studies that view narratives as factual resources and as representations of an objective reality uncovering causal logics (Hyvärinen 2009). Rather than seeking acceptance for my
study because ‘it is true’, I invite the research participants and my readers to participate in sensegiving to the world, practices and local and communal constructions of rationalities, with an inclusive approach that provides room for alternative truths in a dialogue (Gergen 1999; cf. Hosking 2004).

### 3.3 Narrative research material

Narratives are often treated as type or a source of data that are ‘collected’ by researchers, who then extract knowledge from these representations of the ‘real’ world. This treatment implies a realist stance to truth: a view of reality as residing ‘out there’ and of narratives as being evidence of ‘what really happened’. By contrast, I view narratives as empirical material that I constructed jointly through interview interaction with the participating entrepreneurs (cf. Larty & Hamilton 2011, Riessman 2008).

Riessman (2012: 370) notes that

> “personal narrative refers to large sections of talk and interview exchanges – extended accounts of lives that develop in conversation over the course of interviews and other fieldwork interactions, […] an evolving series of stories that are framed in and through interaction.”

This implies that narratives comprise a broad category of discourse types, whereas a story is one form of narrative account: a distinct set of events with sequential, temporal and spatial ordering (ibid.). What distinguishes narrative material from other interview discourses is that it recaps discrete moments (through stories) or, in a wider sense, elicits “the general course of things, or ‘experience’”, e.g., in habitual, hypothetical or topic-focused narratives (Riessman 2011: 314). In the following, I reflect on the boundaries I used to select the entrepreneurs as participants with which I could construct relevant narratives and discuss the processual narrative material that I analyse in this report.

#### 3.3.1 Setting boundaries and locating entrepreneurs

I decided to limit the empirical context of my study, first, to early internationalising firms (EIFs), i.e., firms that internationalise within three years from inception (Zucchella et al. 2007), because small and new firms are found to struggle particularly with international sales at the outset of their internationalisation (Reuber & Fischer 2002). The timing of the first foreign sale is found to influence
a firm’s sales growth, return on foreign sales (Fernhaber & Li 2010), and operations and learning (De Clercq et al. 2012). The EIF focus allows me to study entrepreneuring and IO processes in small, new firms that initiate internationalisation at an early age—but not necessarily at inception, as is often the definition for the related concept of born global (Knight & Cavusgil 1996) and INV (McDougall 1989)—when founder-entrepreneurs and/or other members of the entrepreneurial team are often (still) directly involved in sales at the customer interface. Such a setting provides fruitful ground for examining IO processes, as in these sales-oriented entrepreneurial processes and direct buyer-seller interactions, small and new firms can quickly respond to changing customer needs. Through these interactions, they ‘turn’ ideas into actions and solutions (cf. Biemans et al. 2012) in the beginning and during the (potential) expansion of international sales.

This EIF focus also appears relevant in the Finnish context: the small domestic market encourages firms to seek growth internationally (e.g., Kuuluvainen & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2011) and the three year time horizon of my definition is suitable in the current global market environment (Madsen 2013). I did not restrict the selection of my research participants by the level of foreign sales success, for example, 25% of returns derived from foreign sales within three years as defined in many studies on born-global firms (e.g., Knight 1997). I also did not want to limit the scope of foreign sales activities in terms of location or the number of target markets (cf. Zahra & George 2002). My goal was to follow the IO process in international selling as it unfolds during the early years without labelling international aspirations as failed or successful based on an external set criteria for categorising firms and even without focusing on the mere outcomes of internationalisation efforts.

Second, I limited the context to international B2B sales through negotiations in which IOs are envisioned, evaluated, created, executed, and constructed anew or replicated in buyer-seller (face-to-face and other types of) interactions within and across dyadic relationships and contexts. International sales negotiations provide a particular setting for selling (Ghauri & Usunier 2003, Simintiras & Thomas 1998), characterised by increased ambiguity because the interaction is influenced by various contextual differences (Kumar & Patriotta 2011). Negotiated agreements between firms are the primary component of international business opportunities (Herbig 1997). Hence, socially situated sensemaking appears to be highly relevant for understanding IO in this context. I wanted to interview entrepreneurs who had already enacted IOs in international buyer-seller relationships and those who perceived future IOs and were starting international negotiations.
Third, I decided to conduct interviews in Finland. I see this context as highly interesting for understanding IO processes in the context of international sales. Finland is experiencing a start-up boom (Lehdonvirta 2013), i.e., a peak in young, innovative entrepreneurial ventures with high growth aspirations (Autio 2009). These firms enjoy remarkable domestic media attention, high political status, and increasingly positive cultural attitudes (Napier et al. 2012) in a country that is only slowly recovering from the global financial and economic crisis that hit it particularly hard in 2009 (OECD 2014: 15) and the subsequent collapse of several large, established ICT companies in 2012–2013 (Napier et al. 2012). These events resulted in a substantial skilled workforce being released to the labour market. There, individuals’ entrepreneurial efforts to start up new businesses have been supported along with the continuous development of framework conditions by policy makers (ibid.).

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report of 2014 (Stenholm et al. 2015) states that there is a well-developed support system for entrepreneurship in Finland, including supportive governmental policies, regulation, financing, physical infrastructure, and domestic market dynamics.

“In Finland entrepreneurship is recognized as an important means to catalyze economic growth. This is demonstrated in the new Government programme as one strategic objective of ‘employment and competitiveness’ with key projects of improving conditions for business and entrepreneurship as well as renewing labour market conditions and working life in order to increase employment in Finland.” (Stenholm et al. 2015: 36).

However, a paradox is detected: despite the positive pre-conditions, the number of high growth start-ups is moderate (Autio 2009, Lehdonvirta 2013) due to the inability to accelerate early growth and to fully realise global potential (Napier et al. 2012). The GEM 2014 report also indicates that higher education and government programs are less supportive of entrepreneurship (Stenholm et al. 2015). The small domestic market typically urges ventures to seek growth from foreign markets (Kuuluvainen & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2011), but an international or global approach may not be accomplished in practice despite entrepreneurs’ international mindset (cf. Andersson 2015). Finnish early stage entrepreneurs’ international aspirations have slightly increased from the beginning of this boom, but still only 13% of them have at least 25% international customers. However, this measurement only reveals the number of successful firms with ‘high’ international aspirations and excludes smaller-scale internationalisation efforts.
“Despite the supportive policies and environment for entrepreneurship, positive perceptions on business opportunities and high entrepreneurial potential do not turn into potentially growing and remarkable start-ups and new businesses. Finland has potential entrepreneurs with new ideas and skills, but we still seem to lack the ones who take the initiatives and exploit the opportunities.” (Stenholm et al. 2015: 36).

The difficulty Finnish new ventures experience generating high international growth can be linked to not only individual- and firm-level capabilities and resources but also to the societal level. A recent study indicates that Finnish start-ups looking for high growth are nested in an environment that lacks a critical mass of competent market actors (Sipola 2015: 258). Public actors play a significant role in supporting the formation of new businesses by connecting them to public business development services and instruments with the aim of developing many profitable job-creating new firms. Private venture capitalist funding plays a minor role, as it allocates “in smaller amount to a wider pool of less risky and less ambitious ventures” (ibid.: 261). Scaling is under capitalised, pressure to execute and scale to international markets is low, and exits are often not targeted (ibid.: 262–263). IOs are increasingly important, but high-growth expectations and an exit-focus are not necessarily shared by individual companies and entrepreneurs. These may focus on IOs from a sustainable, profit-making perspective: the target is to grow profits and the number of employees but not to aggressively scale and exit (cf. ibid.).

Based on my interest in the Finnish context, entrepreneuring in EIFs and international B2B sales negotiation, I began searching for participants for my study. I quickly realised I had, without further reflection, also limited my search to founder-entrepreneurs and not just any individuals with entrepreneurial behaviour in new firms. This was partly because in Finland, the concept ‘entrepreneur’ translates to ‘yrittäjä’, which refers to anyone who has established and/or owns a business. However, I was not looking for business owners who may have, for example, bought an existing business, but specifically chose to look for individuals who were (co-)founders of a new business that was seeking early growth through internationalisation. Hence, I did exclude small business owners running a stable business for livelihood and who are not considered to be entrepreneurs if the term is understood as personal trait or behaviour connected to innovative resource combinations for a profitable and growing business (cf. Hytti 2003: 91). These founder-entrepreneurs were easier to identify, e.g., from company webpages, in
comparison to other personnel potentially fitting the behaviour-centred definition of entrepreneur(ing). They are often CEOs and co-founders and presented the webpage with a short story. Judging by the small size of the staff, usually with between two and seven members on the top management team, they were likely to be involved in customer relationship establishment and maintenance at some level, and the very young age indicated that opportunity, particularly IO, construction was ongoing.

When going through company webpages, it was often difficult to judge if the business idea was targeted towards B2C or B2B markets. In some cases, this was perhaps due to less-developed company communications or even the lack of a clear business model. The often-limited information on the company webpages and press or in the company directories also gave little clue about whether the firm was already internationally active or had the intention to internationalise. I started by looking for companies that were actively presented in the media and participating in start-up events and discussion to find entrepreneurs who were successfully expanding business abroad, seeking/gaining investor funding for business opportunity development and/or sharing their stories in the start-up community. However, I also needed to find entrepreneurs who were not in the press or other media: voices that were not expressed because they did not perhaps suit the prevalent start-up discourse of high-growth, investor-fund-raising start-up ‘superstars’ or the ideal of an ‘interesting’ and innovative new enterprise. I hoped to find entrepreneurs in different types of settings and with diverse stories, so I also searched for different types of businesses.

I wanted to find both men and women to participate in my study to hear different types of voices and to avoid marginalising any group. In Finland, only 4.6% of women are involved in early stage entrepreneurial activity as opposed to 6.6% of the male population. However, the gender difference is not as great as in European Union or Nordic countries in general. (Stenholm et al. 2015: 32). In 2014, approximately 34% of all entrepreneurs in Finland were women, out of which approximately 75% were single entrepreneurs, such as hairdressers and beauty salon owners, and not in the scope of my study (Kangaspunta 2015: 24). As it was more difficult to locate female than male entrepreneurs in international growth-seeking young B2B ventures, it was also harder to find female entrepreneurs responsible for international sales in such enterprises.

I also worked on a project in 2012–2013 in one of the local entrepreneurship centres helping entrepreneurs to develop their ideas and their businesses. Initially, I hoped to become involved with some of the entrepreneurs I was working with.
during the project for my own research but came to notice that despite an initial intention to grow an early internationalising firm, many did not enact their business idea at all or started with a domestic business and postponed internationalisation. None ended up fitting my research focus. However, I learned much about the process of business idea development, widened my networks and spread word about my research project. Naive and influenced by the ongoing start-up boom and related discourse in the media and the local community, which I was now part of through my project work, I had thought it would be easy to locate new Finnish ventures in the midst of IO construction through international sales negotiation. It turned out, however, to be considerably harder to identify EIFs in B2B businesses because many new firms were not clear on their business idea, model and/or internationalisation efforts in their external communications.

The both planned and random events leading to the identification of suitable interviewees are described more in detail when I present my interactions with each participating entrepreneur (Chapter 4). In brief, I located the first interviewee, Daniel, through my networks. My project colleagues told me about his firm, and in summer 2013, I also happened to meet one of the co-founders and learn that their internationalisation plans had just begun to concretise. In spring 2013, I also met employees of a new firm at a start-up event and learned that Laura would fit my interviewee profile in several months, when the first steps towards internationalisation would be taken. Towards the end of the year I was becoming frustrated at not being able to find participants through my contacts in the local start-up community, and I began a systematic search using arcticstartup.com. I collected a list of young Finnish B2B firms and searched further information on them from the media, their web pages, and directories offering company information to discover if they fit the EIF definition. The very limited amount of information available at company directories posed a challenge for collecting the information I needed to identify interviewees for my study. I made a contact list several companies around Finland, and started by contacting Joel, who later became my fourth interviewee. One other entrepreneur whom I contacted based on the list expressed his interest in participating in my study but did not manage to find time for an interview. Early 2014, I remembered an entrepreneur, Maria, whom I had met during an earlier course assignment and realised she would be an interesting participant for my research. Finally, I saw Kai present his venture at a networking event in spring 2014 and realised he could provide an interesting narrative.

Despite some difficulties in finding suitable interviewees, I managed to meet five individuals who differ in their educational and/or career backgrounds as well
as in their types and fields of business. I was also happy to find two female entrepreneurs to participate in the study. My participants still include ‘average’ Finnish early stage entrepreneurs in terms of age and educational background, but I did manage to have variation within the latter group. In Finland, early stage entrepreneurship is found to be highest in the 35–44 age group, and highly educated individuals are more prone to early stage entrepreneurial activity than those with lower (some secondary) education (Stenholm et al. 2015: 30). I estimate that all my interviewees belonged to the above-mentioned age group at the time they established their business. They also all have higher educational degree(s): Daniel has a Bachelor’s degree from a university of applied sciences; Laura, Joel and Kai have Master’s degrees from a university; and, Maria has a Ph.D. None of them had prior experience in self-employment. Maria had been working as a researcher at a university; the others had held various positions and made long careers in larger corporations. Their motivation for entrepreneurship ranged from self-employment in an unsecure employment situation (Daniel, Joel and Kai) to the desire to work in business for oneself (Maria) to a sense of accomplishment (Laura). By chance, I had also managed to find two interviewees (Laura and Maria) who identified themselves as entrepreneurs even though they are not co-founders. They have been actively involved in developing the offering and the business as part of the entrepreneurial team and are partners. The internationalisation experiences also vary, because Daniel and Laura had just started approaching their first international market when we met, while Maria, Joel and Kai already had more extensive (albeit differing) experience in multiple market areas.

The entrepreneurs all represent service businesses, but in different fields: software development for varying markets (Daniel, Laura, Joel and Kai) and medical research and development (Maria). Joel’s firm has also started developing a hardware product. The software development businesses also focus on very different markets. Still, all of the firms can be categorised under high technology industries. High-technology firms, similar to manufacturing firms, have been a popular group for sampling in empirical IE studies (Coviello & Jones 2004), but my intention was not to focus on the high-technology industry for the purpose of comparative examination. However, it is no surprise that I located entrepreneurs in early internationalising high-technology firms, as these form the largest group of Finnish firms internationalising early after inception (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson 2004). The service focus can partly be explained by the capitalisation of expertise relying on high education and work experience (cf. Hytti 2003: 94).
To conclude, I am happy with the interviewees that I managed to locate for the study: I feel that their stories reflect different voices. However, these entrepreneurs, while having different backgrounds and current settings to certain extent, also ‘fall into the same category’ in many ways (age group, educational background, high technology based service business). There are certainly other interesting stories that my study does not give voice to.

3.3.2 Processual narratives

I conducted twelve interviews for this study. I interviewed Daniel and Laura three times, and Maria, Joel and Kai twice. I conducted more interviews with Daniel and Laura because of the point at which I started following their stories: at the outset of internationalisation. I first met with them when just after they first visited a foreign market and started discussing potential IOs. I subsequently followed up twice to learn about the ongoing process of IO development through sales negotiation. In the case of Maria and Joel, I could discuss their experiences of successful foreign market entries and ongoing expansion plans in the first interview, while the second interview was conducted at a point when they had decided to invest effort in generating IO in a distant continent. I first met Kai when his venture was still very young and had a rather *ad hoc*, yet successful, approach to IOs. In our second meeting, he narrated the ongoing growth of the firm. Background information on the entrepreneurs and their ventures is presented in Table 1, and their narratives are presented one by one in the following chapter (Chapter 4).

The dimension of time has been identified as being fundamental to IE research; combining the examination of IE processes (Coviello & Jones 2004) and longitudinal approaches with a cross-sectional approach (Coombs *et al.* 2009) is often called for. While the question of how long longitudinal should be (Kimberly 1976) with regards to specific phenomena is difficult to define and open to debate—also with regard to EIFs and IO processes—the research material of my study was produced from two to three points in time and covers between approximately 8 months and 1.5 years. This span could be seen as insufficient for a longitudinal process study because ‘genuinely longitudinal’ material should be produced from least at two different points in time (see Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2014), and it could be argued that the time between my interviews is not long enough for the study to considered longitudinal and/or process based. The researcher’s challenge is always choosing to end an empirical study at one point of time, concluding at a point when some processes may be ongoing, some ended, and
others just starting. I felt quite satisfied with the material: even if the time frame for interviewing the entrepreneurs was rather short, it is justifiable considering the IO phenomenon in the context of early internationalisation. In a growth-oriented new firm, much occurs at a rapid pace within a short period of time. This characteristic emerged clearly in the interviews when the entrepreneurs were trying to think back and remember what happened when and what had happened since our first meeting. In the second interview, Daniel needed to stop to calculate how long the firm had been in business, and in the third interview, when I asked him to tell what had happened within the past year, he replied

“[sighs] In a startup firm much takes place...It is an eternity, an eternity. All sorts of things happen and also the direction can change for many times if needed”. (Daniel 16 February 2015)

Only slightly more than five months after the first interview, Laura also starts by saying

“a lot has happened really, a lot happened. With fast pace this...it is somehow about throwing oneself to it, and then letting the stream take you and it...it just proceeds on its own course”. (Laura 1 July 2014)

Maria started the second interview by saying how hard it was for her to remember the point they were at a year ago. Kai, also, did not recollect exactly what ‘point’ the venture was at during the time of the first interview.

Even within a short period of few consecutive interviews with the entrepreneurs, I gained research material based on narrative constructions that contained varied process phenomena (Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013). The constructed narratives address sequences of events, involve multiple levels and units of analysis and their ambiguous boundaries and are temporally embedded and eclectic with focus on, e.g., changing relationships, thoughts, and understandings (Langley 1999). They describe processes over time and place, and it is the temporality and contextuality of process and narrative that make the narratives so compatible to process research (Elliott 2005, Langley 1999, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013, Pentland 1999). In narratives, entrepreneurs can construct story elements temporally and spatially to combine disordered experiences and events into a plot in an attempt to holistically describe what happened (Pentland 1999, Riessman 2002). IO processes are particularly appropriate for examination through a narrative approach that provides detail and richness to understanding processuality: what happened and why, how and why
things and activities evolved, and who did what and when (Elliot 2005, Langley 1999). Narrative constructions describe, organise, explain and analyse processes; narratives make room for the narrators’ reflections on and interpretations of processes–formed by interrelated, temporally connected, sequential and overlapping events, actors and time. Narrations are longitudinal, with their changes, antecedents and consequences in particular contexts over time (Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013, Rantakari & Vaara in press). Hence, they enable study of particular events and periods in real time and in retrospect, thereby enabling a study of social action in time (Makkonen et al. 2012, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013).

The timing and number of interviews for this research are connected to the following elements of the IO processes in each entrepreneur’s case:

1. Daniel met me for the first time after his first visit to negotiate IO in his first foreign target market. The firm had been in business fewer than two years at this point and was starting to more systematically act on imagined IOs. Six months later, he told me about the ongoing designing of IOs. A year after, in the third interview, Daniel narrated the first enacted IO but, at the same time, reflected on the plan to discontinue their IO activities and to consider a new approach at a later point in time.

2. Laura narrates the ongoing process of imagined IOs and attempts to construct them in the first international target area. During a one-year period, I interviewed her three times. The first interview was conducted after Laura’s first international activity, when the firm was over a year old and the focus was on perceived IOs. In the second interview, less than half a year later, the IO process activities were critically reflected upon, and at the time of the third interview, there had been a discontinuation of these activities in IO construction in international sales.

3. Maria discussed IO construction in retrospect when I met her the first time. The firm was already almost three years old and clearly successful in IO processes that were partly replicable. She also reflected on the perceived IOs in new market areas, some of which she had acted towards by the time of her second interview a year later.

4. Joel narrated from a firm that had started its operations with designed and constructed IOs in several locations. At the first interview, the firm was one and a half years old. The second point of IO process narration almost a year
later focused on a newly designed and enacted IO and the new activities related to it.

5. Kai’s narration also included reflection and a retrospective view of IO constructions since the early stages of the now seven month-old firm. In the second interview approximately eight months later, the IO processes were still very *ad hoc*, but this had led to continuous successes in IO construction.

The decision to conduct only a few interviews with each individual and the rather short time span leaves space for criticism. I acknowledge that, for example, in the case of Maria, the IO process in connection with expansion to the US market could have been followed to the point of realisation of the expansion plans. However, I felt that through Maria, Joel and Kai, I had already gained insights into past and ongoing IO construction processes that were becoming replicable. Following another perceived IO and the actions taken towards enacting it could have added to my collection of rich stories. However, I already perceived my existing set of stories as very insightful, and there needed to be an end to the empirical study as well as, more practically, to this research project.
Table 1. Introducing the participating entrepreneurs and their new ventures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entrepreneur†</th>
<th>Daniel</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Maria</th>
<th>Joel</th>
<th>Kai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>28 Aug 2013, 0:59</td>
<td>22 Jan 2014, 1:05</td>
<td>(2 May 2012, notes²)</td>
<td>14 Apr 2014, 0:45</td>
<td>18 Jun 2014, 1:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24 Feb 2014, 0:58</td>
<td>1 Jul 2014, 0:50</td>
<td>6 Feb 2014, 1:18</td>
<td>26 Jan 2015, 0:47</td>
<td>4 Feb 2015, 1:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 Feb 2015, 1:03</td>
<td>9 Feb 2015, 0:52</td>
<td>3 Feb 2015, 1:09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>BSc (Techn.)</td>
<td>MSc (Econ.&amp;Bus.Adm.)</td>
<td>MSc (Econ.&amp;Bus.Adm.), PhD (natural sciences)</td>
<td>MSc (Techn.)</td>
<td>MSc (Techn.), eMBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional background</td>
<td>Software development, strategy work</td>
<td>Product training and management</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>Device hardware and software development, intapreneur, team management</td>
<td>Software development, selling and sales management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior international work experience</td>
<td>Yes (globally)</td>
<td>Yes (globally)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (globally)</td>
<td>Yes (globally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior experience in international sales</td>
<td>Lived in: USA, Denmark</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lived: USA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New venture</td>
<td>Software development</td>
<td>Software development</td>
<td>Medical research and development</td>
<td>Software and hardware development</td>
<td>Software development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>Service</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2014: ≤ 60</td>
<td>2015: ≤ 30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2015: ≤ 80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†Names changed to maintain anonymity. ²Interview notes from another project for additional background information.
3.4 Narrative interviewing

When requesting an interview and settling a meeting time, I explained to the participants that the first interview would take approximately one hour but would not require any preparation on their side nor the completion of, e.g., questionnaires or other materials. I told them that I was looking to hear stories, a very informal narration, about their experiences. With this message, I hoped to give them some information on the topics I was particularly interested in and to influence their expectations about the interview: I was hoping for a ‘free’ narration that would not follow traditional structured interview logic.

The focus on the participants’ role and activities as entrepreneurs in the particular context invited certain types of narrations that sometimes applied entrepreneurial and other (e.g., Finns vs. others) stereotypes or that resisted these stories. I assisted the participants in constructing and labelling themselves as entrepreneurs, and they (primarily) narrate from this stand. (See also Hytti 2003: 84). The narratives the entrepreneurs constructed in their interaction with me reflect the culturally immersed ways in which they think of their lives, i.e., the narratives were largely constructed in relation to culturally/institutionally expected stories (Lillrank 2012) that were accepted, rejected or improved upon in the conversation (Czarniawska 1997).

“[… ] linguistic resources simultaneously limit and facilitate the thinking and talking of entrepreneurs. Put slightly differently, the entrepreneur is never the sole author of his or her story since narratives are always contingent on the available scripts of a given historical period and subject to conversational positionings […]” (Steyaert 2007: 463).

Sparkes and Smith (2008) note that narrative interviewing requires the researcher’s contextual awareness of the implications of the place (where) and the time (when) of each interview. I will reflect on the role of the place and time in the interviews in detail in Chapter 4. On a general note, I was lucky to interview each entrepreneur at a time that was not tightly constrained on either side. This allowed a more relaxed atmosphere, with no need to keep track of the time. Most of the interviews were conducted in a meeting room that provided good conditions for recording the conversation, for us to interact without interruptions and for the entrepreneurs to talk freely. Perhaps such a quiet environment helped the participants to take a break from their hectic everyday activities, sit back and reflect
upon their experiences. That said, there were also occasions when the interview was interrupted, for example, by a phone call or the need to change location. After such occurrences, we needed to briefly recap what we had just been discussing.

The narratives are not merely productions of the entrepreneurs but are co-created in the interaction between me and the participants (Gubrium & Holstein 2012, Polkinghorne 2007). As a researcher, I also played a part in the social construction of the narratives (cf. Flick 2006). Narrative interviewing is not about the researcher delimiting questions and answers but instead emphasises the spontaneity of narrating and the narrative structure (Coffey & Atkinson 1996, Flick 2006, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013). Hence, this allows the narrator to talk about issues that the researcher is not actively seeking but that seem important and to choose and connect events that are deemed relevant (Elliott 2005, Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2014). I started with generative questions (Flick 2006) such as ‘could you tell me about your background before entrepreneurship’ or ‘would you tell me what has happened since we last met’. I also provided a brief discussion of my research interests to stimulate relevant narratives (Flick 2006).

After posing generative questions to encourage narration in length, I posed questions to obtain more details about the narrative fragments I found interesting to guide the narration (cf. Elliott 2005, Flick 2006, Mishler 1986). At times, I had to make an effort not to interrupt a narration when a question popped into my mind. Active listening required me to suspend my own perspective and focus on what the narrator wanted to say (Lillrank 2012). My goal was to support and encourage the entrepreneurs to continue their narration through active listening (Flick 2006, Mishler 1986), but occasionally I became involved without being sure that the narration had come to its end. On such occasions, I formulated an interpretation of what had been said, asked a question related to it or just repeated words to encourage the entrepreneurs to explain something further. I worried that a thought would escape me or that ‘the moment’ would be gone if I did not direct the narration in a particular direction. Hence, at times there were more conversational narrative interview moments, and at other times, long uninterrupted narrations were followed by questions and answers or continued narration. Most of the time, I was able to follow the entrance and exit cues (Riessman 2002) to give room for uninterrupted stories, and then I returned to shifts, contradictions and gaps in the narratives (cf. Lillrank 2012) when I was certain that the narration had come to its end. Active listening in narrative interviewing is an interactive endeavour requiring reflective work and effort to not only ‘hear things correctly’ but also to understand the
emerging narrative from the interviewee’s viewpoint and to flexibly form follow-up questions (Lillrank 2012).

I sometimes found it challenging to encourage the participants to narrate freely when they completed short speech fragments or were silent, indicating that they were expecting me as the interviewer to pose questions. I had anticipated the difficulty of initiating narrative construction in interviews, particularly when I met the person for the first time. To guide their expectation with regard to the interview, I had already expressed my wish to hear their stories narrated freely in my original emails requesting a meeting. In some interviews more than in others, I felt that the entrepreneurs were used to structured interviews and limiting answers to concise statements (cf. Mishler 1986, Riessman 2002). In particular, requests to construct narratives of situations or ‘episodes’ (Flick 2006) were not very successful, in that the entrepreneurs started to narrate more holistic understandings and experiences without remembering individual events or considering their understandings as emerging from certain ‘key’ events. Flick (2006: 178) notes that conducting narrative interviews can be problematic due to “the systematic violation of the role expectations of both participants” when structured questions are not asked and people are not used to giving everyday narratives or have mastered narration to differing degrees.

The interviewing resulted in narrative constructions that can be seen as a mixture of retrospective narrations of life histories and experiences as the entrepreneurs connected present events, actions and interactions and future expectations. There were sections in the interviews that seemed to be very ‘loose’ forms of personal narrative or even to be a question and answer type of material that could be seen as ‘poor material’ (cf. Hytti 2003: 62). During the interviews, I felt unease when I received short answers without personal elements, but I did not want to dismiss these ‘thing narratives’ even if they did not fit with my initial expectation of how personal narratives should be told. (Cf. ibid.).

Particularly during the first interviews, I felt disappointed when the narration did not include intercultural aspects as I had expected. My questions attempted to direct the entrepreneurs’ reflection on these issues but only led to the reproduction of general level (impersonal) and even stereotypical classifications that appeared to have little to do with their current experiences. When later reflecting on my expectations and feelings and after gaining more experience with narrative interviewing, I was better able to accept that the narrators did not regard certain concepts and aspects as important, although I (based on theoretical knowledge) expected to hear that they were. In fact, critical notions on and disagreement with
what had appeared to me to be self-evident became some of the most interesting points of the interview material and redirected the focus of my research and approaches to subsequent interviews.

### 3.5 A narrative approach to analysing narratives

I chose to take two angles to the analysis, focusing both on what is said (content) and the way of speaking (structure, construction of the narratives) (cf. e.g., Hytti 2003: 63). Hence, I focused on the content (Gubrium & Holstein 2012, Riessman 2008) and meaningmaking structures (cf. e.g., Hytti 2005, Makkonen et al. 2012) to understand the multiple and possibly changing meanings of IO and the process of developing IOs. An analysis of the substance–focal actors, events, situations, emotions (Makkonen et al. 2012), themes and characterisations (Gubrium & Holstein 2012)–on the one hand, could facilitate categorising and comparing different cases (Flick 2006) and, hence, serve both of the main research objectives. An analysis of the meaningmaking structures, on the other hand, placed my focus on the plot, form, and organisation of the stories (cf. Riessman 2008), the ways the respondents made sense of new and unexpected events (Bruner 1986), and how they temporally and spatially located the narratives (Riessman 2012).

A constructionist approach to narrative analysis aims to examine different and even contradictory layers of meaning in narratives and to set these meanings in dialogue (Esin et al. 2014). Furthermore, the goal is an understanding of “how narratives operate dialogically between the personal and the surrounding social worlds that produce, consume, silence and contest them” (ibid.: 204). In line with this approach, I also analysed the personal narratives to see how the entrepreneurs justified their actions and thinking (cf. Hytti 2003, Johansson 2004). I looked not only for attempts to build holistic descriptions and causal pathways but also for non-linear and contradicting elements and the use of different types of discourses in (re)framing experiences. While I see content analysis as an important step, the narrative constructions and discursive strategies utilised to assign meaning to experiences are more central to my analysis.

A processual analysis of narrative sensemaking balances between future prospects (anticipation) and retrospective (resilience) reinterpretations of occurrences, and takes as its basis to “treat plausibility, incrementalism, improvisation, and bounded rationality as sufficient to guide goal-directed behavior” (Weick et al. 2005: 419). In brief, I study how the entrepreneurs make sense of IOs, themselves, social situations, and even history over the process of IO development.
Entrepreneurs can, for instance, position themselves as agents who initiate action or can narrate shifts between passive and active roles (ibid.). Recapitulated experiences remembered and narrated in the present provide us with an understanding of the past that “can only be understood in terms of how it is narrated” (Hytti 2003: 64), explained and made sense of today. Also a third time, the future, can be anticipated and imagined in a narrative and connected to the past and present (Riessman 2001).

This combination of approaches to narrative analysis is not new, as prior research has, for example, taken a narrative constructionist view to analyse stories as social phenomena but also to study themes and/or content of narratives (Esin et al. 2014). However, the aim of analysing the themes and content (within and between the personal narratives) is not to fracture the narrations around themes for the sake of generalisation but to preserve the meaningmaking of, and possible frictions in, structures (Hytti 2003: 63–64, Riessman 1993: 2–4). Thus, both what and how become central to the analysis. After the initial reading of the transcribed material, I formed tentative broad thematic categories for the discourse types and relationships between different narrative elements. I made both open and theory-informed markings when identifying what was of interest in the text. Then, I examined the sequential structures of the narratives with a focus on the manifested instances of relevant occurrences. I wrote narrative summaries of each personal narrative using contiguity-based ordering: I reorganised the material by linking relationships and building chronological narratives. (See Maxwell & Miller 2008). This process was repeated several times during the ongoing process of interviewing and analysis, aiming to gain feedback from the participants and the research community for the purpose of developing this final research report.

The connecting strategy led me to write individual narratives that share themes (internationalisation, sales and opportunity) but differ in length and content. For instance, my analysis of Daniel’s interview material resulted in a narrative summarised and analysed under seven headings whereas Kai’s narrative could be organised under five subheadings by content. Differences in organising the narratives arise from the story contents. While I analysed each narrative through the lens of SSC and looked for influences of the wider context (industry, economy, domestic market environment), I felt that some narratives contained rich notions on contextual influences–some even explicit statements confirming or criticising the societal start-up discourse and changes in the domestic economy–but some had very little and implicit references to the broader environment. Hence, when analysing and writing the narrative summaries, at times I wrote in more my
interpretation of implicit narrative elements and at times I reproduced the interview narrative very directly. For example, Laura’s narrative had less direct IO meanings connected to the business environment (macro-level) but contained rich material I could examine through the SSC lens.

In addition to the connecting strategy used in summarising the narratives, I applied a categorising strategy to match, compare and contrast narratives (Maxwell & Miller 2008). This process involved grouping text sequences into thematic categories to understand the substantive meanings of narratives (see also Holstein & Gubrium 2012, Riessman 2008). I identified not only different content but also different ways of accounting for experiences (what happened, why and how) within and across personal narratives, revealing varying interpretations of diverse IO constructions in negotiation and different types of subject positions assigned to self and other relevant actors throughout the sales interaction.

The last step of my analysis was to conclude with conceptual leaps and abstracted theoretical idea(s) through abductive reasoning (Klag & Langley 2013). Klag and Langley (2013: 150) describe the process as follows:

“Making a conceptual leap involves bridging the gap between empirical data and theory: moving from the mass of words and other data (the world of the field), through and beyond the mechanics of analysis to an abstract and explicit set of concepts, relations […] that have meaning and relevance beyond the specific context of their development (the world of ideas).”

In contrast with the aim of producing knowledge that can be transferred over empirical contexts, I do not make claims about the generalisability of my findings. My aim is to capture abstract, socially constructed knowledge to gain contextualised understanding (cf. Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 217–218). I strove for a gradual synthesis and a more abstract level of theorising (cf. Lemert 2007: 262). Whereas stronger processual approaches to IE are encouraged, processual analysis is recognised as a challenging enterprise: not only the sequence and patterns of events and the shifts between them but also the dynamic mechanisms (how and why things occurred) need to be addressed (cf. Langley 1999, Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2014). The analysis involves multiple levels and units, with ambiguous boundaries and a focus extending from events to activities, decisions, and changing meanings, feelings and relationships over time (Langley 1999).
3.6 Narrative research reporting

It appeared to me to be a natural choice to report my research journey through reflective narration in an attempt to write a good story (cf. Hytti 2003: 75). This implies that a good narrative research report is also meaningless if not informed by and forming theoretical insight (cf. Czarniawska 1999). When crafting this report, constructing my research journey in collaboration with other participants, I have striven to uncover the dynamics of IO processes through a thick description that will hopefully help my readers to identify similar dynamics in their lives or research (Dyer & Wilkins 1991, cf. Hytti 2003). A research narrative can reveal unexpected issues, surprises and contradictions that make it interesting to the reader and gives him or her the sense of deja vu and/or of learning something new (Langley 1999). The researcher must be able to create an interesting ‘puzzle’ with meaning (theoretical aim), coherence (of arguments, presentation strategies, points-of-view) and fidelity (Hytti 2003: 76).

Due to my role as an active participant in the research process (cf. Potter & Hepburn 2012), I wanted to make my presence explicit in the writing (first person) and to avoid the passive voice when telling how this work came to be. By locating myself in this text, I aimed to build a deeper connection between my personal experience and standpoint and the research phenomenon (cf. Lillrank 2012). However, as indicated in the consideration of what is good narrative research reporting, presenting myself (the author) reflexibly is not enough; attention to the readers as agents of the text is also required because written texts are constructed within and against specific traditions and audiences (Hytti 2003: 77, Riessman 1993). As Denzin (1997: 267) states, “there are no stories out there waiting to be told and no certain truths waiting to be recorded; there are only stories yet to be constructed”. This research narrative is not a ready story of the participants that I tell and interpret; I produced it through the constitution of social reality as it emerges in interaction between me, the participating entrepreneurs and the research community.

I have tried to be clear about the abductive research process and about shifts in my focus and thinking, but instead of bringing all the ‘messiness’ of the process to this report, I decided to follow a rather conventional structure. Experienced readers of social science documents are accustomed to a qualitative research plot that starts with an opening to the narrative (introduction), establishes the theoretical positioning, discusses the research design and methodology, introduces the empirical element of the process, and presents an analytical and critical discussion
of this material (findings and conclusions). A coherent narration of the research, rather than following the process, not only makes the report easier to read but also increases its expressiveness and the power of its arguments.

In structuring the empirical elements of the study, I decided to first discuss the personal narratives, each embedded and contextual, and then to draw on the shared themes/issues and the multiple voices for the purpose of theorising. I present these personal narratives in the order I interviewed the entrepreneurs the first time. Following Hytti’s (2003) example, I start each personal narrative by presenting the scene, how I ‘entered the field’ and how our interaction developed. By discussing of my role, experiences and feelings during the interview process, I intend to “create a space for the readers to empathise with my anxieties” and enthusiasm (Hytti 2003: 80) and to understand my preconceptions, decisions, and redirections. Through detailed and hopefully persuasive writing, I attempt to offer my audience the opportunity to both understand me and the entrepreneurs and also to “reflect back on their own lives“ (Tierney 2000: 551).

In the reporting, I try preserve the meaning-making structures of the entrepreneurs so that readers can follow how the meanings are created and the stories are formed (cf. Hytti 2003, 2005). However, the amount of transcribed material and the fact that I interviewed each entrepreneur at least twice forced me to edit the material by combining themes and the related sensemaking attempts from the consecutive interviews with each individual, i.e., to ‘bridge’ the personal narratives. As the decision to interview each entrepreneur two or three times relates to the processual focus of my research, it was also natural to continue and combine sensemaking accounts on each related topic as they were discussed over several interviews. Unlike purely cross-sectional narrative studies, I had the chance to follow and report changes in narrating and meaning-making over time: how did ‘the plot’ develop, how were meanings reconstructed, were there inconsistencies within and/or between the narratives and were they ‘explained away’? With five participants and 12 narrative interviews, the narratives became rather long. This is one reason why the number of entrepreneurs could not be higher, and some interesting perspectives and narratives were surely left out of the research. Additionally, my aim is to focus on glimpses of how IO processes and the interaction involved in them are understood and experienced at a certain time and place by entrepreneurs but not to provide a comprehensive picture of the group’s way of working and living or to reach ‘saturation’ of the data (Denzin 1997, cf. Hytti 2003: 87). I also feel that I could not have excluded any of the narratives from this research report because each of them provides new and relevant insights in
content and/or structure that I analyse. In my report, I am not making claims about the ‘truthfulness’ of the personal narratives but report the co-authored stories that require and are limited to the narration capabilities of the entrepreneurs, my capabilities as the author, and our willingness to render our lives into stories (see Hytti 2003: 56).

One challenge in the reporting occurred due to the different languages used for participant interaction and research reporting. All of the interaction between me and the entrepreneurs was in Finnish (the native language of all). This was positive because we could communicate in our native language. This eliminated any additional challenges to our expression, enabled subtle nuances in the narration, and possibly also helped us to establish rapport and shared understanding in contrast to a situation in which the interviews are in a non-native language (cf. Welch & Piekkari 2006). Analysing interviews in the original language and using own foreign language skills in translating are seen as a benefit by some anthropologists (Welch & Piekkari 2006). The entrepreneurs probably felt also more comfortable (cf. Welch & Piekkari 2006) talking in Finnish, and this may have led to richer narrative material. However, the difference in the language used for interviewing and that for reporting the research created a challenge when I needed to translate all of the direct citations I felt are needed in this report. With a background in linguistics and translation, I felt I could translate the quotes myself but wanted to have them language checked. On the one hand, I was afraid of losing something when translating the citations, but on the other hand, I found it useful to deeply reflect on the choice of words and the ways in which the entrepreneurs expressed themselves. At times it was hard to find English equivalents without losing the idiomatic content of an expression. The resulting ‘direct’ citations in the target language risk being imbued with unintended, equivocal or inaccurate meaning (Brannen et al. 2014).

3.7 Ethical implications of my research

There are several ethical issues that require reflection when conducting empirical research. During and particularly towards the end of my research project, I needed to consider the ethical implications of the empirical study, i.e., the narrative material’s construction, analysis and reporting. To start, the decision on whose voices are heard and whose perspectives are omitted in narrative research is a serious ethical choice (e.g., Syrjälä et al. 2006) that partly relates to the choices I made in my research design and partly to my access to potential participants. When
limiting narrative construction to entrepreneurs starting internationalisation within three years of firm establishment, I deliberately excluded international entreprenuring in more established organisations. I also intentionally excluded other people involved in the sales of these ventures. I only included one entrepreneur involved in IO construction in sales from each venture. When contacting the venture, the participants or their colleagues indicated that they were ‘the right people’ to take part in my study when I expressed my topic and aims. My responsibility was to explain the research idea in enough detail and encompassing enough meaning (cf. Elliot 2005: 141) for the entrepreneurs to be able to evaluate their suitability and interest in taking part in it. This task, on the other hand, was not easy, as I did not want to limit the research to overly narrow thematic areas in the beginning but wanted to allow the participants to talk about what they found interesting and relevant. Because the aim was to understand the phenomenon from their perspectives and not to set clear questions a priori, it was challenging to give any detailed description of the research project. Indeed, my focus changed over time, and in discussions with the participants, I needed to reflect on prior interviews and theoretical readings and to refine the topic areas covered in the interviews through my own initiative if this did not occur otherwise.

Although interviewing others, e.g., the prospects and customers who the entrepreneurs interacted with during the ongoing processes, could have brought interesting perspectives to IO construction, it would have been extremely difficult to get participants for the research. The entrepreneurs often preferred to keep their customers anonymous and in some cases had very strict non-disclosure agreements to prevent discussion on any particularities of ongoing relationships. The focus on only these particular individual entrepreneur’s voices and their narratives is strongly connected to my research approach: the point is not to try to gain access to some objectivist ‘truth’ distilled from a comparison of several accounts of IO-related events and actions nor is it to compare a multiplicity of personal accounts on a series of events and actions and ‘reveal’ different/similar perspectives to see how personal narratives relate to the shared cognition of (inter-)organisational narratives (cf. e.g., Vaara 2001, Weick 1995).

Another issue to be considered regarding the ethics of the narrative construction process is why the participants were willing to invest their time and effort in this study. There may be different motives for entrepreneurs to take part in the interviews and to read and comment on my preliminary narratives about them. The motives that became explicit in my discussions with the entrepreneurs were an
interest in hearing and reading about how others have addressed doing/organising and managing selling and a willingness to contribute to academic research.

““At least in our case, it has been really in a way a sum of chances and it is interesting then to read [a laugh] eventually from your dissertation then how the others have done [it] because the basic problem is that if you go and start doing sales in the traditional way, then it is really expensive.” (Kai 4 February 2015)

“In that way, it would be interesting to know what kind of firms you have interviewed and what they think, but I think that the problem with … the start-up boom is that too little is made to build firms that are profitable themselves and do not need to be sold…that do not need funding because they hand-finance their own operations and the money comes from customers.” (Kai 18 June 2014)

In between the lines, I also interpreted that entrepreneurs enjoyed the chance of voicing their experiences and opinions, i.e., being heard, expressing flaws in the system and in societal discussion and explaining their own troubles.

“[…] somehow the feeling that in Finland, people in general think we are in some kind of recession […] and are kind of paralyzed. That feels like a pretty…horrible situation if this is very common, and especially if bigger corporations think that they do not dare to invest now because the situation is so insecure. That means that everything stops. And others pass us from left and right.” (Daniel 24 February 2014)

“In Finland, the environment…does not support internationalisation very much. […] So here, I must say, that the atmosphere or societal support and also us being located a bit…in a corner…of the world so that…these are inhibiting factors for a Finnish company. […] Sure there are some support elements in Finland, but they are horribly heavy and stiff and…slow…and really the investment world here in Finland is so small, and the networks from here to there to elsewhere in Europe are weak…” (Daniel 16 February 2015)

Perhaps also the opportunity to sit down and take time for self-reflection and to engage in ongoing meaningmaking provided these individuals with a positive experience.

By offering the participants opportunities to construct narratives about their lives, experiences and understandings/visions, I did not constrain them with strict,
structured interview protocols determined by me (Elliot 2005: 135, Mishler 1986). Thus, they could become active subjects within this research, tell what they felt was relevant and what could be told, and make sense of the complexities of their experiences (Graham 1984, Elliot 2005: 135). My interviewing approach was characterised by my working together with the entrepreneurs to co-construct narratives and reflect on the research topic (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). Elliot (2005: 136) notes how even research on topics that are not anticipated to be very sensitive for the participants can become unexpectedly distressing when they “are given the space to provide stories about their experiences”. Some of the entrepreneurs over time grew more at ease and were able to be critical and discuss their disappointments, misjudgements, even regrets.

When analysing the narratives, I needed to pay attention to who was included and excluded in the narratives but also to what was included and excluded. During subsequent interviews, I discussed my interpretation and understanding of the ongoing research process with the entrepreneurs, allowing them to reflect on my thoughts and to provide competing/confirm interpretations of, e.g., the role and efficiency of hired, professional salespeople as opposed to entrepreneurs with substantial expertise or of the start-up boom and dominating discourses around it.

As for the reporting, I attempt to be transparent about my role as a responsive participant and about “the co-constructed nature of the research process” (Larty & Hamilton 2011: 225). I continuously try to clarify my own reflections and my role in each phase of the research so that it is easier for my audience to evaluate what I did. More crucially, I tried to remain sensitive to the participants’ stories and to the information that they gave me because it is important that I do not report overly sensitive issues that may have been revealed during or outside interviews or jeopardise confidentiality in reporting (Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013). As some of the participants wished to remain anonymous, I decided to change the names of all of the participants and to avoid detailed accounts of their background or ventures that might allow them to be easily recognised. I also asked them to read the narratives I wrote and offered them a chance to ask if they preferred some information to be left out or reformulated in way to make them less recognisable. Gaining their approval to make their stories public not only prior to the narrative construction but, particularly, after the research reporting was important to me (cf. Elliot 2005: 143). While I felt that I could have written about our interactions and about their stories in a more detailed and ‘attractive’ manner, revealing interesting details to the readers, I omitted aspects that could have compromised their anonymity and the trust between us.
3.8 Evaluating this narrative research

Several times during my research process, I had senior IE, IB and marketing researchers to comment on my research in tutorials and conferences, and on several occasions I received criticism on the method and research approach. Usually, the criticism arose from the inability of narrative constructionist research to produce generalisable results. Despite my attempts to explain, the approach to my work was judged by post-positivist standards that viewed my narrative ‘method’ as something that had ‘taken over my research’ and become the purpose rather than the means to an end (see Hytti 2003 for similar experiences). The evaluators appeared to be keen to separate narrative analysis and data from the rest of the study and unwilling to accept narrative constructionism as a holistic research approach. I increasingly felt the need to explain how I understood IE processes, reality and knowledge from a social constructionist stance and to explain how narrative constructionism was inseparable from the way of reporting and understanding narrative constructions and their collaborative production, the aims and boundaries of the study, and the ways in which research can contribute to our knowledge. Some of the criticism stemmed directly from misunderstanding narrative constructionism as a naive relativist approach that views reality only as socially constructed and language based. All in all, it became very clear that the value and place of narrative constructionist research needed (extensive) clarification (cf. Hytti 2003: 89).

Traditional ‘quality’ criteria for evaluating qualitative research have been questioned in interpretive studies (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln 1998, Flick 2006, Lincoln & Guba 1985, Welch et al. 2013). To address the confusion in terms of evaluating this type of research, there was a need to develop new criteria to evaluate research that was dissociated from the traditional criteria (validity, reliability, objectivity and generalisability) developed for quantitative and post-positivist research (cf. Denzin & Lincoln 1998). There have been a variety of attempts to develop alternative evaluation criteria for qualitative research since the mid-1980s (Flick 2006). Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) suggestion for trustworthiness and credibility criteria have been well cited. Many of these criteria were developed from a realist stance and aim for transferability of findings, assuming that, for example, data triangulation or other methods would increase the trustworthiness of the results (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Narrative material is then considered to be ‘evidence’ of personal meaning, indicating that these descriptions can differ from what ‘actually’ happened (e.g., Polkinghorne 2006).
This research should be evaluated from the viewpoint of reflexivity. I have attempted to construct a temporally and spatially situated report that demonstrates my own personal investments, my preconceptions and biases, the surprises and subsequent reflections, sometimes the shifts in my research process, and finally the ways in which my choice of literature lends “rhetorical force to the research report” and the ways in which I “have avoided or suppressed certain points of view” (Gergen & Gergen 2000: 1027). The last point relates to another important evaluation criteria of narrative constructionist research: removing and relativising “the single voice of omniscience” by including multiple voices in the research report (Gergen & Gergen 2000: 1028). I have attempted to include entrepreneurs with different backgrounds, from different types of businesses, and in different types of situations in their IO processes to construct diverse stories. I try to maintain the varying and changing views of each entrepreneur regarding IOs in sales negotiations and have kept conflicting and similar interpretations of and between the narrators with the aim of not compressing diverse views into one coherent perspective or concluding with a single, integrative notion. To ensure that I did not eradicate any views, I worked together with the entrepreneurs, whom I asked to read and comment on the conclusions (cf. Gergen & Gergen 2006).

Welch and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki (2014: 16) note how difficult it has proven for process studies to be evaluated on their own terms, as they are often “squeezed into variance-based templates.” Hence, it is of upmost importance for a stronger processual study to maintain internal consistency, starting from a process-related research question and moving through the empirical material, maintaining temporality in the analysis, and offering process mechanism-based, dynamic models in the conclusion (ibid.) Thick description, including the variety and richness of meanings and uncovering complexities and temporal dynamics in a narrative, should allow my readers to judge if the ideas are transferable to other situations (cf. Langley 1999; Welch et al. 2013). Good process research must also “make the readers feel that they learned something of wider value” (Langley 1999: 697), and this I hope to achieve through these compelling and fascinating narratives. These are not only descriptive, as I also use them as the basis to theorise on IO processes and to strive for conceptual leaps, which do not represent predictive statements (Welch et al. 2013). This study is not to be understood as theory building or testing, inductive or deductive, explorative or confirmatory. Instead, my aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon through rich, contextual narratives and to use the co-constructed narratives and meanings to elucidate the theoretical point (cf. Welch et al. 2013). The goal of understanding
and thick description can be considered modest and atheoretical to modernist scholars (Welch et al. 2013, cf. Langley 1999), but from the narrative constructionist stance, I see critical and reflective narratives as “a powerful form of gaining theoretical insight and a means to give voice to individuals or groups that tend to be marginalized” (Welch et al. 2013: 251). Findings were constructed through an abductive research process, in which I actively took part in the meaning making, a role that I attempt to make explicit along with the conditions of the interview interaction (cf. Gubrium & Holstein 2012).
4 Entrepreneurs’ international opportunity narratives

4.1 Daniel’s narrative

Daniel has a Business Information Technology degree, and for a few years during his studies, he worked as a salesperson in computer systems. He had an 18-year career in a multinational enterprise (MNE), where he worked first in coding, later in business development, and eventually in corporate strategy. During this career, he lived some years abroad. Daniel is the co-founder and CEO of a firm established in November 2011.

The firm provides software solutions for digital marketing. The company consists of a small team of co-founders (fewer than five) with a full-time work commitment, and one partner who joined them in 2012 with a part-time work commitment. There is also a subcontractor. During the second year in business, in 2013, the firm obtained investor funding for product development, and in 2015, it raised crowdfunding. During the first three years of operations (2012–2014), its revenue was still negative, but the firm has since managed to gain well-known, large domestic corporate customers, particularly in 2015. In 2013, the firm started internationalisation in the UK, where it now has its first foreign customer.

4.1.1 The setting: our interaction as the space for sensemaking

I learned about Daniel’s company from project colleagues who shared my interest in Finnish start-ups and had large networks. They suggested that this firm might suit my research interest, and I started by finding information on it online to see if there were signs of the firm having or aiming for sales abroad. Although my colleagues had the impression that this firm intended to internationalise early, there was no sign that any efforts were being made to do so. I happened to meet one of the co-founders at a few start-up events and received confirmation of this intention, but it was later in the summer of 2013 that I heard from him that Daniel had recently been to the UK to meet with prospects. At the time, I felt the need to start interviews as quickly as possible. I took a day to dig out more information on the company and to figure out what I wanted from these narrative constructions that I was about to begin. After some planning and drafting, I wrote an email to Daniel—it was the weekend, and I did not want to just sit and wait to call him later. I was excited but
also nervous, as I was not sure whether he would be interested in taking the time to meet me and to participate in such a study. I wrote him, asking if he would be interested in participating in my doctoral research on entrepreneurs’ experiences in international sales negotiation. I explained that I had heard of his recent trip to the UK and would be very interested in getting his viewpoint on the topic. I also wrote that I was hoping for several interviews over a longer period of time but that the interviews would require no preparation on his part. I said that my interest was in hearing stories about how he, as an entrepreneur, had experienced international sales negotiations. By telling him explicitly that I was hoping to have him narrate freely and to have an informal conversation, I wanted to influence his expectations about the interview: this would not be a structured ‘question and answer’ type of interview. My trepidation was alleviated when Daniel replied the next day with a short message suggesting a meeting that same week. After a few emails were exchanged, we settled on a meeting that would take place in a co-working space where the company was located. I was eager to meet him but anxious about the situation. I had limited experience in interviewing. In addition, I had never met Daniel, but I had heard that he was a nice guy.

When we met on August 28th, 2013, we shook hands and moved to a meeting room where we could talk in private. The room was small, and although it was not particularly cozy, it suited the purpose well: it was ideal for recording the discussion without interruptions or background noise, and it allowed us to sit comfortably face to face. Daniel asked me about my PhD research, and I started by telling him a bit about my background, research interests and plans for the research process. I felt that this would make the situation more equal. After some chitchat, I also felt more comfortable moving to turn on the recorder to ‘start’ the interview. This was actually something I did ‘on the go’ while we were discussing how I planned to conduct the study. I said that I would be recording the interview, and I repeated my aim and wish for the interview to be a rather free flowing conversation, which was why I had not prepared structured questions. However, I did tell him that I had several topics in mind that I wished to discuss with him. I asked Daniel if he felt at this point that he wanted to remain anonymous, to which he replied that this would not be necessary. He did not appear to be concerned about revealing anything that would be harmful or secret. He appeared to be very relaxed and comfortable with the situation, so I started by asking him to tell me about his background before he started up the company. This spurred a lengthy narration, and I was very happy about the promising start to the interview. It seemed that he was a very talkative person who liked telling stories, and I had no problem encouraging him to narrate
on the topic areas I wanted: his background, his entrepreneurial journey, internationalisation and selling. Daniel also initiated topics he thought might be of interest to me, such as his ideas and vision for the future, without my prompting. Daniel’s narration ranged from ‘factual’, chronological autobiography to vivid stories describing particular events that illustrated, e.g., business ideas that he had rejected in the past. He did not constrain his narration strictly to a chronology but, for example, when he moved from his background to tell me about starting his own company, he went back in time to reflect on when he was still a student and then to later when he worked for the MNE and already had entrepreneurial ideas and intentions. Such ‘jumps’ back and forth in time in his narration gave me richer insights into how he made sense of his experiences and reasoned about his decisions. Daniel occasionally used colourful expressions, humour and self-irony in his speech, and it was easy for me to engage in the conversation with smiles and laughter. He spoke softly and clearly and talked in a way that gave me the impression that he had narrated these stories before and that he had pondered upon and discussed these issues with others. He did not take much time to consider how to formulate his thoughts and reflect upon the topics initiated by either of us. While I felt that I was a researcher or a ‘student’ who was there to learn from Daniel’s experience, I felt comfortable in the situation and in my role. I was not afraid to appear unknowing or to pose ‘stupid’ questions, and with his manner of talking, Daniel also made me feel that we were having a discussion of his experiences and perceptions rather than that he was ‘educating’ me about the ‘facts of doing business’—a scenario that I had considered possible, particularly because I was a young researcher conducting her first interview, and he was an experienced practitioner.

Before the interview, I prepared notes for myself with a few bullet points on the topics I wanted to cover in the interview in case I froze and did not know how to continue the conversation but also so that I would not forget anything if I was nervous. I used these notes in moments when Daniel paused longer than usual, indicating that he needed another queue as to what I wanted to discuss, and when I had no follow-up questions. I either returned to the notes to see what could be the next topic of our discussion or to return to an issue I had found interesting and had made notes on. I made short notes because I did not want to interrupt his narration, but I needed to take notes on issues that I wanted to bring up again to clarify in more detail. This helped me to move past any pauses that could have turned into awkward silences. However, there were also moments when I felt that I had problems forming a question or a comment that would inspire Daniel to talk more
at length because ideas for additional interesting issues kept coming up as he talked, and I needed to react to his pauses even before my thoughts had become clear in my mind. Most of the time, I aimed to continue our discussion on a specific topic by restating something he had said that led him to elaborate more on the topic and also to check to see if I had interpreted something in the way that he had meant it. At times, the discussion did resemble more of a question and answer type of interaction, when I posed several questions to specify issues in continuation of his narration. With these questions, I aimed to obtain more detailed answers or richer contemplation. Despite the page of notes, I tried to maintain eye contact and to write as little as possible because I wanted to focus on personal narrative and interaction with nonverbal and verbal cues to indicate that I was genuinely engaged in the situation.

Even though I was very inspired, happy and excited at how well the interview went in terms of Daniel’s effortless narration and his interesting viewpoint on entrepreneurship and selling, there was one issue that I felt puzzled, and even disappointed, about during and just after the interview. I repeatedly highlighted the dichotomy between domestic versus international, trying to get Daniel to talk about differences between domestic and international selling or about the particularities of international selling, and I felt that I was not getting the answers I was looking for. In hindsight, I see that I was fixated with the traditional research approach in IE literature: emphasizing problems, challenges and liabilities related to early internationalisation. I was expecting to hear him juxtaposing his experiences based on actions and occurrences within or outside national borders. Only later did I better understand his perspective that country borders were not such an interesting or relevant topic: the customers’ country of origin as such does not matter, and country borders are not borders in terms of doing business. Daniel acknowledged the role of cultural and contextual differences in doing business, but he seemed to feel that these issues were so self-evident that discussing them was not relevant when talking about sales—although later, they did become a more relevant element of his narration. He did, however, compare domestic and international firms’ decision-making and behaviour in negotiations.

Only later, after more interviews and reading, did I realise that I had ignored a very important topic that was emerging in Daniel’s narrative but that had not been made explicit by him due to my rather restricted focus on my research interest. This was the narrative related to opportunities, and it only later became a more explicit topic of our discussions. My unconscious preconception of international selling as an activity that involved problems and challenges, which is how it is presented in
the majority of academic readings, rather than opportunities and advantages restricted my openness to picking up queues related to imagined future opportunities and the elements of opportunity construction, which were built into Daniel’s past reflections and future envisioning.

After an hour, the time we had planned, I felt that it was time to finish the interview. I had no further questions and thought that we had covered all of the topics needed. Daniel also appeared to have no further issues in mind that he wanted to share. He told me that he would be visiting the UK in a couple of weeks again, and we agreed that I would contact him later to set up a follow-up interview. When I wrote him at the end of September and again in early November 2013, I received no reply and assumed that he was busy. I did not want to ‘push’ him for an interview; if it took place at a time when he was perhaps stressed, the time pressure could possibly influence his motivation to give an interview and to genuinely reflect on his experiences.

Six months after the first interview, in February 2014, I called Daniel to ask how his foreign sales efforts had developed and to request a second interview. During the phone call, I learned that the past half a year had been very hectic, including several visits to the UK and efforts to organise sales there. In a follow-up email, I explained that after further interviews, my research focus had been redirected towards opportunities, and I was interested in hearing his thoughts not only on how his international sales efforts had progressed but also on how he perceived business opportunities in this context. We set up a meeting for the following week.

On February 24th, 2014, I revisited Daniel in the co-working space. Because he was running late, I started reading a recent Harvard Business Review article on “What entrepreneurs get wrong” (Onyemah et al. 2013). When Daniel arrived to the meeting room, apologizing for running late, I told him that I had used the time to read an interesting article. Inspired by the notion that most entrepreneurs regretted waiting too long before starting sales, I started the recording by asking Daniel how and when he had started meeting with prospects and asking them for feedback on the products. This led us to talk more about the challenges he saw related to sales and to negotiation techniques. This time, I had prepared notes with bullet points on the topics I wished to return to based on the first interview (e.g., roles he assigns to himself and to others in international selling) in addition to asking him to reflect on the experience he had gained since our first meeting. Now I was more alert to issues related to entrepreneurial opportunities, asking specific questions regarding, e.g., the role of customer interaction in product development.
and the transformation of initially observed opportunities. This time, the interview progressed more like a conversation, with Daniel providing shorter narrations and me posing more questions in reaction to what he was saying or as a reflection of what he had told me earlier. His narration did not contain coherent stories about specific events but focused on making sense of his new experiences and on narrating how he saw the future. The interview took as long as the first one and was very similar to it in nature.

In October 2014, I contacted Daniel again by email, telling him that I had noticed from their webpages that they now had a customer in the UK. This time I received no reply and assumed that he was very busy. I made another attempt in January 2015, this time also asking him to read through his story and to comment on it, as it would be included in a publication in an academic journal. I was happily surprised when he replied the very same day, saying that the text to be published seemed to be okay and suggesting a meeting time. After one rescheduling because he was busy, we met for a third interview on February 16th, 2015, in the same location as before. There had been a year between this final interview and the previous one, which is a long time in the lifespan of a new venture, and much had happened in between. This led Daniel to provide a longer narration about his experiences. We continued to discuss the topics of international selling and entrepreneurial opportunity. This time, I focused more on asking questions about change and the transformation of selling and opportunity, as the initial analyses of the previous interviews and related theoretical reading had led my focus and interest more towards the processuality of the phenomena. I wanted to make better use of the longitudinal, processual narrative material in theorising. The interview lasted over an hour, and Daniel discussed challenges and disappointments more openly than before. I would like to think that this was partly due to the trust that we had built between us. However, it could also be that his dissatisfaction had increased over time, and he had had much time to reflect upon his expectations and the reasons that they had not been met.

When we ended the interview, I promised Daniel that I would send him the final report so that he could read his section through before it was published. Although he was not concerned about his anonymity at any point, I still felt the need to make sure he thought that my re narration and (re)interpretation of his experiences made sense to him and that he did not feel that he was identifiable.
4.1.2 Starting the entrepreneurial journey

Daniel had thought of starting a business several times in the past. As a student, he perceived a potential business opportunity when he considered starting a business similar to his employer to import computer parts for assembly and sales. During his career at the MNE, he considered a potential opportunity for new mobile content that was later very successfully provided by many businesses. However, job security and the ease of being an employee were the biggest obstacles to his entrepreneurship. Starting up a business would be exciting but risky, whereas a steady secure job was “without high ups or low downs”. Although there were moments during his corporate career when a customer’s enthusiasm about a new product idea he had been developing got him excited and made him think about his own business ideas, he abandoned these thoughts. He was comfortable in his current life. Daniel ended his 18-year career in the company only when it began downsizing dramatically, decreasing his job security. He had started questioning his motivation for corporate strategy tasks, and he decided that he would rather start up his own business than accept a transfer within the MNE. He already had a business idea, and with two colleagues with a similar vision, he founded a venture to provide software solutions for mobile marketing in November 2011. Daniel was the first person to start to work full time for the business in early 2012.

At first sight, Daniel’s story of his career path from a high-technology corporation to self-employment is similar to the ‘average’ story of a Finnish engineer at the time. The collapse of large ICT companies in 2012–2013 (Napier et al. 2012) is connected with the Finnish start-up boom (Lehdonvirta 2013) in part because the talented individuals made redundant were encouraged to leverage their strong knowledge base to start up new businesses—with support systems provided by both the downscaling firms and by society. In a way, entrepreneuring appeared to be a natural choice or even a necessity under the circumstances. Albeit in an insecure employment situation, Daniel could have chosen to stay with the company, but he decided that it would be a good time to act on his entrepreneurial ideas and motivations. Despite reports such as GEM 2014 stating that Finland provides a friendly environment for entrepreneurship, “much of the turmoil around start-ups still remains invisible in statistics and studies” as support systems, positive attitudes, perceived business opportunities and competences do not turn into new businesses and high-growth start-ups (Stenholm et al. 2015: 40). Daniel represents a proportionately small group of people who perceive business opportunities, believe that they have the know-how needed and engage in entrepreneurship by
starting their own business. Only 5% of the Finnish adult population was involved in early stage entrepreneurial activity in 2014, and the average number is higher among innovation-driven economies (Stenholm et al. 2015).

4.1.3 Entrepreneurial selling

Daniel started interacting with domestic prospects in early 2012 to develop the offering and had the first customer by the summer. He felt that given his role as the CEO, it was natural to handle sales, whereas his co-founders felt that they could not sell. The responsibility for maintaining customer relationships shifted to them for the technical execution. Daniel felt that he had done quite well in business-to-business selling despite his limited sales experience, which was from over 20 years previously when he was still a student. He jokingly described himself as a divided character because he enjoyed both interacting with customers in marketing and sales and engaging in technology development. With this description, he appeared to be referencing the widely shared stereotype of an engineer-entrepreneur who focuses on product features but lacks the interest and capabilities to interact with customers (cf. technology vs. marketing entrepreneur in Andersson 2000): it is extraordinary that someone would be interested in both technological development and customer interaction.

During his corporate career, Daniel had attended customer meetings all around the world to present new technologies. He particularly highlighted his international experience–living abroad and regularly travelling for meetings–as being connected to his international mindset.

“I feel that I have always thought rather internationally. […] I don’t think that there are domestic and international sales separately. There is just sales, just trade. And it doesn’t matter if the customer is from Finland or Sweden or the UK or the USA.” (28 August 2013)

He did not pay much attention to cultural or legislative differences, feeling that these issues did not make a big difference as long as one understood how they affected the business. He came to this notion after one round trip to the UK for negotiation and no international customer relationships established to date, i.e., based on his other international work experience and experiences in domestic entrepreneurial selling.

Having some experience in both domestic and international selling, Daniel contemplated how an entrepreneur approaches selling differently from a corporate
entrepreneurial selling is characterised by “heart flame” and speed. It is about “trusting your own dream a lot and going ahead with this ardour” (28 August 2013). For an entrepreneur, every negotiation is a chance that cannot be wasted because selling is a matter of survival, “life and death”, to a start-up. A sales representative cannot substitute for the entrepreneur “because nobody can do it with the same devotion and know-how, the same assertiveness, as one of the founders” (28 August 2013). The founder has more credibility when making promises related to service execution and product features. Daniel saw the minimal organisational structure as a strength, as it allowed instant decision making during meetings.

“And also from the viewpoint of product development, the customer’s needs must be understood well and that is why a founder must be there.” (28 August 2013)

However, there was also no support function to help with the lack of sales experience in the entrepreneurial team. When discussing future opportunities in the US market, Daniel stated:

“We have technology know-how in [the domestic market], but sales and marketing is something we do rather poorly – and everyone knows that.” (28 August 2013)

With this statement, he again reinforces the preconception that Finns, particularly engineers, do not know how to sell but do possess a strong ICT knowledge base.

In autumn 2012, a salesperson, later a partner, was hired to support Daniel in sales.

“I think this has worked very well…In the way that we have different backgrounds and experiences and we know different things, so combining these has worked well.” (28 August 2013)

They prepared sales support materials together, and both attended negotiations with prospects at least for the first meeting: the CEO would introduce the company and the offering, and the partner-salesperson would step in when contractual stipulations and pricing were negotiated. With still no full-time salesperson after two years, Daniel looked back to the very beginning and thought about what could have been done differently:

“I’d say hiring a professional salesperson […] if the firm’s financial resources would allow it. Then, it would be crucial. Probably everyone can learn to be a
Daniel described his approach to sales as being *ad hoc*, whereas a professional salesperson would know the phases and handle them better. He pondered on how hard it is “to find a salesperson that can professionally bring the negotiation to the closing”, while “door openers are easy to find” (24 February 2014). He thought that the ideal situation would be one in which the professional salesperson sells and understands the product, and the founder-entrepreneur supports him as the specialist. There appeared to be a need for both entrepreneurial and traditional (professional) selling in the process. Daniel did not directly relate the challenge of gaining sales growth as expected to his inexperience in sales or to the inefficiency of a part-time sales force. However, he clearly described the importance of his own role in providing credibility and flexibility when negotiating the content of a joint opportunity with prospects, while he expected the experienced salesperson to be able to professionally manage the negotiation and technicalities and to ‘close the deal’.

### 4.1.4 Challenges in creating international opportunity in selling

“Since the beginning, we said that our venture will fail if it stays...if we do business only in Finland. It simply won’t work. Nobody...well, let’s say that maybe we could get our salaries paid through that, but that’s it. That’s not our dream.” (28 August 2013)

The vision was to develop one of the world’s leading solutions in the field and to exit somewhere along the way. The UK was chosen as the first international market for entry. Daniel explained the decision as being related to proximity, in terms of distance and time zone as well as EU membership, and to market potential, as many large corporations were headquartered there.

Early in 2013, the venture hired a recommended person from a national trade organisation to perform initial market research for the UK. As interest in the offering appeared to exist, the consultant set up meetings with twelve prospects, and Daniel visited them with the partner-salesperson in July 2013. After the first roadshow, Daniel said that the UK “has been a very positive experience” (28 August 2013) with significant business opportunities. Negotiations continued with nine prospects who showed interest and readiness to invest in new marketing solutions. One prospect signed a letter of intent within a month of the first face-to-
face meeting. The potential for IOs was perceived based on the initial discussions with prospects and imagined based on the assumption that similar interest could be found on a large scale because of the large size of the market (in terms of potential customer businesses).

In August 2013, Daniel felt that a local salesperson was not needed to compensate for language or cultural differences. During his career, Daniel had spent time in the UK and had visited the country often. He felt that a local office might be good for logistical reasons but that a local presence was not of concern to the prospects when asked. Daniel emphasised that both he and the partner-salesperson would be involved in UK customer interaction, as they did not intend to separate sales by country. Within six months, Daniel made another two visits to the UK to continue negotiation. Simultaneously, he had discussions with a sales agency identified by one of the partners that could represent the company if needed. By the end of the year, Daniel had decided that the lack of local contacts and foreignness were hindering sales, and he started collaborating with the local sales agency, hoping that their experience, networks and locality would help in the sales. In December, the representative firms’ salespeople joined Daniel in negotiations, while the partner-salesperson started focusing on domestic sales.

In February 2014, the venture had three offers in for foreign customers, indicating that perceived IOs were being evaluated for potential joint construction. The widening of the sales funnel started with a telemarketing campaign executed by the agency. Daniel and the representatives agreed that the CEO’s presence was needed as soon as a prospect expressed interest and possible solutions (opportunities) were being discussed. In May 2014, a collaboration with the first UK customer, a small shop chain, began with a free trial and later continued to the commercial stage in November. Daniel’s goal was twofold: for the client to actively use the e-marketing system and for as many of their franchise shops as possible to use the system. The collaboration started well with campaigns, but in the autumn, the customer started renewing its web sites and online shop. As a small company, its focus and resources were tied to a new project that had been delayed. The customer regretted not having been able to concentrate more on marketing, and Daniel was disappointed that the first project was not “starting big” (16 February 2015). The perceived opportunity to make the marketing solution popular among the end users was constructed in practice (a tailored marketing application), but the realisation did not meet their hopes or reach the desired value because the customer was unable to fully commit to enacting the planned opportunity.
By February 2015, Daniel felt that sales progress in the UK was a disappointment because sales had not started with any “explosive” growth. One customer and one oral agreement were less than Daniel had hoped for after visiting the country almost monthly for over a 1.5 year period. By the time of our meeting, he was scaling down the effort and taking some time out:

“We will learn from this and see if there is another way to start better.” (16 February 2015)

Daniel, however, did note that the local agency had done quite nicely and that continuous work together was needed to improve sales. When reflecting on his experiences, Daniel noted the significance of references, particularly for a small company from a remote location. In the UK, they did not have a well-known customer reference to prove that they could successfully enact an IO with a credible, relevant reference customer. This made it difficult to demonstrate that the envisioned and jointly discussed IOs could be a valuable solution in the local context of the end customers (consumers) and in certain types of businesses.

Despite the challenging start in the UK market, Daniel restated that their aim was still for substantial (international) growth:

“We really have world class technology, and I guess at this state, I could say also world class know-how. [...] We would like to be a thought leader: bring something as the first [to the market], to create the need and be experts in that way.” (16 February 2015)

Daniel said he knows that they “must go with realities”: they learned that a new market could not be conquered with “a left hand swipe” (16 February 2015), indicating that more resources would be needed before more effort could be put into IOs. He felt that when the business started running well, they would have a lever for internationalisation and an accelerated start in conquering the UK. Then, the next target market would be the USA.

4.1.5 Developing business through customer interaction

Daniel narrated three stages of their venture that I thought reflected his readings from start-up manuals (e.g., Blank & Dorf 2012). First, proof-of-concept regarding the perceived product opportunity was sought through the initial customers. When product ‘packaging’ is done well, the company achieves the second stage: they find the angle(s) for approaching customers, even if some tailoring is still needed.
During this stage, the business becomes profitable and relevant references and experiences are accumulated for the next step: scaling up.

This first stage involves learning and tailoring; the entrepreneur tries to develop customer relationships and a replicable offering. In February 2014, Daniel considered the company to be moving towards the end of this stage. The venture started by licensing a marketing platform to application producers, but it was quickly observed that not all customers had applications to fit to the platform. Hence, a customisable application was added to the offering. Later, Daniel formulated the offering as “a turn-key [digital marketing] solution for your company” (24 February 2014). Daniel told of how they constantly tried to streamline and simplify their message. This was partly achieved by optimizing the product package to five customer types. In February 2015, he explained that before any solution was even negotiated, he would first take a consultative approach to discuss the customers’ changing business and marketing needs, after which they would evaluate whether mobile marketing would be a suitable solution.

The general customer feedback directed the entrepreneurs to simplify their message, offering and pricing. There were also ‘light bulb’ moments in single meetings, when Daniel realised that the discussed solution could also suit other customers, i.e., the opportunity could be replicated for others. In particular, the billing model changed based on his experiences in the UK. There, Daniel recognised two types of customers: ones that preferred first paying for tailoring and subsequent monthly fees and ones that preferred having tailoring costs included in the monthly fee.

Particularly in the proof-of-concept phase, the entrepreneur’s personal contact with customers was significant: gaining trust was critical. Daniel told of how the biggest challenge for sales was the fact that the solution meant change to the customer’s business model. This meant that as part of evaluating the potential opportunity, the customers needed to assess whether the perceived value of the enacted opportunity would be worth their resource commitment in changing some of their practices. Daniel needed to persuade the customer to engage in a new way of marketing, commit to the launch and use the application for the opportunity realisation to be successful. This required customers’ “ability to change and courage and willingness to jump into the change” (24 February 2014).

Daniel expressed his frustration with the slowness and ‘stiffness’ with which domestic companies approached decision-making. In particular, the stagnant behaviour of Finland’s big firms worried Daniel: they did not appear to dare to invest in the future due to the insecure economic situation. In the UK, the “wheels
are obviously turning” (24 February 2014). He had the impression that UK firms were much faster and leaner in their decision-making. UK firms appeared to be more enthusiastic and they started to discuss potential customer cases and project execution quickly. By early 2015, though, Daniel was positively surprised at how they had increasingly gained domestic contacts, whereas in the UK, the business was more “stuck”: he appeared to struggle with the joint evaluation of IO:

“When we talked last time, the situation seemed the opposite: nothing was happening in Finland, and UK had a good vibe. (16 February 2015)

Still Daniel criticised Finland’s national business environment, which he felt did not provide enough support for internationalisation. He listed the atmosphere and location as challenges to internationalisation and rapid growth. There were support elements they were “horribly heavy and stiff and slow” (24 February 2014). The investor scene was small, and the networks to other countries were weak.
Fig. 4. The temporal order of events in Daniel's international sales story.

Fig. 5. The emerging international opportunity process in Daniel's narrative.
4.1.6 Meanings and mechanisms of the international opportunity process

The above analysis mostly notes the sequence of what happened and why (Fig. 4) in Daniel’s narratives in relation to the UK sales, but the question of how—the dynamic interplay between changing meanings and (inter)actions—remains to be addressed (Fig. 5). Through the lens of SSC, I will now try to gain more insight into how he rationalised the IO process: how he acted upon (perceived) opportunities, how IOs were situated, how the meanings and construction of IOs were embodied in him, and how he understood IOs as distributed over (social and material) environments. With this approach, the analysis remains on a very contextualised and complex level, maintaining the richness of his individual narrative (Table 2).

Daniel’s sensemaking narrative of IO is strongly action-oriented, reflecting the vision of high growth, scalability and a strong market position eventually leading to an exit. His narration focuses most on the product IO development: from platform to customisable application and optimised turnkey solution. Beneath and intertwined with this IO content is the business model IO story: how to make the business scalable by further developing the product, its sales and distribution channels, and the revenue model and by targeting customer segments. Daniel wanted to see the firm becoming an innovative ‘thought leader’ in the market in the long run, and this long-term opportunity defines the actions that he narrates as steps taken to secure the firm’s survival and to strive towards growth through the perceived business model and product IO. Notably, Daniel did not differentiate between a national and an international context for product IO development in regard to acting towards achieving the vision; instead, he saw product IO constructions as being inevitable and selling in foreign markets as the only solution to achieve their ambitions. He narrated three stages in moving towards their high growth objective that would first require legitimising the offering through relevant customers (in Finland and/or the UK). The product opportunity development started with domestic customers, but additional development has been continuous based on both domestic and international prospects and customer feedback. Interactions with different types of prospect businesses led to the development of a tailored application for a validated product that was customised for the need of (only) a few different customer types. While Daniel had experience negotiating product IO with and developing it based on domestic customer relationships, his
product IO narrative was rather free of country context, which had implications for the market IO and growth narratives.

The action orientation of Daniel’s sensemaking of the market IO focused on internationalising and selling. When discussing domestic market opportunities, he talked about relationship opportunities, which perhaps related to the importance of the first customer for the business and for product development, but his narration on foreign market opportunities revolved more around selling. Daniel spoke of sales action in the UK, i.e., negotiating replication of the product opportunity (application) with some optimisation possibilities, as the first step towards the international growth goal. The team particularly perceived IOs, specifically international growth opportunities, in the UK and the USA, regions that were both familiar to Daniel through his previous career. During the second year of operations, after first piloting a tailored marketing application domestically, the firm hired a consultant to collect leads and contact prospects in the UK. This action led to a roadshow and several consecutive trips to the UK. It was not long until Daniel felt that he needed local professional sales help to address prospecting efficiently in the UK. As negotiations in the UK moved forward, Daniel’s market IO storyline became increasingly intertwined with product IO development and relationship IO building and began to include challenges, particularly in the latter area even with the help of the sales representative. The decreasing commitment to the UK as a market IO is linked to the action-orientation of Daniel’s reasoning about the IO: to be successful in tapping the market IO, the firm must be able to put its full effort into sales to build relationship IOs and to develop product IOs. With the lack of replication for the turnkey solution in the UK, Daniel focused action on domestic customers simply to establish stability and gain resources. This would provide a foundation for transforming (replicating) the product opportunity over market (country and business field) contexts.

The intertwined product and market IO storylines also link to Daniel’s embodied cognition of the IO, the former being tightly based on his expertise and the latter on his prior work experience in the UK. Although the local agency was used to partly solve the logistical challenge caused by the firm’s location, Daniel’s physical presence in negotiations remained crucial when opportunities for collaboration were discussed. The intersubjective space for product and relationship IO development require face-to-face interaction in which only Daniel could create value with the prospect. Face-to-face meetings were needed to build trust in relationships but also because Daniel, as the expert in his teams’ capabilities, had the knowledge and the power to flexibly adapt the offering to customers’ needs.
and to suggest different solutions. Embedded perceptions regarding product IOs appear to be central for developing the IO in foreign markets before the offering was validated and transferable across contexts in the UK and eventually the USA.

The notion of the UK as a desirable foreign market IO appears to have initially derived from Daniel’s prior experiences and to be embedded rather than situated in the retrospective sensemaking of the first interview. The communicative situatedness of Daniel’s IO cognition appears, for example, in the ways he adjusts his message to UK prospects by highlighting Finnish technological know-how and the prospects’ positive attitudes towards Finland in the ongoing negotiations. Adjusting the billing model in the UK provides an example of how the entrepreneur’s interaction with local prospects and how Daniel’s agency affected development of the business model IO. Daniel and the co-entrepreneurs perceived the UK prospects as being more enthusiastic and quicker decision-makers than Finnish prospects. However, despite the various communicative approaches taken to develop these prospects’ commitment to a negotiated product and relationship IO, only one deal had been closed. At the time of the third interview, Daniel wanted to re-evaluate the relational context around building social networks to realise the opportunities the team saw in the UK market. A new strategy for approaching and acting in the (cultural and institutional) cross-context intersubjective space may have been needed, but before approaching the more developed market areas in the business field, the entrepreneurs planned to focus on domestic market opportunities; at that time, these were perceived as being more feasible. Daniel viewed the relational context of relationship IO building in the UK as being crucial: to understand the context and tap into new networks, local agents were needed as were good customer references from reputable firms who had committed to utilising and promoting the product IO.
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Daniel narrated the meanings of IO as shared and jointly developed (i.e., distributed). The perception of the UK as a desirable IO market was influenced by the consultants who initially prospected the market; the entrepreneurs’ perceptions of the feasible product and relationship IOs for development and the business model, which would be optimised to customer needs and later made scalable, were influenced by interaction with the local sales agency and prospects and distributed across these relationships. What, however, appears to have been one of the biggest challenges in realising product IOs was gaining a shared understanding of the reasons why the prospects should commit to a joint IO execution that required changes to its marketing approach.

4.1.7 Daniel’s narrative in the empirical context

Daniels narrative is situated in the particular context of a Finnish economy that is slowly recovering from a global financial and economic crisis (OECD 2014) followed by the significant downscaling or bankruptcy of several large and medium-sized, established ICT companies such as Daniel’s employer in 2012–2013 (Napier et al. 2012). These events released thousands of highly skilled individuals such as Daniel to the labour market. The support of their entrepreneurial efforts in starting growth-seeking ventures (ibid.) has had an effect on the on-going start-up boom (Lehdonvirta 2013)—along with policy makers’ continuous development of framework conditions (Napier et al. 2012). In fact, Daniel’s entrepreneurial activities could be seen as being supported even before he started his own enterprise, as his salaried work included entrepreneurial activity when he was involved in creative product development tasks. In Finland, such entrepreneurial activity is actually more common than early stage entrepreneurial activity that, despite the observed start-up boom, often does not evolve into new businesses, let alone growth ventures (Stenholm et al. 2014).

Since their venture’s inception, Daniel and the co-founders had envisioned a high-growth entrepreneurial venture with a global scope. Early internationalisation was clearly driven by the entrepreneurs’ international mind set (cf. Andersson 2015): Daniel envisioned IOs in terms of global scalability and market leadership, taking for granted that domestic business opportunities would not satisfy the team. Daniel’s talk of substantial international growth, thought leadership and market leadership reflects the prevalent start-up discourse; this discourse is reinforced by remarkable domestic media attention and high political status that have also led to increasingly positive cultural attitudes towards not only entrepreneurship as a
career choice but also start-ups with growth ambitions (Napier et al. 2012, cf. Lehdonvirta 2013). Daniel saw the firm’s world class technology and know-how as the foundation for their growth aspirations, but after three years of operations and 1.5 years of sales efforts in the UK, he recognised that the desired growth pace would not be achieved with the current resources and effort.

Daniel’s narrative somewhat contradicts the discussion on the paradox of good pre-conditions for growth ventures versus the moderate number of high-growth start-ups (Lehdonvirta 2013, Napier et al. 2012). He did not assign the lack of a ‘big start’ in the UK to a lack in his ability to accelerate early growth (cf. Napier et al. 2012), but clearly new approaches to realizing the global potential of the firm needed to be sought, possibly through increasing resources from domestic sales. While Daniel discussed IOs in relation to global markets, the slow start with internationalisation led the firm to develop entrepreneurial opportunities in the domestic context. Proof-of-concept is sought through both domestic and UK sales, but the venture may end up relying on opportunities that are constructed locally and extended or modified through international customer interaction (cf. Fletcher 2004). Daniel stated very strongly that the domestic environment was very challenging in terms of sales: firms were unwilling to invest during ‘insecure times’ and decision-making was slow. This was in contrast to the UK, where he perceived great market potential and a willingness to envision joint solutions from early on in the negotiations. Although Daniel had the impression that the UK prospects made decisions more quickly, closing deals proved difficult and time consuming. The domestic market suddenly opened up, particularly after the venture gained good references. Daniel still felt that the national environment would not support accelerated international growth: the atmosphere, with its weak investor culture and unwieldy support systems, did not sufficiently support growth aspirations that were easily hindered by the remote location.

Daniel’s narrative can also be analysed in light of the scholarly and general discussion of entrepreneurs’ sales skills and orientations and prevailing preconceptions about salespeople’s inborn or trained competences. There is a strong need for the entrepreneur-salesperson’s participation in sales interactions, as IO development, feedback, proof-of-concept and long-term relationships cannot be outsourced. Daniel reflected on how a lack of sales experience on the entrepreneurial team created the need to use a professional sales agency. In particular, in the UK, these representatives were needed not only for logistical reasons but also because the local professionals were more efficient in opening doors to new networks. Daniel commented on his own peculiar interest in both
technology development and sales interaction, making the point that an engineer-entrepreneur usually focused on technology but was not comfortable in sales (cf. Andersson 2000 on the marketing and technology entrepreneur). He reinforced a widely shared notion that Finns have technology know-how but perform poorly in marketing and sales. He said that probably anyone could learn selling, but because a start-up does not have the time, it becomes crucial to hire professional sales support. He soon learned that his ad hoc approach to selling, combined with distance, network outsidership and limited resources and skills for prospecting, needed to be compensated for by experienced salespeople. Although Daniel had a proactive international sales orientation (cf. Andersson 2000; Pitkänen et al. 2014) that was unusual in high-technology and industrial firms (Hisrich 1992), he needed sales support for prospecting but also, in particular, for closing.

4.2 Laura’s narrative

Laura has a degree in marketing and approximately ten years of international work experience in health product training and management at an MNE. In summer 2012, her colleague founded a new venture, involving her in a small team to develop a health service platform. She joined the firm with a full commitment in early 2013. The first two fiscal years saw negative results. The firm gained investor funding in 2013. The number of employees has doubled since the founding, but remained under ten after three years of operations. Within these three years, the firm had gained a customer in one nearby country and had put effort into organising sales and establishing customer relationships in the USA.

4.2.1 The setting: our interaction as the space for sensemaking

In spring 2013, I attended a start-up event, during which I spoke to people who were working for new ventures. When I told them about my research interests, they encouraged me to get in touch with two people in the firm who were responsible for marketing and customer relationships. I managed to briefly speak with them—Laura and another employee. I heard that they were only just then planning the first action, a trip to the USA, to initiate internationalisation and that I should contact them towards the end of the year. They gave me a brochure and their business cards; I, with slight disappointment, stored them in my bag. I felt that I had not been at my best in this unplanned situation, which had occurred in a hallway and with probably both of my new contacts on their way to continue work. I felt that I had
been rather ambiguous and perhaps had failed to interest them in my research. As a novice researcher, I was nervous and afraid of rejection, which is why I felt I was unable to show my enthusiasm about the topic, which in hindsight was still a very fuzzy bundle of topic areas. I feared that I had not left a good impression and that they would not be willing to waste their time in an interview later.

In early December 2013, I got back to Laura and the other employee, asking if both or either of them could take part in my research on entrepreneurs’ international negotiation experiences through a very informal interview. I referred to our previous encounter and their plan to travel to meet potential customers in the USA, asking if one or both of them had since made the trip. To my great pleasure, the co-worker answered my email the very same day, telling me that Laura had visited the country and was responsible for the market area. She herself was not involved in international operations. Laura did not answer the email, and due to the approaching Christmas season, I decided to contact her again in January.

When I again approached Laura via email, I decided to clarify that the focus was on subjective experiences and that I would not require detailed information on customers or on the content of negotiations. I could leave her and the firm anonymous. This issue had recently become important to my research process, as it had come up when I was on the phone with another entrepreneur, Maria, asking for an interview. Based on that conversation, I now assumed that including anonymity could ease the entrepreneurs’ possible doubts about taking part in my project. I was thrilled when Laura answered me the same day, and we agreed to meet in less than a week.

In January, I went to visit Laura in the coworking office space where the firm was located. We sat on comfortable sofas but in an open space, which led me to wonder if she would be comfortable speaking about things that she might view as negative or challenging. To my relief, the space was very quiet during the interview, and we were not interrupted. Laura did not appear to have any tight schedule for after the interview, which I told would take approximately an hour, and this helped me to feel more relaxed and to focus on our conversation without time pressure. This being only my second interview, I felt that Laura’s positive and calm demeanour made me less nervous. She was a woman and I estimated that our age difference was slight, which I felt helped to democratise the situation. Additionally, I felt that my own interest and understanding about her field of business helped to create some common ground at the outset. It was easy to understand the business, and I did not feel worried about posing ‘stupid’ questions due to unfamiliarity with the industry or the type of business. After a short while, I was able to engage in the
interaction without worrying that I would forget something or be unprepared with follow-up questions. Laura did not rush in her answers, but paused several times and took time to contemplate. The atmosphere was friendly, and she smiled often. We talked for over an hour.

When telling me about her background and experiences, she often emphasised her feelings and motivations and explained her way of thinking and of approaching areas such as work, customer interaction, and international contexts. She emphasised relationships and her passion for product content development but spoke relatively little about international sales, the initial focus of the interview. This was at least partly due to the very early state of the firm’s internationalisation, and the narrative repeatedly reflected the multiplicity of options and the uncertainty of the future.

At the beginning of the first interview, Laura asked if she could later decide whether she wanted to stay anonymous based on how the final text corresponded or deviated from the company brand. While I was worried about her concern with the firm image, this request luckily also implied that she would perhaps also discuss critical views and difficult issues and that she recognised that the option to remain anonymous allowed her to talk about negative experiences. Trust between us and the issue of anonymity became increasingly important in our later interaction, when Laura noted that it was good I considered anonymity in my writing and that this should influence the study in terms of what interviewees would be willing to tell me about things that had not gone quite as hoped. She had clearly been thinking about the topic between interviews and wanted to remain unrecognisable so that she could speak more freely.

At the end of April 2014, I approached Laura with another email to ask if she would have time to meet with me again. I guessed that a lot had happened since we last met. It turned out that I was right, as Laura got back to me two months later, telling me that she had been very busy, the time had flown but the summer was now freeing her schedule to some extent. We agreed to meet in early July before we both would have our summer vacation. I was happy because I felt that this would be a good time for her to look back and reflect on the spring now that the busy season was over. We met this time in a meeting room located in the shared office space that Laura’s firm was located in. This was a good choice because we could meet undisturbed, without anyone hearing us or influencing the quality of the recording. The meeting took 50 minutes.

Similar to the first interview, Laura described a constantly evolving situation in which many options were still open and being examined. However, this time,
she also expressed dissatisfaction with the professional salesperson’s results. This seemed to confirm notions I had developed during other interviews and from different readings. What continued to concern me, however, was the focus of Laura’s narration. First, she was not directly involved in face-to-face international negotiation. This was an activity that she was prepared to do if needed, but one that she eventually ended up engaging in through a sales representative. I was not sure if she perfectly fit my initial focus now that she had a rather limited view on roles in sales. It was only later that I fully accepted her view that an organiser or manager of international sales was equally relevant and important to my study. The narrative strongly emphasised her role in product development and marketing, while international sales, particularly how to organise them, increasingly became a focal topic towards the end of my research project. Later, I understood how entangled marketing- and sales-related actions and plans and product development were to her. She also approached sales from a product development and personal interaction viewpoint, as opposed to “direct” and “systematic” selling, which she felt was not “natural” for her. Her narratives directed my initial sales focus towards the opportunity process, as the interviews with her clearly included constantly changing roles, the organisation of sales for observed or assumed opportunities that were being evaluated, and actions and views that changed based on experiences. So much took place between the interviews that it was clearly challenging for Laura to construct a chronological story including the timing of events.

In December, I wrote Laura and told her that I would have an upcoming publication in which I would talk about her experiences anonymously, and I offered her the chance to read and comment on it. Simultaneously, I requested a third meeting. After a second email in January, she answered and apologised for the delayed response. She was very busy, and we agreed to meet later in February. She suggested changes to the journal manuscript, as she felt that it still contained information that made her too easily recognisable. I was happy to receive her comments because despite my efforts to omit certain details and to generalise some information, I felt that it was hard for me to judge if I was revealing too much. Based on her suggestions, I changed the text and took a stricter reading on all of the narratives in terms of anonymity. I had conflicting feelings about editing the narrative: I wanted to write the narrative with rich detail that made it more interesting, but at the same time, I needed to respect the wishes of Laura (and others) and strip down specific aspects that could have compromised their anonymity.

For the third interview, we met at Laura’s home office. She invited me to visit her there, as she had planned a home office day with virtual meetings before our
meeting. While she was clearly multitasking between private life and work, she was very calm and cheerful during the interview. We both laughed several times during our conversation. At this point, I had already conducted several interviews for my research and was considerably more confident and relaxed in the situation. I felt that I had become a better active listener and was more at ease with varying interview content and more open to welcoming any topics and viewpoints that arose. Not being entirely ‘in control’ of the interview situation, i.e., dictating the interaction, was actually a role that better suited my personality. In this conversation, I could also give more of myself to the situation: not only did we briefly discuss my research project at the beginning of the interview, but Laura also posed some questions to me about my background and experiences and I reflected on my knowledge and takeaways from other interviews when forming questions and discussing Laura’s experiences. After 52 minutes of recorded discussion, we finished. Laura, who seemed somewhat preoccupied, still devoted time to reflect on her past and present experiences and to picture the future. She said that she would gladly read my research report on her narrative when I approached the end of my project.

When I started writing this chapter and revisited the company’s webpage, I learned that there had been interesting developments in the company’s internationalisation, and I had to live with the fact that I had only been able to follow a short part of their ongoing IO process. Told at a later point in time, the story would naturally have been different. However, I had my time constraints and was happy to have shared Laura’s journey in the beginning of their IO and international sales. She has since been focusing more strictly on her role in product development, with other people dividing the sales roles.

### 4.2.2 Entrepreneurship as new career opportunity

After working at a Finnish MNE for a decade, Laura had gained vast international experience in product training and management. She travelled extensively to visit the company’s subsidiaries. Her (consumer) sales experience dated back to when she was working during her studies. In early 2013, she decided to leave her corporate job and join a small group of former colleagues who had established a new venture six months earlier. Since the very beginning, she was involved in idea generation and product development for a health software. Although Laura was satisfied with her career development and with the work environment at the MNE, the work had become less inspiring.
“I missed the feeling of excitement…and that is why I came along to this [venture]. I want my work to be passionate, I need to get inspired.” (Laura 22 January 2014)

From the beginning, she multitasked between several roles. The firm started with domestic sales, and Laura was initially involved in these. After a year, the responsibility for (domestic) sales had concentrated on the founder-CEO and one employee, while Laura had begun focusing on marketing, product development and internationalisation. These tasks felt more natural to Laura, who is particularly concerned about content development (in product and marketing).

I feel that I am more like a content seller…that I can’t direct…When thinking of, for instance, [Diane] whom we have, who is really…She has a bit different angle to selling and is able to approach it systematically. I start more with the content. My experience is from that… […] I guess it’s my way […] It is what fits best to my personality and my know-how. When jumping to the other approach to selling, it is very target-oriented…and it’s maybe not so natural for me.” (Laura 22 January 2014)

Laura connected these feelings and thoughts with her job experience: she had always worked with products that had “strong content and messages” that she needed to “open up”. She saw her role in internationalisation as being a natural fit: she liked to talk and perform and to interact with customers to ensure that the product was valuable and serves practitioners needs.

4.2.3 Challenge of mediated opportunity creation in international sales

Since the beginning, it was clear that the firm would seek scalability and growth from international markets.

“The beginning of the year was very busy in the Finnish market and the domestic (sales) situation has been very good since. […] Our situation in Finland is good but…it is not nearly enough, the [sales] volumes.” (Laura 1 Jul 2014)

Laura contemplated why, after a year of developing domestic customer relationships, the USA was selected as the next market to enter. She described the domestic market as “a development country” in her business field but also as a
small market, where it is good to practice doing business (1 July 2014). They wanted to enter the USA

“...because the health market is the most developed there and companies invest quite a lot in similar things that we do” (Laura 22 January 2014)

Hence, less effort would need to be put into educating US buyers. Laura was also very familiar with the context, and one of the partners was located there. He was also a former colleague, and Laura referred to him as their sales manager in terms of the US market. However, he had a full-time job and was not involved in the work daily. Laura saw the entrepreneurs’ existing international networks as an advantage: in several countries, they knew people in the health field who they could turn to when they “are ready” to expand. Laura also viewed Europe as an interesting potential market area, but noted that the company would face the challenge of needing to be a forerunner in the field there too. The network would become important in this area.

In late 2013, Laura attended a conference in the USA with a potential local sales representative, a former colleague who was now a sales consultant. The purpose was to gain contacts and to discuss collaboration in organising US sales. Laura felt that they were working well together, complementing each other in discussions with prospects at the event. The entrepreneurs wanted to reach scalability by first adapting the offering to the US market (if needed) and then replicating the IO. This, in addition to the distance from the US market, led the entrepreneurs to decide to rely on the salesperson’s effort and consider further visits later if needed. He was hired as a part-time sales representative due to his sales experience and his passion for health. In early 2014, he visited the firm in Finland to be trained to demonstrate the product so that he would be able to transmit the concept and the company’s story. Laura emphasised that sales can only be outsourced to sales professionals who “live the content” because “otherwise, you cannot tell the story” (1 July 2014).

The entrepreneurs were also encouraged to visit the USA themselves to initiate sales, but they felt it was best to use a local representative. Laura felt that in the USA, they needed a charismatic person who knew the health field, could produce localised communication and could demonstrate the product. In summer 2014, however, Laura expressed her disappointment in the number of prospect meetings conducted in the USA and said that she felt that the market entry had started too slowly. The entrepreneurs were starting to think that they needed to set clear targets for the professional salesperson, and they were demanding concrete results
(number of product demonstrations and customers) by the end of that summer: “We have been practicing” sales management from distance (1 July 2014). Laura stated that one reason for the slowness in gaining customers with whom to design IO locally was the part-time commitment of the representative, which was a result of the new venture’s limited financial resources. Having followed the representative’s performance for five months, Laura questioned his energy and “drive” in selling the content. Pilot customers and direct feedback in the USA were much needed. “Sometimes I would like to be there, but we have got to build this in a way that we don’t need to...To build the service and product so that it enables scalability.” (Laura 1 July 2014)

In spring 2014, a domestic salesperson was hired and in the summer, he joined prospect meetings in the USA. At the time, there were two prospects that had shown interest and the target was to “get a bit better picture here on what is going on” in the USA (9 February 2015). Laura was cautious about US prospects’ enthusiasm, which was reported by the salesperson, and felt that an “internal perspective” was needed to evaluate if the interest was “genuine”. With this observation, she also noted the differences between how Finns and Americans communicate, give feedback and interpret the ‘real’ meaning of expressions. Laura said that the sales representative appeared to be good at “waking people up” to the topic, but she was afraid that he could not handle product demonstrations or eventually training as needed, i.e., following the entrepreneurs’ standards. The entrepreneur had a clear idea of how the perceived IO should be presented for prospect evaluation, and she had good experience in this from product demonstrations and trainings in Finland.

In early 2015, Laura continued to feel that they would need a good customer service trainer in the USA who could handle the practicalities with regard to the service product. The venture still had no customers in the USA, and Laura suspected that the US pricing model had made the purchase decision too big and slow. In Finland, the company did not charge for service product training but only for licenses, which made decisions on the joint opportunity easy and the financial commitment low. In the USA, the sales representative had decided to introduce the IO as a package solution with help, for which he would charge the customer for travel and training costs. This package would include a certain number of licenses, the required equipment, and service and training. The IO evaluated by the customer could have appeared to be riskier due to the higher financial commitment required up front. Laura believed that the pricing model should be reconsidered and made more tempting for US customers. She was surprised at her co-entrepreneurs’
patience with the sales representative, whose services they stopped using in 2015. The entrepreneurs felt that one of the team members should be present in the US market, but the most suitable people (such as Laura) were not able to move there; “It just doesn’t proceed before one of us is there” (9 February 2015). Laura’s efforts were now focused on domestic marketing entirely and international selling—initially seen as her responsibility—was not part of her role anymore.

In addition to a different way of presenting the collaboration opportunity (pricing model) in the USA, Laura wondered if no customer relationships were established in the USA due to a lack of commitment or product understanding on the part of the sales representative. Her experience from her previous job was that salespeople did not necessarily consider customer product feedback to be “their thing” and they were not committed to the product. The representative also had other work, which is perhaps why the pressure to perform was not very high.

In 2015, the firm focused on domestic sales, which had increased well, and attempts to break even. Laura still saw the domestic market as a test field. The entrepreneurs had not decided how to proceed with US market entry, but it had not been rejected as a target area. They had some potential suitable representatives in their networks if they decided to re-approach the market. Laura was convinced that they needed to change the pricing model to ease the purchase decision and also to “get salespeople to commit” to the product. She had noticed that in the USA, the culture is very different in the sense that the health business is developed but focused on issues that appeared to be self-evident to Nordics.

“Our own background and experience in the USA was so strong that we instantly thought we need to go there where there is more money.” (9 February 2015)

The USA was also used often as a reference from the outset because market data were available. “In the future, we need to make big outlines about where to go. [...] It depends a lot on the people” (9 February 2015). Central Europe was also considered to be an interesting market area. It is more similar to the domestic market, with less competition and less aware customers, but the entrepreneurs already had networks there for sales support. Laura saw that scalability would be needed for international success, but that alone would not be enough: “it’s about many things.” Figure 6 summarises the sequence of events in Laura’s international sales story. When I wrote this report, I could see from the company website that the venture had decided to further pursue sales in the USA: they had appointed a key account manager to this market area—a Finnish employee this time.
Fig. 6. The temporal order of events in Laura’s international sales story.

Fig. 7. The discontinuous international opportunity process in Laura’s narrative.
4.2.4 Meanings and mechanisms of the international opportunity process

After the above discussion on the sequence of actions, events and decisions in Laura’s narrative on international opportunity in sales (Fig. 6), I now turn to take a closer look at the mechanisms in her IO process narrative (Fig. 7). Her narrative is particularly focused on repeated attempts to transfer and adapt a locally developed product opportunity to an IO, with relational and contextual dynamics at play but not leading to ‘progress’ in the IO process. Similar to Daniel’s narrative, Laura understands IOs in relation to opportunities realised through customer interactions in the domestic context, but in Laura’s account, IOs negotiated with international prospects do not lead back to opportunity development (product or other). There is little that she appears to have gained from the international sales negotiations in terms of developing product IO content, but she did reflect on the ways in which the IO process could be initiated and managed (cf. Table 3).

Laura started her IO narrative by talking about the entrepreneurs’ vision of making the domestically constructed product internationally scalable. The team of entrepreneurs saw a business opportunity for a replicated or modified product, particularly in the US market. IO-focused sales actions started there, with the aim of gaining an understanding of how the offering was perceived by US prospects and how it could be developed with pilot customers in the USA. In Laura’s narrative, the IO-focused actions were to train a sales agent, in order to obtain an experienced local representative who could negotiate, and to learn to manage distant sales. As the challenges in building relationship IOs through the local sales agent alone became of increasing concern to the entrepreneurs, an employee and later one of the founders visited the USA to see how the negotiations were going. They had particular interest in gaining direct prospect feedback on the product IO and in seeing how it was presented by the representative. After over a year of collaboration with the local representative without any relationship and product IOs being established in the market, the entrepreneurs felt that they needed to re-evaluate the market IOs and to identify new representatives to pursue IOs. The business model and product were becoming increasingly successful in the domestic market, which became their focus area, and IOs now needed to be considered based on the experience of successful interaction with Finnish customers.

Laura narrated the product IO, i.e., the developed test tool with ongoing content updates, as being based on the entrepreneurs’ prior experience and current
entrepreneurial experience. The perceived and developed product IO was embedded in and distributed among the team of entrepreneurs, who were passionate about what they were doing. Laura saw the product content as having the potential to be transferable, but she also wanted to adapt it to emerging customer needs. She thus contemplated the importance of having an engaged salesperson in the USA and the need for direct contact with prospects. Product IO demonstration and training needed to be conducted in a way that reflected expertise in the product IO content and commitment to increasing the customer’s product understanding through interaction. Laura was disappointed to find that little information was mediated between the entrepreneurs and the US prospects. She felt that the product IO was not communicated as she had hoped and agreed upon with the salesperson. Eventually, the team of entrepreneurs determined that the IO understanding was so embedded that one of them would need to be present in the USA to pursue the market IO. To start sales in the USA, they could not rely solely on a trained local salesperson and product trainer, although eventually the product IO would need to be developed enough to require little support and training to enable scaling.

Whereas the action-orientation and embeddedness of Laura’s IO perception emerged very strongly in her first interview, the situatedness and distribution of IO understanding were less clear. She narrated the perceived potential in the current moment but mostly focused on speculating about the future, highlighting its unpredictability and the entrepreneurs’ openness to emerging opportunities. Laura had committed substantial time to developing the company’s communications to convey the right, compelling story. While she felt that transforming communications for the US context would be necessary, she also trusted that a local sales professional would adapt well to the communicative situation in a market that appeared to be more mature and in which a positive perception of Finland could be useful. To her disappointment, the sales representative was not committed enough to the situated understanding of product IO and unsuccessfully adapted the business model IO to the context. However, Laura narrated the relational context, i.e., the potential utilisation of her social networks in relationship IO development, as a potential channel for pursuing market IO in the USA and Europe in the future. Laura believed that there would be situated adaptation needs for the product IO when relationships were built with foreign prospects by a committed sales representative.

Laura’s understanding of the market IO changed over time: the assumption of highly developed health markets with great growth potential in terms of sales changed to a perception of the US market as challenging because it took a different
approach to health than Europe. Indeed, over a year after her visit to the USA, Laura started to view Europe as an appealing developing area for IO construction. With social networks providing potentially suitable sales representatives in both market areas, the entrepreneurs now needed to consider how to approach internationalisation, while their focus had shifted to efforts in the domestic market.

In addition to Laura’s frustration that IO-related meanings were not being successfully communicated to the US prospects, she was also concerned that very little feedback was transferred from the foreign prospects to the entrepreneurs. A distribution of product and relationship IO meanings between the entrepreneurs and US prospects appeared to be lacking or was mediated by the representative in ways that were dissatisfying to the entrepreneurs. Laura wondered if little evaluation had been requested in the first place by the salesperson, who was perhaps more interested in sales numbers than in product and service development. To gain a better understanding of the perceived product IOs from the US prospects’ perspective, an employee from Finland travelled to visit prospects with the local representative. The aim was to ensure the quality of the product demonstration (embodied cognition) and to obtain a direct, ‘internal’ view and interpretation of the prospects’ feedback (situated communicative context). In a way, this was an attempt by the entrepreneurial team to bridge distributed understandings of IO.

What strikes me as particularly different between the IO process dynamics in Laura’s narrative and those in Daniel’s narrative is the missing interaction between Laura and the US sales representative for development of the product IO. Instead of being a productive space that influenced ‘back’ to the domestic context and customer interactions, this borderline appeared to remain influential only because it reinforced Laura’s experience that a domestically developed product opportunity and business model were based on successful efforts in sales and relationship building. The initial shared understanding between the entrepreneurs and the local representative for the US market IO and the representative’s accepted idea of an adapted business model with a ‘packaged’ solution for product and pricing were later reconsidered.
### Table 3. The IO process through the socially situated cognition approach to Laura’s narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action-Oriented</th>
<th>Embodied</th>
<th>Situated</th>
<th>Distributed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jan 2014</strong></td>
<td><strong>Visited the USA</strong></td>
<td><strong>Prior experience</strong></td>
<td><strong>N/A</strong></td>
<td><strong>N/A</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ongoing:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Enter the USA → train a local sales representative</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perceive potential for transferability and adaptability</strong></td>
<td><strong>USA is the most developed market background and Finland perceived social networks →</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prospective:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pursue scalability through market opportunities in the USA product</strong></td>
<td><strong>Need engaged salesperson to demonstrate networks could aid internationalisation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Prospective:</strong></td>
<td><strong>US market IO</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jul 2014</strong></td>
<td><strong>US representative slow to meet prospects → set clear targets</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expertise and passion in product training and demonstration</strong></td>
<td><strong>IO construction mediated by the local representative IOs with the US representative</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ongoing:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Learning to manage and control US sales</strong></td>
<td><strong>Need direct contact to develop relationship and product IO</strong></td>
<td><strong>Representative adapts business model to the USA</strong></td>
<td><strong>No direct feedback from US prospects → no product IO</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prospective:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Send employee to support demos and get direct feedback</strong></td>
<td><strong>Competence in product IO training needed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Employee sent to interpret US prospects’ feedback</strong></td>
<td><strong>Employee goes to the USA to discuss product IO</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feb 2015</strong></td>
<td><strong>Visits to the USA</strong></td>
<td><strong>Own team member needed to present product IOs</strong></td>
<td><strong>US market IO taken for granted; noticed different approach</strong></td>
<td><strong>Trained a US product trainer (relationship IO)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ongoing:</strong></td>
<td><strong>No US customers → discontinue collaboration with representative</strong></td>
<td><strong>Challenge of not having an own salesperson in the USA</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ongoing:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ongoing:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prospective:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus on domestic market; Contact potential representatives in the USA/Europe</strong></td>
<td><strong>IOs: Europe more promising?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Scalable product IO</strong></td>
<td><strong>Scalable product IO</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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4.2.5 Laura’s narrative in the empirical context

Unlike many other new venture stories in Finland at the time, Laura’s journey in entrepreneuring did not start from (the threat of) unemployment. Instead, she decided to leave a steady job and to pursue a more inspiring career as part of a new venture. Her narrative strongly reflects her motivation and reproduces a conventional narrative of entrepreneurship being about passion for one’s product, excitement, and non-routine work (cf. e.g., Hytti 2003). She also joins the prevailing discourse of the local and national start-up ecosystem: the supportive spirit of the community, positive attitudes towards entrepreneuring, participation in pitching events and pursuit of investor funding and media attention. Interestingly, she accentuated the need for product scalability in pursuit of international growth but did not talk about an exit plan. This could indicate that she did not share the taken-for-granted assumption of an exit target in high-growth seeking new ventures.

Laura described the domestic market as a development country for the particular health business. The Finnish health and wellbeing sector is growing, but much of the innovations are directed to different customer segments and businesses are not investing in health products and services as much as US companies. Later, she talked about the unexpected growth in domestic sales: Finland was still more of a test field, but there appeared to be interest in health and wellbeing related solutions. She thought that sales growth related to the current tight economic situation of many companies, which found her product easy to use and inexpensive compared to competitors. Daniel used a similar metaphor for the domestic market and was also happily surprised by increased domestic sales figures.

4.3 Maria’s narrative

Maria holds a Ph.D. in natural sciences and worked in the USA as a post-doctoral researcher in the medical field. After returning to Finland, she completed business studies and was recruited to a newly founded medical research and development firm in summer 2011. She joined the team of three entrepreneurs, who had registered the new firm in spring 2011, and soon also became a partner. Her tasks included marketing and sales and development of the offering. There was steady growth in turnover and operating incomes over the first four years. The number of employees also increased from under ten to close to twenty. Within three years of starting operations, they had customers on two continents and soon extended to a third continent.
4.3.1 The setting: our interaction as the space for sensemaking

Towards the end of 2013, I had only identified two participants for my study and was growing very anxious to conduct the empirical study. I urgently needed to get in touch with the empirical world after a long focus on theoretical readings. It was at that point that I came to think of a firm and an entrepreneur I had gotten to know through a course assignment a few years back and realised that she would perfectly fit my study. I waited until after Christmas and called her in January. I was not sure if she would remember me from the group project, but I thought that she would probably at least recall that she had been interviewed for it. Maria picked up the phone and agreed to speak with me briefly. I told her about my research topic and asked for an interview; to my great excitement, she said yes. We agreed to meet in two weeks, and she invited me to visit her in her office. On the phone, she said that she wanted to remain anonymous and asked me to send my questions to her in advance. I understood that in her field of business, confidentiality was particularly critical and that it was very important for her to remain anonymous even if she was not disclosing any details about their business agreements. I also learned that she was a busy and efficient person, which is probably why she also wanted to have a look at my interview questions in advance. I wrote her an email describing my narrative approach to interviewing and provided her with the topic areas I was hoping to cover in our discussion: her background, particularly with regards to her international, sales and entrepreneurial experiences, and the international experiences of the firm more in general.

I arrived at the company’s premises well in advance, as I had been unsure whether I would find it easily. To get in, I needed to use a buzzer and then immediately walk upstairs to the next locked door, where the person answering the doorbell was waiting for me. Hence, I did not have time to gather my things and prepare before actually entering the premises. I said that I was early and would wait for Maria to be ready. She soon came to welcome me, showed me around briefly and took me to an available meeting room. Her shared office was in use, but she said that we would move there later because the meeting room would then be needed for recruitment interviews. We both took a cup of coffee and sat down. I reconfirmed that I would be the only person to listen the recordings, and we agreed that everything she told me would be anonymous.

Because we had met and I had interviewed her before, it was easier for me to meet with her now. Additionally, I felt that given her academic background, she understood my motivation and the personal importance of the project particularly
Because I lacked a good understanding of her field of business, I felt that she was the expert, and I occasionally posed ignorant questions to which she replied by educating me, e.g., about how high regulation influences the field.

Unlike the other interviews I’d had prior, Maria did not start off with a lengthy chronological path relating her background but instead reflected on how her career and mindset as a researcher and her stay in the USA led her to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and how her choices in further education were targeted to give her the know-how and credibility to work in business. This was clearly something she had been reflecting on earlier, as the narration continued in a flow of reasoning without breaks apart from my questions, which aimed to encourage her to elaborate. Although the interview was interrupted after approximately 15 minutes, when we needed to move to another room, this did not seem to disrupt Maria’s narration. In her office, she continued reflecting on her role and her entrepreneurial efforts in the team. She answered at length and patiently waited for my follow-up questions and requests for further narration. We ended our meeting after almost 80 minutes of recording when I had no more topics or questions in mind and she felt that nothing relevant had been left unsaid.

Maria’s narrative of the firm’s internationalisation path and the reasons behind their decisions was very coherent, and she had told it before. In her retrospective, she did not include insecurities or ponder on mistakes, but she did reason about solutions to challenges in different languages and cultural areas. What she described sounded like a very well-planned, reasoned and controlled process of business and international growth. Maria’s narration also revolved on relationship building as being flexible and as being a problem-solving or needs-based interaction. She talked about continuous learning and the reliance of development on customer and prospect interaction. When Maria talked about future plans to expand to a distant continent, she described how the planning and evaluation of options (different market areas) was based on a systematic process; this was not a simple decision on a new target area. Opinions had changed several times, and more information and evaluation were needed; further, she acknowledged that chance could also play a role in the decision making.

In December 2014, I wrote to Maria to ask her to read through what I had written for an upcoming publication based on our first interview. She sent me minor comments. What I found particularly helpful was her comment on the narrative summary, in which I heavily emphasised sales. She noted that company visits rarely lead directly to sales and that she viewed them more as the creation and development of a customer relationship that would hopefully leads to sales after
the meeting. I did not understand or use the concept of sales as merely an end result of an interaction but instead as the entire process of interaction targeted towards a buyer-seller exchange relationship, and thus I found her emphasis on the relationship process important. Not only did it confirm the theoretical direction I was developing based on the reviewers’ and my supervisor’s comments, but it also influenced my re-reading of the interview transcript. During this email exchange, we also agreed that I would get back to her in early 2015 to schedule a second interview.

Mid-January 2015, Maria and I agreed that I would visit her again in February. I was now feeling confident about what I was doing (how to invoke narration and what themes to cover) and relieved that the empirical—study and the entire—research was coming to its final stage. I started our conversation by asking her to reflect on what had happened since the last time we talked. She said that it was difficult to remember exactly the point they had been at a year before. She started by briefly referring to an increased number of market areas and employees, changed roles and a more developed service portfolio but continued by reflecting more at length on the reasons behind these developments, as I urged her to tell me more about these decisions and experiences. This narrative also strongly involved her contemplation of options that needed evaluation and decisions and her anticipation of and plans for the future with regard to sales efforts in the USA. The importance of direct interaction with customers by people with substantive expertise with the service content and her role in business development in terms of identifying business areas, mapping new market areas and initiating potential customer relationships became clearer in this narrative. What particularly struck me in this narrative was how she talked about the firm maturing, acting more planned and having routines.

The interview lasted for almost 70 minutes, with a short break as we again switched rooms. It appeared to be busy at the office, and I was very thankful that Maria had spared me an hour and did not rush at all. I left very happy with the narrative that we had constructed in our interaction, and I understood that her focus on the intertwined elements of business (particularly service portfolio) development and (prospective) customer interaction stemmed from her belief in their importance when discussing (international) selling.

4.3.2 Recruitment to the entrepreneurial team

In our first interview, I asked Maria to tell me about her background prior to entrepreneurship, and she started by stating her educational qualifications; she has
a Ph.D. in natural sciences and a Master’s in Economics and Business Administration. She then quickly moved on to describe the events that had been critical in changing her attitude towards business and entrepreneurship. Maria emphasised that the time she spent as postdoctoral researcher in the USA positively changed how she thought of entrepreneurship and led her to become interested in business. The local atmosphere and mentality in the USA were very entrepreneurship focused. Coming from an entrepreneurial family, she had always thought she would not engage in entrepreneurship. The family business was still running and successful, so her reluctance did not appear to stem from fear of failure (see Morrison 2000) as much as that she had thought she would end up doing something entirely different. In fact, not once did Maria mention entrepreneurship and small business ownership as a ‘risky’ choice or narrate fear and insecurity about the future. Her initial reluctance to entrepreneurship appears to be more connected with how she viewed the domestic environment: she perceived the atmosphere in Finland as being unsupportive and characterised by jealousy instead of positive social attitudes (cf. Morrison 2000) towards small business ownership. Additionally, she did not mention self-employment as a motive for her interest in business but instead told of how the need to influence her work was important to her. This emphasis is in line with research findings that have found the desire for self-determination and challenge to be the most important entrepreneurial motivation for women (Buttner & Moore 1997). This new interest led her to decide that she needed to engage in business studies to gain credibility. She knew that she wanted to work in business development and that she had the scientific background and the right mindset for it, but she lacked relevant business experience and knowledge. I asked her to tell me more about the mindset, and she started by comparing how the “frame of reference” and “general atmosphere” in the USA were favourable to entrepreneuring, but how in Finland, she had experienced negative attitudes. The positive experience helped her to realise how researcher and entrepreneurial mindsets converged.

"Because I come from a researcher background and you do research for yourself really...And that is your great motivator, that you want it yourself. So somehow, I feel that entrepreneurship is the better working environment for me than if I, for example, applied to some large corporation [...] I feel that I couldn’t influence things. [...] The thought path from a researcher background to starting up a company, a small work community...and even if it then starts
growing from there, that to me is really close to the same mindset that is needed in doing research” (Maria 6 February 2014)

Maria’s narrative about her personal history is clearly different from the other interviewees. Instead of a lengthier narration describing her prior career—e.g., international work experience in different roles, networks, and occurrences at work (such as the possibility of being made redundant) or the encouragement and support of colleagues or of anyone else—leading her to view entrepreneurship as a career alternative, Maria’s narrative emphasises her changing attitude towards business and entrepreneurship as learning to appreciate the opportunity to pursue an interesting career outside of academia. Unlike Laura’s and Daniel’s narratives on the strong supportive atmosphere among entrepreneurs, Maria’s narrative lacks ideas about the domestic environment and atmosphere entirely, except for her earlier observation about the difference between the Finnish and US mentalities. This may be because Maria observed her own family business well before the Finnish start-up boom (which does not occur in her narration at all, positively or negatively). In Finland, the entrepreneurial culture and mindset, as well as attitudes towards entrepreneurship, have improved greatly only over the past eight years or so as entrepreneurial framework conditions actively improved due to the economic downturn and its effect in Finland (see, e.g., Napier et al. 2012). Maria’s perception of entrepreneurial business was, however, strongly influenced by her stay in the USA, which shifted to an entrepreneurial economy, with Silicon Valley as the world’s leading start-up cluster, earlier than Finland (Sipola 2015: 29, 99). Unlike Daniel, Laura or Kai, Maria did not mention economic and societal structures nor did she describe the start-up ecosystem as being either supportive or challenging to entrepreneurs in and from the local context. This is understandable given that she narrates a success story of planned and revenue-funded firm growth, with no reliance on venture capital investors, public ownership, governmental policies and support systems, or regional development actors.

Considering Maria’s business interest, I was surprised to hear that she ended in her current position from a situation in which she was not actively seeking employment opportunities but was finishing her business degree. To her surprise, she was invited to a job interview in summer 2011. A team of entrepreneurs who had established a company some months earlier had heard of her unusual combination of educational experience. Maria started working in the company six months after its founding and became a partner quickly after agreeing to join the firm. I wondered whether being a partner versus being a founder-entrepreneur made
a difference in her case and whether she could be perceived as entrepreneur, so I asked how she felt about it. She said the company felt as much ‘hers’ as if it would if she had been involved since the day it was founded. Similar to the case of Laura, it was entrepreneuring as an investment of her time and effort to develop the business idea and reach towards a vision, and not the partnership as such, that led her to identify the business as hers and herself as an entrepreneur.

With no work experience outside of academia, I imagined that it might have been hard for Maria in the beginning to adapt to her new role in business. She reflected on her feelings of self-confidence, on the one hand, and insecurity on the other. Maria said that she felt formally qualified in medical research and marketing but that her lack of practical experience in business did make her feel a bit scared. However, she felt she could rely on the ‘general principles’ of B2B marketing that she had been studying. She had confidence that she could manage her new tasks and that her scientific background was necessary to understand the substance of what was being marketed and sold. Her highly specialised and unusual educational background, her deep understanding of the services being offered and, later, of customers’ needs provide a red thread through her entire narrative.

### 4.3.3 Successful opportunity creation and realisation in international selling

After discussing Maria’s background and the start of her entrepreneurship, I asked her to talk about the internationalisation of the firm. Maria said that since the beginning, it was clear to the entrepreneurs that the target was to grow the business internationally. In their field, the business opportunities in Finland were simply too limited to grow a successful company. The limited resources needed to be used efficiently, which is why international sales started with a neighbouring country. Maria said that it was unnecessary to go very far when business could also be generated nearby. The scope was, however, broadened quickly to other similar nearby markets and IOs perceived in Northern Europe.

“Since the beginning, our starting point has been that we don’t even think it [the scope] would be the entire world, but rather thought that where we go, we do it properly. And then slowly take more. With this logic, the first international customers were in Scandinavia and Northern Germany.” (6 February 2014)

The entrepreneurs “practiced” in this area during the first year and then started expanding sales in Europe. In spring 2012, the firm had customers in ten countries.
In contrast to the other internationalisation narratives in this study, Maria’s reasoning for decisions and actions is not based on networks (as in Joel’s and Kai’s case) nor on the maximisation of market opportunity (Laura’s and Daniel’s perception). Her narrative depicts a systematic approach to IOs in new market areas by picking an area, prospecting, preparing, contacting, and visiting potential customers through roadshows country by country. The stepwise approach to IO construction in each market area helped the sales team (Maria and the CEO) to put their efforts into building and maintaining good customer relationships. I found that Maria’s narrative emphasis on a target-oriented and planned process diverged from the often-dominant research and public discourse. These generally emphasise entrepreneurs’ innovativeness in serendipitous (e.g., Dew 2009) and effectual processes and expert entrepreneurs’ focus on affordable loss, which implies less need to plan a causal process towards potential gains (Dew et al. 2009, Sarasvathy 2008, Sarasvathy et al. 2013). One reason that she would produce the story of a “roadmap” (although re-evaluated and modified when necessary) guiding the entrepreneurs’ actions towards pre-set goals, instead of an agile unpredictable process with emerging means and goals, could be seen in the industry context. The field of drug development is “conservative”, as Maria put it, and highly regulated. Customer needs are clear and many of the needed service areas can be preconceived. What is expected and even allowed is not an innovative solution emerging from a risky process involving creativity and chance but an efficient and reliable service that is based on the newest technology and highly specialised knowledge. It was of utmost importance that Maria’s firm appeared and proved to be dependable and adept, which is why good preparation and concentrated resource allocation to a certain number of new customers in one new market area at a time appeared to be the most manageable approach. Sometimes a more scripted foreign market entry process, such as leveraging common products and practices by consistently relying on the same approach, is more successful for an entrepreneurial firm than a more improvised process (Bingham 2009).

Maria mentioned France and Italy as challenging market areas to enter due to language and cultural differences, which is why a consultant was hired to contact prospects and set up meetings in those countries. In France, the person joined the roadshow to address practicalities. Maria described the local agents in these areas as being the most resource efficient way to approach these markets the first time to gain initial contacts and access to the right people in (prospective) customer organisations. Maria’s reliance on local agents was clearly more limited than Daniel’s or Laura’s; they gave the local professionals more responsibility in
Maria noted that the entrepreneurs’ most important principle was to do things well, i.e., to enact IOs successfully because positive word of mouth had been one of the “most powerful ways” to gain new customers—not by asking for customer references, but customers themselves deciding to speak well of their experience.

“When we have healthy self-esteem, we have thought that when we go to some new market area, like the USA, we look for small and medium-sized actors and don’t even try first the biggest ones. But we kind of practice with the smaller ones so that when we go […], we have first gained the local experience with some smaller actor…Then you learn a bit more about the local way. If something comes up…that our process would be a polished diamond, so when you get in touch with the big ones, everything would go as smoothly as possible.”

(6 February 2014)

When I asked Maria if there were differences in sales negotiations, she said they were very similar but that there were cultural differences, often small details, that required attention. In addition to interpersonal interaction and its particularities across cultures, country-specific settings and regulations vary and need to be understood, especially before approaching major prospects. After almost three years in business, the entrepreneurs started considering expansion to further, bigger market areas in either Asia or North America. In 2013, Maria visited a trade fair in the USA and became informed about the Asian market. In Asia, a consultant would appear to be necessary due to cultural differences, but in the USA, their own sales efforts could be sufficient, she said (6 February 2014). The firm already had a few customers in North America thanks to word of mouth. They had also seized a moment with, e.g., their first customer in the USA; they had been put in touch with this customer by a European customer doing scientific consulting for the US
company. Despite the focus on a clear roadmap for approaching customers country by country, some degree of flexibility and room for serendipity was maintained.

“So we know that the basic concept is possible without us having any physical office or address there. So doing business there is possible from here. The USA is very different from Europe. […] You can’t just have a roadshow, just directly go and knock doors. You find it difficult to knock if you have never got their business card first in some event or…There the meaning of networking and US reference customers is much bigger than in Europe.” (6 February 2014)

In three years, the firm had grown from four to fifteen employees. Maria’s narrative implies improved performance over a series of foreign country entries (e.g., Lu & Beamish 2001), a process that is also suggested in a few studies on entrepreneurial firm internationalisation (Bingham 2009).

“Controlled growth is important so that everyone can keep up […]. So we have tried to keep it quite steady” (6 February 2014)

Growth had been financed with returns, and exit within five years was targeted. In early 2015, Maria said that the firm had customers on three continents: one customer in Asia and others in Europe and the USA. They had over 80 customers in 19 countries, and the USA represented 10% of their turnover in early 2015. The decision had been to enter the US market with proactive efforts: “Doing business in Asia is very different” and “the whole market in the USA is still bigger” and seemed more realistic (3 February 2015). To start marketing and sales in the USA, the firm was looking for a consultant and had applied to be part of a project that could ease their entry. Maria had contacted companies but felt that a local representative would create easier contact with prospects. A representative would only be used briefly for “opening doors”, as in Southern Europe. Replicable, modified or newly constructed IOs would be created through interaction between Maria and local prospects. When I asked Maria if they would continue with the same mode in the USA that they had used in Europe, i.e., initiating relationships over roadshows and serving customers from one location, she replied as follows:

“Now it seems that [we continue] just with the location in Oulu, so not even a physical location [in the USA]. Now that we kind of already have the proof of concept of us being able to serve customers well even if we are located here and even if the customership is on the West Coast of the USA or in Asia… Because most contact anyway is via e-mail after that and you can still
guarantee a ‘within one business day’ reply despite the time difference. And of course we’re flexible if they want a phone meeting […] So we plan to do this on our own after the doors are opened with some help.” (Maria 3 February 2015)

The firms’ online marketing now shows global activity, and they have bought a contact base to send newsletters to Asian and US companies. No further efforts are directed towards the Asian market.

“We take one piece of the market at a time so we can handle it. It will bring nothing to try to go everywhere at once” (3 February 2015)

Maria emphasised that personal selling was highly important and was their dominant way to establish new customer relationships. Together with the CEO, she travelled monthly to gain new and maintain existing relationships. The two attended negotiations together to complement each other’s expertise. It was crucial for sales that they convincingly discussed solutions and resources, instantly reacted to needs and feedback, and matched the service portfolio with varied customer needs. When solving customers’ problems with tailored solutions, they were also successful in productising these solutions (service opportunities) for further use, and the service offering broadened over time. When Maria narrated about sales, she did not specify or differentiate at all between domestic and international customers. However, she appeared to be speaking mostly based on her international experience, as the company had relied heavily on international sales since early on. Perhaps because she already had extensive experience in successful IO selection and enactment, she ignored contextual differences that appeared to be self-evident and that did not appear to be a key enabler or inhibitor of a well-performed IO.

The means and approach for reaching international growth that Maria consistently narrated in our discussions are quite contradictory to those start-up discourses emphasizing targets and collaborative efforts towards rapid growth and the (potential) of scaling opportunities (see Sipola 2015: 67–68, cf. Eckhard & Shane 2011) and to the born-global literature that often highlights a global market focus from the outset (cf. e.g., Rialp-Criado et al. 2010). Maria’s narrative instead highlights a rather traditional logic of internationalising by starting with a low resource commitment in physically local markets, expanding within a market area to bigger customer groups after learning from smaller ones, and expanding to new market areas in a stepwise manner to use limited resources efficiently. This process resonates with the experiential learning and increased commitment aspects of the
Uppsala internationalisation process model (Johanson & Vahlne 1977), although that model is often criticised in the IE literature for describing a slow (e.g., Oviatt & McDougall 1994, Zahra et al. 2000), deterministic process of internationalisation (e.g., Petersen et al. 2003, Rialp-Criado et al. 2010). I see that Maria’s narrative provides an example of how EIF’s internationalisation process can start (and continue) with a low-commitment and low-risk approach that shifts from neighbouring countries to more distant market areas. It also agrees with researchers who state that although experiential learning and resource commitment influence, they do not determine, one another (Johanson & Vahlne 2009). Maria’s story presents reliance on agents and direct approaches to export sales as a continuously appropriate way to internationalise: the entrepreneurs “practiced” in Europe for the first four years, entering incrementally larger and perhaps more strategic countries through the less improvisational selection of new foreign market opportunities (cf. Bingham 2009), and they are now prepared to move to countries where they have less institutional market knowledge (for now, the USA). The interplay between learning from customer relationships and markets and creating opportunities and building trust with customers takes some time (Johanson & Vahlne 2009), even though the process is accelerated through the IO’s modification and replication in many locations rapidly yet consecutively.

4.3.4 Business and service portfolio development through customer interaction

After reflecting on the differing opinions that I had heard about the cost-effectiveness and necessity of travelling (e.g., roadshows, networking events) to acquire international customers, I asked Maria in the second interview (3 February 2015) if she perceived their decision to do roadshows as deliberate risk-taking and as a necessity despite their limited budget. This direct approach to export selling is a relatively low commitment to a new market area but is more resource consuming than attempting to approach customers remotely, e.g., with the help of networks or indirectly via sales agents. She said that with a low budget (digital) approach to prospects, they would be much smaller in size and that interaction in person was needed to be “able to really discuss” the offering. With this, she also referred to the pharmaceutical industry, which is perhaps more traditional than many other industries such as ICT. She continued by saying that she was convinced that they had to visit prospects and customers. Maria emphasised that these situations were occasions to gain a more personal relationship, to hear more, and to be able to listen.
to customers “real needs” and their situation; based on these interactions, she could evaluate what the customer—sometimes unknowingly—needed. Here, Maria noted the firms’ wide service portfolio and her know-how, based on which she could offer solutions that the customer may not be aware of. She, in a way, “educated” the customer. Based on these considerations, Maria emphasised how direct face-to-face interaction brought the relationship establishment and “deepening” to a “different level” compared to online-based channels, which could perhaps be later used in relationship maintenance.

This reasoning links to our earlier interview discussion, when Maria said that it would be hard to outsource sales to external parties. Because know-how and expertise are the core elements of firm’s service offering, it would be hard to find a sales agent with enough substance knowledge and credibility to precisely sell this firm’s expertise in a sales interaction. The only foreign market opportunity where she was willing to consider hiring local sales representatives was Asia, due to “the different nature of business”, which could be better addressed by a local salesperson (3 February 2015). I agreed with her reasoning that sales based on expert services were better handled by the entrepreneur and a service expert than by a professional sales representative. This brought me to ask how she now felt about her earlier idea of recruiting a person to marketing and sales who lacked the content knowledge that Maria possessed. At the time of the first interview, Maria felt that not all people in sales necessarily needed medical research know-how, but during this interview, she said that they had concluded that salespeople responsible for certain service areas must ensure the high quality of service through know-how. As Maria indicated that sales were no longer only her and the CEO’s responsibility but that there were persons in charge of certain service areas who were not involved in sales, I wanted to know more about how this grouping or separation of tasks had been achieved. She explained that the company had four people in charge of four rather big service sectors. These people were responsible for the sale of their services and for managing the service process. Maria saw her role as being between a marketing person who generates leads and a service category manager. She was not responsible for one particular category but for all: she prepared sales (negotiated problem-solving and collaboration opportunities), was involved in the specification of the service content, and fine tuned the final details for the contract, at which point, the customer relationship shifted to the service category managers. When I noted that we had not discussed this structure the last time we met, Maria said that the reorganisation of sales (including the entire customer relationship establishment and maintenance) responsibilities had taken place the previous
summer; Maria could not manage the increased number of customers and services alone with the CEO. To keep the response time to customers as short as possible, service managers answered requests directly regarding their responsibility areas. Maria described the growth as enabling her to now focus on business development tasks because marketing had become mostly the responsibility of a hired marketing person and because the service managers took over the customer relationship when a contract was drafted. Maria was now focused on recognising “new customers, recognizing companies, new business areas, mapping new business countries” (3 February 2015) and on the early state of negotiating joint interests with prospects. I later returned to this part of the narrative and asked if these service managers had training in sales or if they were purely expertise focused; Maria confirmed that they were all PhDs with expertise in the substance of the specific service area but that none of them had business education or experience. She continued by telling me that the company had created an “internal training package” on how to share knowledge within the company, but no external trainings were organised.

The narration about the reorganisation of sales and customer service tasks brought to my attention this interesting development over a short time span: the company appeared to be moving towards more systematic operations. Maria confirmed that she felt that they were reaching some sort of landmark and that they were in need of a customer relationship management system. This notion led us to discuss how Maria’s firm, since the beginning, had targeted controlled growth by starting with a small group of people dividing responsibility for broad tasks; as more people were hired, they could then concentrate on better-specified tasks.

In our second interview, I posed several questions to push Maria’s narration towards different perspectives on opportunities and their construction. I noted my interest in how the company had moved from the first service opportunity to a larger variety of service solutions, and I asked whether this had been based on creating truly new services, on the recognition of unmet needs, or on improving ways to meet existing needs. In response, Maria felt that she needed to specify the nature of the industry, as what needs to be done in different stages of the customers’ product development is mostly predetermined by regulations. This is the foundation of Maria’s company’s competitive advantage because they can serve these customers better through the use of specialised know-how and the newest technology and inventions. These entrepreneurs constantly developed their services through their own research and development. Maria estimated that approximately 90% of their service development took place when they sought to apply the latest scientific knowledge to their services. Some service opportunities were also
discovered when a customer needed a service that was not directly for drug development (based on regulations) but was for in-house decisionmaking processes. By carefully listening to customers, Maria could then offer a research project service externalisation or collaboration. Some of these types of needs that were recognised unexpectedly for one customer led to new service solutions that could serve other customers’ unmet needs as well.

In our first discussion, Maria narrated that in the beginning, the entrepreneurs knew their field well and had productised their core competences but they also, since the beginning, believed that they would be able to offer other services as well.

“[… we interact with very different kinds of companies. Our customers can be small virtual firms that outsource everything […] We have the whole scale from that up to the world’s top 10 companies in our business as customers. And we have everything in between. […] I think it’s impossible to think that you have one operational model for all of them.” (Maria 6 February 2014)

She emphasised that it was important to understand what each type of customer needed. A small customer often wanted to buy expertise, an entire process designed by the entrepreneurs to solve their problem and give direction to their decisionmaking. Big companies often only needed an “extra pair of hands”, in which case, it is not necessarily worthwhile to offer process planning and execution but makes more sense to highlight the absolute core competences that the entrepreneurs offer in their service portfolio. Instead of focusing on consulting for the customer, the focus may then be on being very flexible in how the service is provided to fit the in-house practices of a major pharmaceutical company.

In our second interview, Maria linked the development of the four service areas to the earlier narrative. She restated that the entrepreneurs started with their core competences and that they marketed themselves as having specialised backgrounds and high-quality, tailored services. They started with the two service areas in which they had their strongest expertise, after which the third service area was added to the service portfolio based on expertise they developed through “active learning and education” based on customers’ need to obtain all three services from the same service provider (3 February 2015). When the firm lost some customers because they lacked this particular service product, they acted on the need. The fourth service area was added because the entrepreneurs’ recognised a need for it if they wanted to continue to grow and achieve strategic partnerships with mid-sized firms. They recruited know-how to cover this area of expertise to gain credibility and to fulfil a need that potential customers would consider essential in a strategic partner.
“It is a smaller piece also in sales, but it is necessary for our growth” (3 February 2015).

As the firm is still rather small, it has its limitations in terms of what it can do to serve (big) customers. Customers that are interested in their core competences but also request several other services cannot be serviced yet in the desired timeframe due to the limited number of people. Maria listens to these major prospects carefully to learn what they want, so that the firm knows what they should aim for and develop in the future to be able to serve these needs. When selecting new market opportunities, the entrepreneurs do not engage in jobs that they cannot do well. They only want to serve customers if they can guarantee high quality tailored service: to only go where they can do everything well. Maria discussed a future opportunity to pursue a stable partnership with a mid-sized customer. This would enable them together to serve major actors in the field. Growth through recruitment and investments in equipment appeared to be too risky (time consuming and expensive) a path for pursuing big customers, whereas building partnerships step by step with firms of an appropriate size could still provide growth and the potential to access bigger customers together. Fig. 8 depicts the temporal sequence of actions and decisions in Maria’s narrative.
Fig. 8. The temporal order of events in Maria's international sales story.

Fig. 9. The continuous international opportunity process in Maria's narrative.
Maria narrated a rather traditional market IO story with stepwise entries and expansion (Fig. 8). Her sales story focused on relationship building and the development of new service IOs (Fig. 9). Unlike Daniel and Laura, she did not explicitly discuss business model IO, as they do not pursue its development, e.g., for the sake of scaling up the business. Since the beginning, the entrepreneurs’ actions were guided by growth intentions and their exit plan, which led them to start rather rapid but controlled internationalisation in close markets in Scandinavia in 2011. This was soon followed by expansion to several European countries and, finally, with planned entry to the USA. Maria emphasised the importance of roadshows as an efficient way to use limited resources to pursue market IO and to establish relationship IOs in Europe. The same approach would be used in the USA, which was now perceived as a target market IO. This action-orientation, however, also linked to Maria’s cognition regarding the market IO situatedness in that they would use an approach for the USA similar to that used for Southern European countries, gaining the help of local agents or contacts. (See Table 4.)

In Maria’s business field, face-to-face meetings are necessary for gaining trust and developing a mutual understanding of needs and solutions, and the entrepreneurial seller must have scientific know-how to be able to flexibly offer different service solutions and tailoring options. The embeddedness of knowledge is very central in Maria’s service and relationship IO narrative. The entrepreneurs also wanted to maintain their service know-how and development in Finland, which is why customers would be serviced from a distance and visited when needed in the future.

When discussing IOs with prospects, the communication needed to be adjusted (situated), e.g., according to the customer’s size and cultural context. Maria also felt that the IO needed to consistently convey the message of high-quality services and expertise-based flexibility in developing and tailoring the services. She reflected on how new service IOs had been developed based on customer needs and the firm’s interests. The first service opportunities were developed through the entrepreneurs’ interaction, based on their core competences, and were enacted in customer interaction starting from the domestic market but quickly moving to outside Finland. Interaction with (mainly international) customers had on some occasions led to the inclusion of new service elements and ways of executing some
service components, but such development of service opportunities is rather rare. Mostly, the entrepreneurs focused on the constant development of their competences to maintain high quality services that responded to the existing, regulatory-based needs of customers. With the target of growth in mind, interaction with prospects had led to a third recognised service opportunity: a new service area that the firms’ employees specialised in. This third element was clearly needed if the company wanted to serve customer groups that required a wider set of services from the same seller. Understanding gained in customer interactions and anticipation of future needs among the entrepreneurs led to a fourth service area being included in their portfolio. This service opportunity alone does not appear to be significant, but in combination, as an addition to the other elements of the service portfolio, it was perceived as an enabler of collaboration opportunities with larger customers.

IOs in terms of internationalisation (market entry) opportunities appeared to have been very systematically planned and executed. New market opportunities were pursued in the search for sales and firm growth. Continuously developed and evaluated service content were seen as replicable IOs regardless of the country context. All of these services were, in any case, tailored according to particular customers’ needs, and Maria explained that the type (particularly the size) of the customer was a defining factor in the perceived and realised service IOs and not the geographical context. With small customers, the entrepreneurs executed larger projects and consulted; with mid-sized customers, they needed a variety of service areas; and with large customers, the IOs often consisted of the rather straightforward execution of a specialised task that was being outsourced. Future IOs enabling growth were linked to the development of a service portfolio that served mid-sized customers with whom collaboration opportunities could be discussed to jointly serve large multinational corporations in the industry. Hence, to be better able to serve large customers despite limited internal resources and competence areas, a future opportunity would be a partnership with a mid-sized customer with whom they could develop service solution IOs according to large firms’ needs.

The distribution of knowledge regarding opportunities appears to take place not only among the entrepreneurial team when discussing different types of IOs but also in both directions across company borders in Maria’s narrative. On the one hand, market IO-related contextual knowledge is distributed from local agents and customers to the entrepreneurs. While Maria did not describe institutional differences in regulations as having influence on IO construction, she noted that,
e.g., in France, knowledge regarding tax exceptions for the buyers of import services had been important. Maria utilised the opportunity to file for a status that then enabled her to bring this benefit up in negotiations. Relationship IO-related knowledge was also distributed among customer networks: new relationship IOs had been discovered *ad hoc* in countries such as Sweden, where positive word of mouth worked to the firm’s advantage.

Maria’s narrative does not highlight any country context-specific IO differences apart from acknowledging that IOs through market entrance were slightly more challenging for Italy and France due to language and cultural differences, for the USA due to distance and for Asia, which was particularly risky, due to cultural differences. Only new market opportunity realisation was depicted as requiring modification to the operating method, i.e., the use of local agencies’ help as language and cultural translators when setting up the first meetings. Service IO translation to new market area contexts appeared to be unproblematic (it was not mentioned). It may have been due to the achieved replication benefits in the new market approach and customer approaches that the borderlines between different institutional contexts did not appear to be very influential, or perhaps their role when preparing for entry appeared to be so self-evident that Maria did not feel the need to include it in her narration. While direct interaction in meetings with customers, particularly in the IO envisioning state, would continue to be handled by the entrepreneurs, Maria had learned that local agents were efficient help for “opening doors” to prospects in areas that were challenging due to language, culture or distance. However, their role in IO construction was limited: they could help in gaining institutional knowledge about the new market area opportunity and/or local customer opportunities, but they were not involved in the (service, partnership) IO constructing interaction at the buyer-seller interface.
Table 4. The IO process through the socially situated cognition approach to Maria’s narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action-Oriented</th>
<th>Embodied</th>
<th>Situated</th>
<th>Distributed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 2014</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growth intentions → internationalising</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Use of local agents</td>
<td>Discussed market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited resources → pursued nearby market IOs</td>
<td>necessary for</td>
<td>in Southern</td>
<td>IO with local agent;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Content expertise required in consulting &amp; discussing service</td>
<td>Particularities of market IO context in Asia and the USA</td>
<td>Eased relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospective:</td>
<td>Continue with direct involvement in relationship</td>
<td>USA must be assessed</td>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospective:</td>
<td>Market IOs pursued in Asia or North America</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Use of local agents in Southern</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Use of local agents in Southern</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 2015</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Relationship IO development requires direct involvement</td>
<td>Negotiations with prospects → one new service area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New relationship, service and market IOs achieved</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Target market IO in the USA</td>
<td>Know-how for service IO</td>
<td>Evaluation of market IO approach in the USA among entrepreneurs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospective:</td>
<td>Pursue the US market through local agent or project</td>
<td>Consistently communicating</td>
<td>Consistently communicating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Customers serviced from distance</td>
<td>Consistently communicating</td>
<td>Consistently communicating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

150
4.3.6 Maria’s narrative in the empirical context

Maria’s narrative on her exit-seeking growth venture appears appropriate to the societal discourse of the time in Finland but actually stems more from the US entrepreneurial business environment than from what she had observed in Finland, where the importance of small businesses came to the governments’ attention in the 1980s, when supportive public policies started to emerge (Sipola 2015: 29, cf. Clarysse & Bruneel 2007). In contrast to the family business (which she did not want to be part of) and the more general, persistent perception from the 1980s and 1990s that the desired outcome of entrepreneurship was a profitable, job creating and bankable firm (Sipola 2015: 116, 254–256), Maria shared the Silicon Valley inspired view on exit-focused growth entrepreneurship. Only in recent years has this view gained widespread attention as a desired outcome in Finland (e.g., Sipola 2015), with the recognition of the crucial role of small, growth-oriented firms, including high-growth start-ups, in job creation (Shane 2009). In a way, Maria appeared to transfer and translate the US entrepreneurship mentality to the Finnish context and to her own career aspirations by assuming the target of ‘doing something for oneself’ for the feeling of accomplishment but not as a life’s work to be sustained by the same group of people. Letting go of a successfully running business does not mean that one is giving up on one’s achievement. Instead, exit through achieving growth is a desired accomplishment.

In Maria’s narrative, validation of the firms’ specialised developing service offering through successful opportunity construction and realisation at the customer interface needs to take place through international growth due to the limited domestic market. Maria and her co-entrepreneurs strove to accomplish this growth through a process that could be viewed as somewhat ‘traditional’ to a Finnish firm, in contrast with the high-growth start-up discourse dominant in the USA. The narrative emphasises reliance on organic growth through internal employment (cf. e.g., Coad et al. 2014, Penrose 1995) and growth in international scope at a sequential, albeit rather rapid, pace; these are both based on increasing sales revenue. This organic growth—as opposed to significant scalability potential, investor funded growth and/or ‘global’ market scope (cf. Sipola 2015)—is expected to lead to exit through acquisition. Despite the emphasis on venture capital funding, the start-up literature does not reject sales revenue as source of funding and as a validation mechanism, but external investors are often needed to enable rapid scaling and growth (Sipola 2015: 71). Maria’s approach to financing growth with
revenue and no venture capital may relate to a need to control her “own” company (cf. Sapienza et al. 2003).

4.4 Joel’s narrative

Joel has a degree in electrical engineering, and he had worked in an MNE at various international tasks ranging from product development to intrapreneurship since the early 1990s. In 2012, the company scaled down, and Joel and his colleagues needed to look for other employment opportunities. A team of five co-founders started up a new firm in September and built up a highly skilled team. They started with software development services to obtain faster returns and planned for hardware product development. The first customers were already outside of the domestic market, from two continents. Since the beginning, the firm has had positive turnover, and the number of employees has increased yearly from the initial fewer than twenty to closer to a hundred.

4.4.1 The setting: our interaction as the space for sensemaking

I was becoming more distressed about the timing and conducting of the empirical aspect of my research project. I could not rely on only my networks and events: by December 2013, I had only one entrepreneur taking part in my study. I thus started to implement a more systematic online search for firms and people whom I could contact and ask to interview. I searched for Finnish companies through arcticstartup.com and compiled a list of young firms that appeared to be involved in business to business. I continued by searching for information on them online from their web pages, new articles and directories offering company information. I made a contact list of owner-founders and emailed one who appeared to already have successful international sales in an early stage of business and offering. In my message, I introduced my research interest and my approach to interviewing. I asked if he felt that he had insights into the topic area and emphasised that I saw his firm as a rather rare success example in terms of early international growth. In January 2014, I called Joel; he was busy but willing to meet with me. As agreed, I sent him an email asking for suitable meeting time but needed to send another one a month later and a third in March, as he had still not replied. Eventually, I called him, and we decided to meet in April. Joel had been extremely busy and travelling recently, so I felt happy that he could spare some time for an interview. A day before the interview, we needed to reschedule the meeting for a later time the same day.
He had an unexpected important visit. I was happy to meet with him after this visitor and assumed he would be able to better focus on our discussion after the meeting and not feel under time pressure.

I arrived at the address well on time and was let in to the firm’s premises by a person who asked me to sit down in an open waiting space that I found quite nice. I felt a bit nervous because I was visiting a business that had already grown into a bigger entity. I was surely going to meet a professional business person, perhaps even one of those ‘corporate’ men in suits, ready to narrate the organisational narrative as already presented in the public domain. When Joel arrived, we moved to his office. At his request, I first provided a short narrative of myself and my research project, hoping also that my example would encourage him to narrate freely.

I was relieved when my request to hear about his background elicited a lengthy personal narrative. The atmosphere was pleasant, but I grew somewhat concerned about the narrative material when we talked about the venture: had he gone ‘deeper’ to reflect upon the topics or was he so accustomed to giving interviews that he was mostly repeating a practiced story? During the interview, there were many sequences when I posed questions and he gave a concise answer. This left me little time to think of what to ask next and, particularly, how to form a question or notion that would spur a more lengthy narration. However, when listening later to the interview recording, I thought that the conversation had flowed quite naturally and that the interview actually contained lengthy narration not only regarding Joel’s life history but also regarding organisational processes. In hindsight, it was perhaps his way of narrating that led me to misinterpret: he was swift in his responses without many pauses to indicate that he needed to stop and reflect on ‘how things were’ or how to construct ‘an answer’. In fact, other interviews that lasted much longer did not result in significantly longer transcriptions. Joel appeared to form narratives effortlessly. The interview lasted 45 minutes.

Joel said that even though the firm’s sales started outside of the domestic market, the entrepreneurs did not separate between domestic and international operations. My recurring emphasis on particularly international sales and operations led him, for instance, to note that he did not see any difference between Finnish and foreign customers. When I later returned to the topic, he gave some rather generic, even stereotypical, description of how customers in, e.g., Germany were. Having studied international business, linguistics and cultures and having taken international opportunities and sales as my research focus, I still had difficulty accepting that an entrepreneur involved in cross-country and cross-
continental business would claim he did not see a difference between domestic and international operations. However, the interviewees’ reproductions of cultural stereotypes—as narrated by Daniel and Maria when I repeatedly asked about cultural differences—gave me no more relief or feeling of discovery. I now understood that such narration may not have reflected ignorance or rejection of contextual differences; instead, internationally experienced entrepreneurs might not view linguistic and cultural aspects as being central to their stories, as these did not pose particular challenges or opportunities to internationalisation. After all, he (and the other interviewees) did not claim that there were no relevant differences.

“Having worked for the past 16–17 years in the global environment, one cannot think of it [cross-cultural context] as being somehow extraordinary.” (Joel 14 April 2014)

The narration simply focused on the sequential order of what had been decided and done and why. When I met Joel the first time, my research focus was still on international sales negotiations, but I was seeking elements that could be interpreted as ‘opportunity talk’, such as Daniel’s narration of new market area entry decisions.

After the interview I received an email from Joel:

“I hope the interview was helpful for your dissertation. Is it possible that I can get a copy of the book to read when it is ready eventually? Not for control but out of interest. I myself am also interested in how different firms see these things and if I can learn something from them.” (14 April 2014)

This request pleased me because it affirmed that the topic was also interesting to a practitioner and that perhaps the motivation for taking part in the study was also to learn from others. I replied I would give him a copy of the book and was happy that he was genuinely interested in reading it.

In early 2015, I asked Joel to read through the narrative summary that I had written based his first interview for publication. He quickly replied, saying that the text was well written and truthful. He felt that he and the company were easily recognisable but that it would not matter as the information was also largely publicly available. He also made minor comments; in part, they were updates on the situation that had developed since we last met.

We agreed to meet again in January 2015 at Joel’s office. On this occasion, my predominant feeling was one of relief: with his interview, I was starting my last round of interviewing all participants over a short period of time. Because Joel had
been kind to me in our previous encounter and in his emails, I looked forward to the second interview, and I felt better prepared. I knew how he behaved and narrated in such a situation, I had refined my approach to interviewing in terms of topics and ideas and had learned to direct the discussion less strictly than I had initially. During the interview, I constantly connected what I heard with my theoretical and practical knowledge to develop further questions and topics of discussion. I, for example, commented on his reflections with confirmation from observations I had made during the research project or I gave context to a direct question or a more general topic area by referring to what I had learned from previous interviews or in general through discussions with entrepreneurs and observations of the start-up discussion in Finland. The interview lasted 47 minutes. We particularly discussed how Joel saw customer relationship management and sales, which helped me to understand, e.g., how he and the firm convinced customers to commit to larger projects. One of the most interesting evolutions was the launch of the firm’s new product and how its development and (planned international) sales were different and separate from the service projects. I was excited to hear a ‘product story’, even if the IO process for this product was only at its beginning. Much had been happening in Joel’s firm.

4.4.2 From intrapreneurship to entrepreneurship

Joel started his narration with elaborate story about his professional background: a long versatile career that started during his engineering studies in the ICT field during the “hot years” for ICT in the 1990s. He started working for a Finnish MNC in product development and later moved to project management and international strategy. Not surprisingly he produced—similar to the other entrepreneurs’ narrations—a story of a clearly competent specialist. He presumably had repeatedly narrated this story and his qualifications to different stakeholders to validate the firm and his role. In addition to Joel’s extensive international work experience, his final role at the MNC was to lead an intrapreneurial unit within the large corporation. This appeared to be particularly critical to his narrative.

“[This background then encouraged me to start my own company, as we had in a way been doing intrapreneurship already…] and we had a good team. The founding team of this firm is from the same team that we had there…and in a way those…[I have done] very diverse things […] product development,
As a surprising element, in addition to the prior work experience, Joel added that his experiences on the boards of a few associations during his study years had also been useful. Running activities with a low contribution margin taught him about “the realities of business economics”.

Similar to Daniel and Kai, Joel had been facing an unsecure employment situation, as his employer suffered in the economic downturn and started to scale down its operations. This meant closing the intrapreneurial function. Joel said that he thought of starting up his own firm with the team the very same day that they received the news. After a few months of bouncing ideas around and weighing alternative career options, Joel and a few of his colleagues decided to start up a firm with an initial focus on design and development service sales. Similar to the other interviewees, Joel said that he felt he had seen enough of working in a large corporation, having an uncertain future, and lacking control of any changes. Entrepreneurship appeared to be an appealing option, and the time was good for it. Joel presented it as an opportunity and not as a difficult or as his only solution.

The small team of colleagues started discussing the business opportunities that they perceived based on their experience and know-how, and they also received encouraging feedback from their former superiors, who also thought that there was good business potential to be pursued. The group used three months to draft business plans and evaluate product and service opportunities. They collected an expert team of over 10 and started to market it, having settled on a plan to start with design services. In this area, they had the connections to expand quickly with access to many additional experts as soon as the business was running. Even before officially establishing the firm, Joel and his co-founders started using their networks and contacting prospective customers, who expressed interest in the rather unique set of experts they could have at their disposal. It felt natural to Joel to move from managing the intrapreneurial team to managing the entrepreneurial firm. Joel had not worked directly at the customer interface and had no experience in sales, but he managed to gain two of the three first international customers right at the firm’s inception.

The shifts from buying design services to offering them and from intrapreneur to entrepreneur provide interesting cornerstones to Joel’s narrative. Having perspective and experience from both sides, he felt able to understand customers and to positively distinguish his firm’s services from competitors. Another, not
explicit, viewpoint that connects to this ‘insider’ perspective is that the entrepreneurs appear to be interacting with intrapreneurs in established customer organisations. Such a link between opportunity generation and investment in innovations and new knowledge can enable a broader societal impact from the collaboration between the growth-seeking entrepreneurial firm and the established buyer organisation (Napier et al. 2012).

4.4.3 International opportunity construction since inception

Joel’s opportunity narrative starts very similarly to the other interviewees’ stories, with an emphasis on the marketing of the team’s exceptional know-how, but it differs from the previous IO narratives by focusing on existing networks as enablers of the business launch. In his story, the vision of an international customer base was enacted starting on day one.

“We’re used to working all around the world, so it was instantly clear that we won’t operate in Finland but we’re an international firm. And, the first customers have been from the USA and Central Europe. [...] We have started from as far as possible, but we haven’t started separating international and domestic actions—we don’t see a difference there.” (Joel 14 April 2014)

Joel contacted two of three first leads in his networks and was able to offer services that he knew would support their business. His prior experiences buying similar services also helped the firm to differentiate itself from competitors.

In spring 2014, Joel said that the sales had become systematic from prospecting through contacting and negotiations. They had three full-time salespeople, including a sales manager. In addition, three other people, including Joel, also used some of their time for sales. The nature of service sales—i.e., the slow process of gaining trust—and the firm’s limited resources set limits to growth. Tailoring a team of professionals to the customer’s needs is the firms’ most important asset and advantage, which is why modifications of actions according to customer needs are inevitable.

Joel perceived potential, particularly in the USA, where contract issues slow down the sales negotiation but money is flowing and new innovations are appearing. Europe and the USA were selected as target areas based on existing networks, similarity in the Western cultures and perceived demand. In 2014, Joel was responsible for US sales, while others concentrated on sales in the Nordic countries.
Joel had a consultant in the USA to support sales and in late 2013, collaboration with a local agent was started as a strategic partnership.

“But the amount of contacts has been very limited and the opportunity to sell limited...This is still in a development stage and all the time we seek for new business areas and develop, and use contacts then. This is still a starting phase firm and the practices are shaping.” (14 April 2014)

The strategic partnerships and the consultants are not given a central role in Joel’s narrative. The consultants appear to be helpful in initiating new customer contacts in distant market areas, but they do not appear to play any particular role in IO construction—just as in Maria’s story. Joel mentions a strategic partner, who the entrepreneurs wanted to gain access to local networks, but curiously did not assign any role to it when narrating about IOs and sales in the USA. It appears that the partnership had not led to any significant occurrences that he considered relevant to this narrative. The partnership was maintained, which left me wondering if the collaboration was still perceived as having potential mutual benefits in joint product development and resourcing although it appeared not to have led to any significant results or impact on Joel’s sales so far.

Joel felt that it was an advantage that he could discuss their service products in detail without having to check with technical people. His lack of prior sales experience or education was compensated by using a consultant to contact prospects, which also saved Joel time. All of the key functions were planned to be kept in the same location, “close”, while a small remote office for sales and marketing could serve key customers. This decision reflected the entrepreneurs’ earlier observations of the large corporation with functions spread to distant locations: by keeping operations centralised, one maintains a good overview of what is being done, and knowledge and understanding between sales and service development functions can be shared to support IO construction and execution.

In late 2014, the company established an office with a (Finnish) representative in the USA to support existing customers and to gain new ones. This opened new discussions “in a different way than before from the distance here” (26 January 2015). Local representation may bring more visibility and insights into “what really goes on” in the area. It also eases contract issues. Similar to Laura, Joel discussed how internal representation in the distant market area brought more insight and knowledge about customer and service opportunities than external representatives (consultants, strategic partner).
In early 2015, Joel spoke of how he was now more focused on establishing new customer relationships, opening discussions, and making sure that the processes progressed, while customer relationship maintenance was the responsibility of others. He saw serving customers as being his most important task, and customers valued the presence of the CEO in negotiations. From early in the process, as customer needs became clearer, Joel involved a project manager for technical support in the customer relationship for envisioning opportunities and drafting proposal(s) for agreement(s). Joel said that in design service sales, the discussion quickly moved to a level requiring expertise in needs and solutions, which is why sales was best performed by people who understood the technology and were able to discuss opportunities based on the specialised skills available. Such a division of roles and understanding of appropriate salespeople was also developed in Maria’s narrative. Increasing the number of customers and employees allowed the entrepreneurs to focus more on business development and management. Joel continued gaining contacts through (international) fairs, media visibility, roadshows and networks. These activities were needed because visibility and conspicuousness supported sales and purchase decisions. Positive word of mouth and the utilisation of personal networks were the most efficient ways to gain customers committed to IO creation.

Joel said that several consulting agencies were also used to map target market opportunities for product ideas. Since the very beginning, the entrepreneurs had envisioned product opportunities, but they started with service sales because early development would have required too much capital. In 2014, their first product was launched, and it gained global visibility and interest. In early 2015, a subsidiary was established to separate product sales from service sales, and they applied for external funding to support international product sales. Hardware sales would enable scalability and growth, whereas the service business, although it had grown well due to exceptional local human resources and the optimisation of processes, had its limits. The sequential actions and events in the firm’s ongoing internationalisation and growth processes are depicted in Fig. 10.
Fig. 10. The temporal order of events in Joel’s international sales story.

Fig. 11. The international opportunity process in Joel’s narrative.
4.4.4 Meanings and mechanisms of the international opportunity process

Joel’s action-oriented understanding of IO revolves around ways to pursue the perceived service, product (software and hardware) and market (international) IOs. As the entrepreneurs’ goal is to develop the business over the long run, there is no exit target, and growth is planned through a controlled increase in service sales and, later, through a scalable product. Hence, the entrepreneurs’ actions are directed towards growing the service business and developing a product(s) (see Table 5).

Joel’s IO narrative started with those market and service IOs perceived and pursued prior to firm establishment. Joel entered into discussions with prospects on two continents even before the venture was established. The core entrepreneurial team evaluated several product and service options, and design services were seen as the first viable service opportunity (see Fig. 11). Since the beginning, Joel had two prospects within his networks from the USA and Europe. When pursuing market IOs, Joel was able to negotiate agreements on service and relationship IOs by offering a team with rather unique know-how for a service project that he knew in advance would meet the customers’ needs. Based on the knowledge and skills embedded in the team members and available (situated) in the local labour market, it was possible to efficiently tailor teams according to customer needs without developing redundant functions.

Joel’s narrative could be viewed as an example of a high-technology born-global firm’s entrepreneurial-visionary approach: the entrepreneurs’ intuition and innovation capabilities are central to the narrative on implementing IOs in an improvisational manner but in specific, selected contexts (Rialp-Criado et al. 2010, cf. Bingham 2009). The entrepreneurs’ managerial commitment, intrapreneurial and international experience, networks and vision are central elements in the creation of the early internationalising firm (cf. Rialp-Criado et al. 2010). Joel and his co-founders’ influence on the born-global strategy formation process and early and rapid internationalisation is crucial (cf. Madsen & Servais 1997, Rialp et al. 2005) in the narrative. Service IOs are negotiated and relationship IOs are built through sales by entrepreneurs and team members who have the know-how; understandings of IOs are distributed among this team.

Joel highlighted how the embedded and shared IO-related perceptions and expertise also required particular communication by the team members involved in sales. In 2014, service sales growth was supported by establishing a subsidiary in
the USA, where Joel already had been partnering with a consultant to help with prospecting. However, firm presence in a major market is necessary, as Joel notes that negotiating service IOs in service sales takes a long time and requires multiple meetings. Trust needs to be built. The entrepreneur must convince the customer of the team’s unique expertise and must be flexible in tailoring solutions to ease the purchase decision, which often requires a considerable financial commitment from the customer. Joel emphasised the importance of clearly communicating the offering and how it differs from others, and he later added that the selling entrepreneur must be able to take a consultative approach to discussing solutions. Sometimes, a joint IO is approached by first executing smaller projects or “concept studies”, based on which bigger commitments are evaluated.

The situatedness of IOs also becomes evident when Joel talks about highly tailored service solutions that require customer commitment to the project. This is why it often takes many meetings and a longer time to develop an IO to meet customer needs. The content of the service IO must be agreed upon as well as the ways of working, so that both see the solution and the collaboration as being valuable and are willing to commit to them. Joel must be sure that the service IO will be well enacted, or it should not be constructed at all. This also relates to the slow process of gaining new customers, which is why the existing customer relationships need to be well maintained so that a trusting partnership can lead to further collaboration. Joel explained that the IO development envisioning processes vary according to the types of customers and not according to location. However, he did note that American customers tend to give very positive feedback in negotiation but that the decision-making processes and contractual commitments take time. In Germany, customers want more control over how the IO is enacted. Still, Joel said that he felt that differences in the processes are perhaps not cultural but depend on the organisations and individuals involved, i.e., they are situated and embodied. An example of situated and distributed cognition of market IO within the company as influenced by social networks is the decision not to actively approach Asian or Russian markets in service sales. These market opportunities are perceived as being risky and laborious in comparison to Western markets due to different institutional contexts.

In Joel’s narrative, the US presence does not just improve their visibility and proximity to customers; it also improves the firm’s understanding of what is going on in the field in an area where the market is growing and innovations appear regularly. Joel said that the entrepreneurs are constantly alert to what is going on in their environment and to what types of opportunities can be perceived. There are
constantly situations in which they “seize the moment”. With this observation, he referred to unexpected customer contacts by listing how prospects had approached him based on recommendations, media coverage, or randomly at events. Similar to Maria, Joel narrated a rather planned process in which actions were directed towards achieving clear goals, and serendipity had little place, even though flexibility in IO development remained (tailored services). As the entrepreneurs gained more experience in business, relationship and service IO development became routines that were transferred across country contexts.

Table 5. The IO process through the socially situated cognition approach to Joel’s narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action-Oriented</th>
<th>Embodied</th>
<th>Situated</th>
<th>Distributed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apr 2014</td>
<td>Retrospective: Market IOs pursued in USA and Europe before firm inception</td>
<td>Embodied: Pre-inception</td>
<td>Situated: Service IO requires articulation of unique expertise</td>
<td>Distributed: Positive word of mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing: Planned, controlled growth in the USA and Europe</td>
<td>Embodied: Expertise and personal contact needed when negotiating service IOs</td>
<td>Situated: Social networks examining foreign market IOs</td>
<td>Distributed: Partner firm in the USA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospective: Hardware development → own product, scalability, building relationship IO</td>
<td>Embodied: Continue direct involvement in relationship IO</td>
<td>Situated: Identifying relationship IOs</td>
<td>Distributed: Network discussions → market IOs not pursued in Asia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jan 2015 | Retrospective: Established sales subsidiary in the USA | Embodied: N/A | Situated: Consultative approach | Distributed: N/A |
| Ongoing: | Embodied: Closer contact to US customers | Situated: Concept studies to ease purchase of hardware product | Distributed: Relationship & service IO process routines transferred across contexts |
| Prospective: Hardware product launch | Embodied: Prospective: Hardware product developing IO sales needing | Situated: Developing messages for hardware product IO communication | Distributed: Prospective: Separation of product and service sales for clarity? |
Market entry opportunities for hardware product sales were investigated by consultants, but Joel did not name any new foreign market or customer relationship IOs pursued based on recommendations from consultants or partners (perceived product opportunities and demand) or through their networks. Growth opportunities appeared to be significant due to their scalability potential, and online sales channels were directed to both businesses and consumers. Joel said that the newly launched product’s sales would be separated from service sales under a subsidiary, and time would show how IOs develop on the product side of the business. At the time of our final meeting, the product was being developed and there was already global interest in it before sales had started, particularly in market areas where media attention was achieved.

4.4.5 Joel's narrative in the empirical context

Joel’s narrative, similar to Laura’s, reflects domestic and international media attention as a channel for positive visibility that sometimes led to customer and partner contacts. The collapse of several ICT companies was an opportunity in Joel’s narrative: the domestic labour market allowed them to build an exceptionally talented team, and the growth of their design service business was unusually fast considering that it relied upon recruitment of experts. Design service solutions can only be replicated and optimised to a limited extent, and only a limited number of projects can be executed at a time. In this business field, negotiating and executing projects can take a long time and can involve significant investments from the customer, whereas the product business can be scaled rapidly through business and consumer sales that do not rely on an expert salesperson or even personal selling. Becoming involved in two such different businesses is enabled by the particular know-how concentrated in the market area, and the growth—particularly opportunities with respect to the service business—is centralised to market areas where high-technology products and services are developed. Joel noted that the economic situation was versatile and that some areas were very vibrant, while in others they perceived a decrease in opportunities. The USA, Central Europe and now the Nordic countries increasingly provided most of the opportunities for growing the business. The Finnish economy’s recovery from the global financial and economic crisis, even if slow, became visible towards early 2015. In our second narrative interview, Joel told of his surprise about gaining unexpectedly many customers in Finland (similar to Daniel, Laura and Kai). One reason for the increased demand could relate to the ongoing start-up boom, with software firms
needing help in productisation. Joel noted also that firm financials appeared to have improved, allowing investment in development services.

4.5 Kai’s narrative

Kai’s background is in software and research in a technical research centre. He also had work experience in technical, managerial and international sales tasks at a small firm. In autumn 2013, he resigned from the company, which had been struggling for some time, and established a software development firm with a friend in November.

4.5.1 The setting: our interaction as the space for sensemaking

In early June 2014, I attended a networking event at which Kai held a brief talk about his six-month-old company. It immediately raised my hopes that I had found a potential new interviewee when he referred to the firm’s growth and implied internationalisation. I did not get a chance to approach Kai during the event, but the very same evening, I searched for more information on the firm and wrote him an email. I explained that I had received the impression that his firm was a rather unusual example of rapid growth and internationalisation in the local B2B service field. I requested an interview, and two days later received an answer. In his email, Kai modestly said that the internationalisation was not anything special yet, but he estimated that export sales would account for 10–20% of the firm’s turnover. If this situation was interesting enough for me in terms of the numbers, he said he would be glad to give me an interview. I was extremely happy to get this response, particularly because just a few weeks earlier, another entrepreneur had declined my request due to a busy schedule. I appreciated both Kai’s quick responses and the time he was willing to give to a meeting. I responded by saying that I believed his narrative would provide very interesting aspects to my research, as I wanted to interview entrepreneurs with different experiences in international sales.

Six days later, I travelled to visit Kai for the first interview. He had organised us a meeting room in the shared office facilities in which the company was located. I first told him briefly about myself and started by explaining that I had included firms in very different ‘states’ of internationalisation in the study. With examples of how some participants were attempting a first foreign market entry, while others had expanded to several market areas, I wanted to give him the impression that even as a very ‘fresh’ entrepreneur, his stories of (attempted) internationalisation
would be valuable to me. I also told him that I had not prepared any particular questions but that our discussion would evolve based on his narration. Despite my effort to get him into a storytelling mode, I needed to encourage him with several specific requests to tell me about his background before starting his own venture. To my relief, his narrations grew longer after the first few questions, and to my great surprise, he ended up being more talkative and reflective than other participants. He spoke very calmly, and it appeared to me that he was really contemplating the issues he was addressing. He seemed to be very self-reflective and the narration did not appear to be merely a report of what had happened. Instead, he seemed to actively be trying to make sense, criticise and question different aspects of the ‘plot’ elements he was raising, without my needing to ask for clarification or for the reasoning behind decisions and actions he described.

At first, Kai appeared almost to be an introvert: the tone of his voice was calm and almost quiet, and he initially did not make much eye-contact, focused on moving phone in his hands, and seemed even a bit abstemious. I wondered if he was unconsciously avoiding eye-contact and if he felt uncomfortable in the interview situation, but soon I started thinking that he might have been doing this unconsciously when he was organising his thoughts and producing the narrative. Such extensive and reflective narration would not have occurred if he felt awkward in the situation. Very early into our discussion, Kai told me that he had experience in sales. I was very surprised, partly because he was the first interviewee with sales experience, but mostly because he did not fit my mental image of a (stereotypical) salesperson. My initial reaction was not far from how Kai narrated his own understanding: he was not a stereotypical salesperson, did not have ‘the sales mentality’, and did not feel particularly good at sales. He appeared quite modest to me. I realised that his demeanour may have been very different in an interview situation than in a sales negotiation, but I could not imagine him being dramatically different. He was not an overly sociable, quick-witted sales shark. This notion left me glad: he seemed to be proof that very different personalities and characters could do well in sales. The interview lasted for over 80 minutes, and Kai was in no rush in ‘get done’ but was very talkative and reflective.

In early 2015, I contacted Kai and told about the upcoming publication that would utilise narratives from the first interview. I asked him to read through the ‘story’, and he did not ask for any modifications. He merely commented that it felt weird to read his own interview under a different name. We agreed to meet for the second time in February 2015.
The second meeting was set to take place in the same location as the first. I was worried when Kai was late and did not answer the phone. When he ultimately arrived, he apologised and said that he had been stuck with work. I was afraid that he might be very busy and that the timing might not be ideal for our discussion. This turned out to be an unnecessary fear, as the interview lasted over 70 minutes. We discussed what had happened within the past six months and how Kai perceived international opportunities and sales after having been in business for a bit over a year. Firm growth, Kai’s perceptions of IOs and his approach to sales were the main topics during this interview. Kai remained somewhat modest when discussing how growth had occurred and seemed genuinely surprised at how they had managed to “grow a real business”.

4.5.2 From engineer-salesperson to entrepreneur

Kai worked for almost a decade in a Finnish company doing technical work, slowly assuming managerial responsibilities and then sales responsibilities. Prior to this, he had worked in software and research at a technical research centre. In the software business, Kai had been involved in international selling and sales team management. His superiors encouraged him to take increasing responsibilities in sales, which had not occurred to him as a type of work that he might do, as he lacked an educational background in sales or business.

“Actually, I still don’t think that I’d be a particularly good seller or a sales-oriented person. [...] Let’s say I am at least not one of those stereotypical salespeople.” (Kai 18 June 2014)

However, he saw this experience as one of the reasons he became an entrepreneur. He was encouraged by the experience of being able to sell and by the notion of how sales really made a difference in a company’s success.

“In practice you saw that really…sales is the most important function in any firm”. (Kai 18 June 2014)

Kai said that he noticed that he could successfully sell software by relying on his know-how in software development. This is also what he described as his advantage: a way to differentiate himself from “stereotypical salespeople”. He described “stepwise awakenings” and “sparks” towards entrepreneurship with his sales experiences and considerations of running his own business (18 June 2014). He began to understand that he would have at least as good a chance as anyone in
business. In 2013, Kai’s employer was facing liquidation, and Kai left the company before he was made redundant. Within only few weeks of debating whether to apply for work or to develop a business, he decided to start up a company. A friend told him about a company that needed software developers but could not employ a new workforce, and the friend encouraged Kai create a team and start a venture to provide the needed services. After some discussions, the company agreed to purchase services if Kai established a firm.

In late 2013, Kai started a venture specialising in mobile and embedded software development with a friend. Using their personal networks, they gathered a team of people to join the venture with smaller shares and to work as software developers. Kai said that the co-founder was responsible for sales while he, as the CEO, was doing "just about everything" including sales (18 June 2014). Kai did not describe starting a new venture as a risky decision: the financial commitment was not significant because the company produced services that did not require a major investment. He also did not appear to be too concerned about failing. This is understandable because he felt confident about selling: they would stand out from many other software houses through professional sales, and the sales income would provide finances for growth. He said that the company had been sales-driven from the beginning, and already within a few months, the situation appeared to be very promising in terms of sales opportunities. To this, he added that he saw good human resource potential in the local labour market.

Kai explicitly said that he did not want to start a business alone even if it could have been possible. He wanted to share the responsibility and problems with people he could trust. In all of my interviewees’ narratives, except for Maria’s, teambuilding was based on personal relationships, which connects to the issue of trust. In all of the narratives, but particularly explicit in Maria’s and Joel’s, the entrepreneurial team was composed of people with specific know-how and experience. In the light of prior research, the entrepreneurs’ international work experience (e.g., Bloodgood et al. 1996, Madsen & Servais 1997) and international or global vision (e.g., Oviatt & McDougall 1994) connect to ambition levels and motivation as well as success in international growth (Andersson 2015). Founder-entrepreneurs with personal international knowledge are likelier to perceive and exploit international opportunities earlier than others (Oviatt & McDougall 2005). What is emphasised in the narratives in this study is the entrepreneurial teams’ strong expertise in the particular service area and their shared ideas and vision. However, the entrepreneurs do appear to reproduce the story of internationally experienced entrepreneurs with a global mindset, as they legitimise their position
with prior work experience, expertise, and international experience, based on which foreign markets are viewed as opportunities rather than as an uncertain path to growth.

4.5.3 International opportunities located through networks

Kai reasoned that because the service business could not scale but depended on the number of people, there was a limit to how much it could grow. The entrepreneurs’ first priority was growth in terms of sales and the number of employees. For the new firm, the domestic market was the largest in terms of sales, but it already had customers in the UK and ongoing negotiations in the USA by summer 2014. By autumn 2014, approximately 10–20% of returns came from export sales. As a small new firm, they could not hire local representatives in the UK or the USA, but Kai and the co-founder handled all sales. Their way of differentiating the firm from other small software houses was professional sales and the substantial knowledge of the salespeople.

Prospects were derived from the entrepreneurs’ wide international networks, which were the source of recommendations that put them in contact with prospects who had concrete needs, purchase intentions, and some level of trust in them. Internationalisation was not planned or targeted by area; UK and US customers just happened to be the first international customers reached through their networks. This improvised \textit{ad hoc} foreign market opportunity selection (Bingham 2009) process is, however, not the only approach Kai took to internationalisation. For practical reasons, the firm wanted to do business in Europe, but, e.g., in Germany, network contacts and sales efforts had not yet been successful. Kai explained the challenges in sales as partly being due to the lack of relevant references due to the young age of the firm. In Germany, firm references appeared to be more important than personal references, Kai explained. In contrast, after gaining the first customer in the USA, Kai said it was hard to stand out from the competition without personal contacts. This narrative resonates with research explaining the early identification of IOs and country opportunity choices as a function of the personal and extended networks of the entrepreneurs (Oviatt & McDougall 2005). These networks have also been found to help entrepreneurs establish credibility (Coviello & Munro 1995), but Kai said that such an explanation depended on the country context.

The new firm could not afford to travel to international fairs, hold roadshows or use consultants and agencies, so the most time- and financially efficient way of establishing new customer relationships was through networks and word of mouth.
Kai travelled little and mostly alone, and remote negotiations usually took place via Skype and phone. Kai emphasised that the sales cycle had to be short and that the chances of getting the deal had to be good, so that effort could be put into sales with a reasonable return expectation. Because they negotiated with companies that were known to have a need for software development services, the negotiations were not long regardless of the result. However, this appeared to vary depending on the company size and location: in the USA, particularly with bigger firms, it took time to negotiate the first agreement with all of the legal details. UK firms were “pretty straightforward” and used to buying software services instead of necessarily hiring developers.

Towards the end of 2014, the one-year-old firm experienced “growth peaks”, most of which surprisingly came from domestic sales, decreasing the share of export income although the sales profit from international sales remained at the same level. Kai noticed both in local sales and recruitment that the firm had gained a reputation. The firm already had close to 30 employees, and one of the new recruits was a salesperson. He also had large international networks, and sales and lead generation were still continuing “opportunistically” and not very systematically. In addition to using their international network, the entrepreneurs put more active effort into gaining domestic customers. While Kai decreased his attention to sales, he still believed that “in this kind of a company, it’s good that the management keeps somehow in touch with the real world” (4 February 2015). Kai said that one key to their successful growth was the fact that anyone working at the customer interface acted as a lead generator, detecting needs that could be served. The target initially had been to grow enough to pay salaries, but after a year, their success had led them to consider investing in another business to better serve their customers and widen their offering (see Fig. 12).
Fig. 12. The temporal order of events in Kai's international sales story.

Fig. 13. The expedient international opportunity process in Kai's narrative.
4.5.4 Meanings and mechanisms of the international opportunity process

Kai’s narrative differs from the others in the sense that the initial focus is on perceived service opportunity (see Fig. 13). At the very beginning, the entrepreneur-managers did not make very long-term plans but focused on smaller steps such as being able to pay salaries and some shares. The action-oriented goal to achieve this was through growth. Their advantage in pursuing growth through entrepreneurial selling was that the entrepreneurs simply had to do things well and to put their “personality in the game” by believing in what they were doing. After six months in business, Kai said that the plan was to grow sales and the number of employees and to achieve balance in sales: not to rely too much on one customer or on one field. Sales outside the local market area were needed for this reason, and they also offered a way of “staying in touch with what goes on in the world” (18 June 2014). Notably, Kai did not narrate his vision as being about internationalisation as such but as being about growth regardless of where the money comes from. Hence, a global vision did not really drive their behaviour, but in the attempt to reduce risk from a narrow customer base, the entrepreneurs also sought international expansion.

For the initial perceived business opportunity, Kai and the core team envisioned the starting point, based on the teams’ skills, as software development services with broad application possibilities (see Table 6, embeddedness). The entrepreneurs remained very open to different types of opportunities when negotiating with customers to offer what the customer needed (situated opportunities). He explained that flexibility and improvisation were good to start with, but they were problematic for internationalisation because it was difficult to develop a reputation when no clear focus or specialisation was communicated. While remaining open and able to offer different types of services, the plan was to pursue the growth target by selecting a focus area and marketing towards it. Before this decision was made, the entrepreneurs planned to grow the business to better meet customer needs, and then “see what the firm became like” (18 June 2014). This is also why the entrepreneurs needed to engage in sales to discuss service IOs and build relationship IOs: a hired salesperson with less knowledge of software development would not be able to construct IOs in software development if the service focus was not specified but was purely based on customer needs. This embeddedness of service IO negotiation know-how combined with the limited number of people responsible for sales has
limited the entrepreneurs’ efforts in pursuing market IOs. Kai narrates how they only engage in negotiations with foreign prospects with clear purchase intentions. Furthermore, relationship IOs are difficult to build in the USA due to a lack of presence in that market area. However, Kai does not plan to set up subsidiaries or utilise any other costly methods of gaining presence in foreign markets.

Within half a year, Kai had negotiated the entrepreneurs’ first relationship IO in the UK and was discussing another relationship IO with a prospect in the USA. Due to the entrepreneurs’ very limited resources, no traditional proactive approaches were used to select foreign market opportunities or to access them; the entrepreneurs’ existing networks were utilised in an ad hoc manner. This meant that Kai distributed information about his venture within his networks and learned about potential relationship IOs through these networks. This led to situated perceptions of available and feasible relationship IOs. From people they that knew, the entrepreneurs learned about prospects who needed software development services and hence were likely to make purchase decisions quickly.

“In this business, the network of the salesperson has huge importance” (Kai 18 June 2014)

Social networks also worked the other way around, i.e., potential customers could hear about Kai’s firm and approach him directly. No significant risks and investments in approaching market IOs were made unless the entrepreneurs thought that the deal had high potential. However, in Germany, this network approach had not worked, and Kai felt that personal recommendations appeared to carry less value than firm reputation. Hence, communication and negotiation behaviour may need to be adapted in negotiation with German prospects. The entrepreneur also described the decision-making process speed as situated and varying across country contexts: e.g., in the USA, the process was slower due to attention to legal details of agreements. With regard to situatedness of IO-related communication in any negotiation, Kai also noted that much work needed to be done at the customer interface to educate the buyer, who may not have a deep understanding of software development. A consultative approach was often needed. In foreign markets, he also refers to Finnish know-how when negotiating service IOs.

In the second, interview Kai talked about another method of distributing knowledge regarding potential relationship and service IOs. He stated that one key issue in customer interaction was ‘training’ employees to be alert and to listen to customers when enacting the negotiated service IOs to offer solutions for further emerging problems that they could solve.
“Not everyone has to become a salesperson, but all should be lead generators.”
(Kai 18 June 2014)

Throughout Kai’s narration, he differentiated the firm from its competitors with their sales-driven approaches. He saw that in their field, service opportunities were not particularly innovative; the market existed, and there were competitors offering same service. He expressed that, after all, very few firms were truly innovative or shaped the marketplace, while others succeeded due to timing, location (‘be the best of the service providers present’) and networks and make small, incremental improvements. This is why the sales-focus is crucial. Unlike my other interviewees, Kai did not discuss offering-based competitive advantage and innovativeness but rather clearly highlighted efficient network use in sales as the key to growth.

While Kai admitted that he was rather surprised about the relatively rapid growth in sales and size in the first year, the aim was still to continue growth without risk-taking, continuing to approach IOs through his networks. In the future, he saw that the company would have to decide how to profile itself and, instead of being purely sales-led, would also have to put effort into marketing. Kai said that the company was approaching an area in which it had to transform from a small “chameleon” into a growing enterprise with more focus. The entrepreneurs’ vision had never been an exit but given the increasing returns, Kai saw that the firm was ready for better and specialised services through recruiting or acquiring more know-how and customers for the firm.
Table 6. The IO process through the socially situated cognition approach to Kai’s narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action-Oriented</th>
<th>Embodied</th>
<th>Situated</th>
<th>Distributed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>First market IO in the UK soon after start</td>
<td>Service know-how and sales experience</td>
<td>Social networks’ influence on perceived service</td>
<td>Learn about potential customers through own networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promising</td>
<td>Two people pursuing IOs effort on those with clear purchase intentions</td>
<td>Ongoing: Country differences in speed of decision-making</td>
<td>Ongoing: Recommendations through networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>relationship IOs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prospective:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pursued in the USA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prospective: negotiate service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prospective:</td>
<td>Clear purchase</td>
<td>Need to tune messages and</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceive market</td>
<td>intentions</td>
<td>IOs</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IOs in Germany;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Want balance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>between domestic and foreign sales</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
<td>Retrospective:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Attempted to gain customers in Germany</td>
<td>Three people with required expertise to negotiate IO</td>
<td>Team perceives Germany has desirable market</td>
<td>Relied on word of mouth and networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entering the US market</td>
<td>The USA difficult without physical presence and direct contact</td>
<td>Ongoing: IO; difficulty of building relationships</td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sales-led adaptive approach to IOs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of networks to detect German market IOs;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prospective:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceive good business opportunities but not taking too big risks; Considers acquiring another firm</td>
<td>No plans for other locations or more costly presence in pursuing foreign market IOs</td>
<td>Decisions with regard to profiling needed in future when dedicating resources to marketing</td>
<td>Ongoing: Within firm and networks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4.5.5 Kai’s narrative in the empirical context

Kai’s narrative contains criticisms of the prevailing start-up discourse, and he noted that many start-ups that aimed to “revolutionise something” did not always realise how few are truly innovative. He also noted that targets differ: “do you want to make a living or conquer the world?” (4 February 2015). For Kai, it was not of absolute value to internationalise: a euro is of equal value no matter what country it comes from. He also felt that the incremental way of doing business was also a good way to do business. Finally, he valued the jobs that the firm was able to create.

This brought us to discuss the venture capital aspect of the local and national start-up boom. Kai had not applied for investor money because the business was generally not perceived as being novel or lucrative enough as it does not have its own products. He had often faced the attitude that a service business was not seen worth investing in if there was no scalability potential. The entrepreneurs also wanted to maintain ownership, which they saw as being important to maintaining “the fire of having to succeed” (4 February 2015). He reflected on how the problem of the start-up boom was that firms did too little to become profitable on their own; they were not sales-driven enough to fund their operations with sales revenues, and so they had to sell their shares.

Kai’s narrative reflects several ways in which changes in the domestic marketplace influence how he approached business and how customers did business. First, the downfall of companies that relied on a few domestic customers such as Nokia served as a warning example. The entrepreneurs recognised that they should not rely too much on the domestic market alone even if the sales were going well and that they should not rely on only few big customers. As the reason behind their successful sales in Finland, Kai talked about the easiness of building trust and their good timing in entering into business when the way of thinking appeared to develop a consensus about joint responsibility in favouring local and trustworthy service providers. Finland also has a good reputation internationally for its ICT know-how, and, e.g., Nokia’s downfall is not considered to be the result of a lack of engineering expertise. However, Kai noted the same problem that Daniel observed in his narrative: Finns are not a sales nation and they have problems in productising know-how.
4.6 Discussion of the meanings and mechanisms of the international opportunity process

In this section, I draw from the entrepreneurs’ narratives to stimulate integrative thinking from the investigation of IO and the highly practically relevant boundary-crossing context of buyer-seller interaction in sales negotiation. In answering the question “How do entrepreneurs construct international opportunities in their narratives of entrepreneurial selling?” I draw from the socially situated cognition approach (e.g., Smith & Semin 2004, 2007)–particularly the notions of action-orientation and situatedness, which were brought up especially often in the narratives–and the notions of IO construction and transformation at the intersubjective boundaries (Mainela et al. 2015). Together, these provide a conceptual framework for looking at the IO process holistically. First, I discuss how the entrepreneurs narrated multiple manifestations of IOs and dynamic understandings of these. Thereafter, I discuss how the entrepreneurs talked about these different IO-related actions in terms of diverse intersubjective spaces and shifts in the narratives between the IO manifestations and actions across intersubjective boundaries.

4.6.1 Multiple understandings of international opportunity in entrepreneurial selling

The analysis of the five personal, evolving narratives shows that entrepreneurs employ multiple types of discourse in interpreting and narrating their experiences. By drawing from a combination of different discourses, the entrepreneurs created rich meanings of IOs and justifications for their related decisions and behaviour, but sometimes the combination of several elements also led to a lack of coherence in the narratives. As I discuss in this section, the narratives contain dynamics and dilemmas that arise from the narrators’ continuous sensemaking of their experiences, decisions, actions and interactions with regard to IOs during past, present and future international selling. (Cf. Vaara 2002). I identified many of the elements contributing to early internationalisation activities, e.g., networks, knowledge, experience and resources, that are familiar to us from prior IE research (e.g., Andersson 2015). What, however, arises as a more novel finding is the dual nature of the discursive elements applied when making sense of the IO meanings, actions and interactions during entrepreneurial selling (see Table 7).
The entrepreneurs talked about opportunities in general and IOs more specifically as future (new/developed) products and services, sustainable or scalable business models, customer or partnering relationships, and foreign market opportunities. These opportunities are intertwined, and shifts in the focus of the narratives between them are overlapping. Opportunities such as product or service IOs were narrated as innovations (new to the markets) or new or developed offerings of the firm. Business model IOs were given less focus than other IO manifestations but appeared particularly important when scalability of the business was targeted. Relationship IO manifestations, and customer relationships in particular, were central in the narratives from various viewpoints, such as returns, references and validations. Market IOs were discussed as enablers of growth and sustainability. The dilemmas of IO (inter)actions are partly shared among the young, early internationalising firms and partly relate to the different meanings assigned to each IO manifestation. The specificities of different actions and interactions in various productive intersubjective spaces with regard to each IO manifestation are discussed more in detail later (Chapter 4.6.2), but in the following, I categorise these (inter)actions under envisioning, construction and enactment of IO. Envisioning includes e.g. imagining, identifying and evaluating IOs; constructing includes e.g. initiating actualisation of IO by (re)organizing and joining resources, and by building and developing tangible or intangible material; enacting means e.g., materialising or realising an opportunity.

**Specialization vs. high flexibility in envisioning and constructing international opportunity**

The entrepreneurs’ narratives share the element of dilemma or possibility in balancing between specialisation and flexibility: what types of product or service and relationship IOs can be communicated to prospective customers and envisioned together in negotiations. Each interviewee narrated the entrepreneurial team and employees as being highly qualified experts with know-how that could be utilised in a variety of ways and extended according to emerging needs. Particularly Daniel, Maria and Joel make this element a central, reoccurring aspect in their narrations. However, there are differences in how flexibly the entrepreneurs are prepared to envision new product or service IOs to extend or modify the existing offering to construct new relationship IOs. While specialization in high-tech product and services, superior quality and high-value offering are commonly viewed as pertinent to early internationalising firm, also flexibility in the rapidly changing
environments is required (e.g., Cavusgil & Knight 2015) when IOs are created (e.g., Cornelissen & Clarke 2010). Development of appropriate product and service IOs based on knowledge acquisition about customers in the beginning in particular and adaptation of the existing offering (cf. Aspelund et al. 2007) require balancing between high flexibility and specialization.

Maria attributes successful internationalisation to the effect of positive word of mouth. This is linked to her understanding of successful service and relationship IO enactment, which has been reinforced by her sales experiences and also relies on her initial idea of how these IOs are envisioned and constructed in negotiation: the principle of only committing to projects for which they can provide high quality service relying on their core competences. In sales, Joel has been able to rely on his experience in software purchasing and to differentiate their service from the competition with high quality enabled by an exceptionally skillful team. He also connects the importance of positive word of mouth to the decision to only engage in projects that they can implement very well. In negotiations, he avoids committing to service and relationship IO construction with uncommitted customers because the results would not be satisfying. In hindsight, Daniel feels that his disappointment in slow IO enactment with the first UK customer is partly due to this issue. The customer has not had fully committed the resources to the collaboration as planned. Similar to Maria and Joel, Daniel said that in the future, they should find customers who are committed to service and relationship IO enactment by using and promoting the service. These entrepreneurs narrate specialisation as focal to successful IO processes but also acknowledge the importance of developing the firms’ expertise for other service and/or product IOs.

Laura’s narrative, however, depicts a very specific specialisation in a productised service: the product IO is fixed in the sense that no new service or product IO areas, but only one type of IO is negotiated with the aim of adapting its content.

When envisioning and evaluating product or service and relationship IO in sales, declining customer requests is hard for a small new firm. While Kai shares the reasoning that one cannot afford to do things badly, he also explains that in negotiations, one needs to be very flexible in responding to customer needs. Getting the deal on IO construction and enactment is the most important thing, and it is enough to do ‘good’ work instead of striving to be ‘exceptional’. Hence, whatever software needs a prospect has, he would try to negotiate an agreement by discussing solutions, i.e., envision service and relationship IOs, that both sides could commit to construct. Kai’s narration particularly raises the dilemma of a young firm trying to market itself and communicate specialisation based on defined core competences.
and embedded understandings of service or product IOs, but at the same time trying not to limit relationship IOs in advance by communicating too strict an area of specialisation. Daniel also sees such flexibility in product and service IO envisioning as being crucial but interprets this more as an aspiration to finding new, innovative solutions (product IOs) enabled by the team’s expertise rather than taking a pure sales-for-revenue focus on flexibility. Maria highlights how, in negotiations, she would not commit to too demanding service IOs knowing that their resources and know-how may not be on the level required to provide outstanding service IO enactment, and hence, relationship IO. However, these types of situations are not perceived as failed IO interactions, as these moments provide opportunities to gain useful information on how to develop the offering and to build relationships for the future. The entrepreneurs narrate a problem-solving, relationship-focused approach to sales with the aim of fostering collaborative long-term relationships (e.g., Chaisrakeo & Speece 2004, Graham et al. 1994, Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer 2000, Moncrief and Marshall 2005).

__Entrepreneurial selling for international opportunity envisioning and construction vs. professional selling for international opportunity replication__

Maria and Kai describe reliance on their own expertise as the basis for successful IO envisioning, construction and enactment in sales. In-depth knowledge of the service content allows the entrepreneur to respond to, e.g., tailoring needs on the negotiated service IO on the spot. The entrepreneurs also highlight their own desire to learn about customers and to gain direct feedback to improve and customise future service or product IOs. Maria changed her narrative reasoning; initially, she felt that in the future sales could be conducted by people with a business background, but later she said that personal selling needed to be done by people with expertise in medical research to be convincing, flexible and consultative in negotiations when envisioning service and relationship IOs.

Kai and Joel had similar explanations that their strength in selling derived from their understanding of the technological content, which gave them credibility in service and product IO envisioning and construction in negotiations. Both saw their international networks as an important resource for overcoming resource limitations in sales: IO processes are initiated with the help of personal networks that help locate potential relationship IOs. When some degree of mutual trust already exists, it is easier to start relationship and service or product IO envisioning.
with a prospect. Over time, an increase in resources enables Joel to also employ professional salespeople and to optimise a systematic, albeit tailored, approach to service and relationship IO processes. His company also partners with a US company to increase sales overseas. Such attempts to build a specialized network to govern sales and marketing activities with the help of partners who complement the limited resources and competences is found typical for new international ventures (Madsen & Servais 1997). Kai, however, states that he continuously manages limited travel resources by seizing of opportunities through networks and the use of all employees as ‘lead generators’, scouting for potential relationship and service IOs when interacting with customers. The importance of customer references and networks in gaining credibility and trust among prospective customers is crucial for the new firms (cf. Luostarinen & Gabrielsson 2004).

Daniel experienced a disappointment in the slow market entrance in the UK, and initially attributed the challenges to his lack of sales experience and the need for professional salespeople to manage the IO process in sales. The local sales agents turned out to be helpful in ‘opening doors’ to relationship IO envisioning with prospects in the UK. However, over time, he discussed the difficulty of finding salespeople who could close deals on product and relationship IO construction and enactment.

Laura was initially convinced that a professional salesperson was the best way to start approaching the perceived foreign market IO in the USA for practical reasons and because of his expertise in selling. Disappointment in his inability to construct a suitable business model IO and demonstrate product IOs in meetings with prospects initially connects, in Laura’s narrative, to the entrepreneurs’ inexperience in managing the salesperson and to his lack of (entrepreneurial) enthusiasm. Later, Laura attributed the failure to the salespersons’ lack of commitment to product IO envisioning as a part of his sales tasks. The lack of commitment is also connected to his part-time agreement and because he has other sources of income. As the professional, he determined the pricing in the USA, which Laura later saw as one of the biggest problems: this adapted business model IO made relationship IOs unappealing and the purchase decision too big and slow.

Both Daniel and Laura explicitly discuss the dilemma of needing to develop a scalable product and business model IO that require no or little personal selling, on the one hand, but the desire and need to be involved in international selling personally to ensure that envisioning and construction of product and relationship IOs succeed, on the other hand. Before a replicable IO is reached, the partial or full outsourcing of foreign sales would seem like efficient use of time and money.
However, it became clear to Daniel that his personal, entrepreneurial sales efforts were to convince prospects about his expertise and ability to provide “world class” technology and know-how in product IO construction. After failed collaboration with the local sales representative in the USA, Laura is convinced that only the entrepreneurs have the required passion, commitment and knowledge to get IO processes started overseas. When networks and relationships with partners and customers become the content of IOs and not only their environment (Johanson & Vahlne 2009, Mainela et al. 2014) entrepreneurs’ interaction for co-developing IOs with prospects becomes essential.

*International opportunity process in sales is the same anywhere vs. context matters*

Daniel and Joel particularly highlight their international experience and mindset (cf. Andersson 2015), saying that they do not perceive or treat domestic and international opportunity processes in sales differently. Both acknowledge that there are some cultural and contextual differences, but this appears to be so self-evident that it does not require particular consideration. Joel perceives Western cultures as very similar and intertwined, not posing the type of contextual challenge that, for example, Asian contexts would. Daniel first thought that the market IO in the UK could be pursued alone and did not require local representation due to language or cultural issues, but only six months later, he collaborated with a local agency to compensate for his foreignness and to help with logistics. Laura and Joel note the US prospects’ overly positive feedback as a challenge for gaining much needed direct feedback for product IO development that could enable tailoring of the offering if needed. All of the entrepreneurs said that it was easier to envision relationship opportunities with individuals from the same cultural context. However, all also mentioned having used the Finnish country brand to create positive associations.

Maria also narrated relationship IO processes as being fairly similar regardless of the target market, but she attributed success in France and Italy partly to the use of local consultants who could help overcome cultural and language barriers at the initial states of sales and relationship IO envisioning. She mentioned contextual differences that she could either adjust to in negotiations or address with the help of local consultants. With this narrative, Maria ended up providing ‘textbook’ examples of cross-cultural differences, as does Daniel, perhaps to show that she is not ignorant of contextual differences. Reproductions of, e.g., how Germans or
Americans are from experience and/or hearsay were present in all of the entrepreneurs’ narratives. Yet, more focus was put on what Zahra et al. (2005) call the territory, i.e. the competitive arena, instead of the geo-physical, political and cultural map.

Laura attributed part of the challenges in selecting the US market opportunity to the entrepreneurs’ preconceptions and personal bias (cf. Levinthal & March 1993, Zahra et al. 2005): the area was selected because they were familiar with it and market information was accessible. They assumed that the business field was developed but failed to see that in the USA, it is mostly concerned with health issues that are taken for granted in Europe. The offering may better suit European markets that share more similar approaches to health.
Table 7. Understandings of IO and the related (inter)actions in entrepreneurial selling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understandings (Inter)actions</th>
<th>Understandings (Inter)actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specialisation–flexibility</td>
<td>Agreeing only on IOs that can be enacted particularly well relying on core competences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(product/service, relationship IO)</td>
<td>Declining to commit to customers uncommitted to IO enactment to avoid unsatisfying results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Declining from too demanding IO constructions but learning from negotiation; future opportunities for specialisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constructing IO very flexibly based on customers' needs could serve to gain returns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IO envisioning and construction in entrepreneurial selling–replicated</td>
<td>Entrepreneur relying on field-specific expertise in selling is able to flexibly envision IO at any point with prospects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IO in professional selling (product/service, business model, relationship IO)</td>
<td>Entrepreneur making use of international networks in IO envisioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entrepreneur needing professional salespeople's help to manage relationship IO envisioning in negotiations, to 'close' the deal on IO construction and enactment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional salespeople not committed to product/service IO envisioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If IO not replicable, entrepreneurs' participation in negotiation needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity process same everywhere–context matters (market, relationship IO)</td>
<td>Opportunity envisioning, construction and enactment in selling the same no matter the context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjusting to cross-cultural contexts based on prior international experience and/or knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local representatives used to initiate relationship IO envisioning to overcome logistical problems and to compensate for foreignness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpreting foreign prospects' feedback on product/service IO with caution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Envisioning market IOs in familiar areas</td>
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4.6.2 Mechanisms of the international opportunity process in entrepreneurial selling

I now discuss how the entrepreneurs talked about action and interactions related to the different IO manifestations in diverse intersubjective spaces. Furthermore, I focus on the shifts, i.e., the mechanisms, between the IO manifestations and actions across intersubjective boundaries (Fig. 14). With my emphasis on the social situatedness of entrepreneurs’ cognition and the intersubjective spaces of IO envisioning, construction and enactment, I attempt to respond to Fletcher’s (2006) call for studies that go beyond descriptive, linear process models of opportunity
recognition and to provide situatedness as one angle to better understand how and why IOs emerge between people (cf. Fletcher 2004) as iterative processes (Mainela et al. 2014). Similar attempts have recently been made by Selden and Fletcher (2015) and Puhakka and Stewart (2015), both by focusing on entrepreneurial opportunities in general. In this section, I attempt to provide more detail about our understanding of IOs as arising from interactions between entrepreneurs and their social, cultural, timely, spatial and material environment (cf. Wood & McKinley 2010).

Mechanisms of international opportunity narrated as product or service opportunity

A focal interest in the narratives was the opportunity process of developing services and/or products. This manifestation of IO connects to the widely shared understanding of opportunities as new services and goods (e.g., Sarasvathy et al. 2003) but the narrations emphasize with whom these IO are envisioned, constructed and exploited (cf. Shane & Venkataraman 2000). The entrepreneurial team’s experience and know-how provided the basis for the narrated ideas of offerings that were described as both unfolding from interaction between colleagues (cf. e.g., Venkataraman et al. 2012) and from search for (new) needs and solutions to which the available human resources could be put use to (cf. e.g., Eckhardt & Shane 2003). Whether the entrepreneurs among themselves envisioned and set up a target of developing a scalable product IO or service IO with steadier, more moderate growth targets, the initial product or service idea(s) were strongly based on the team’s internal sensemaking processes but soon also discussed within prospects for feedback. Potential, perceived IOs are typically very broad and vague when initially envisioned among the entrepreneurs, and not ready to be enacted until transformed (constructed) into concrete, materialised opportunities (Oyson & Whittaker 2015).

In a very early state–even before the official founding of the new firm–the entrepreneurs started to interact with prospective customers to envision opportunities that matched their ideas and competences with customer needs. This aspect of the narratives resonates with Dimitratos et al.’s (2010) emphasis on entrepreneurs’ proactive approach towards customer interaction in capturing IOs. Yet, in contrast to description of entrepreneurial behaviour (e.g., Zahra & George 2002), the narratives direct attention to entrepreneurial activities occurring in different social contexts and the complexity of the process (cf. Fletcher 2004). The entrepreneurs clearly highlighted the direct customer interface as being the most
essential intersubjective space for jointly envisioning and constructing offerings with and for customers. The entrepreneurs described the actual contents of envisioned product and service IOs emerging from customer interaction. Service or product IO envisioning between local intermediaries and prospects did not lead to construction of these opportunities without entrepreneurs’ direct customer interaction.

The early customers’ validation and references were seen as being crucial to the new firm, which needed not only to develop the offering, i.e. products and service IOs, but also to build new relationships to expand its customer network. Constant envisioning (imagining and evaluation), construction (combining resources and developing content) and enactment (use of services or products) of opportunities within the intersubjective space of buyer-seller sensemaking and interaction led to the development of the existing offering and the addition of new service areas or a product. The service and product opportunity development was strongly connected with building relationship IOs at the customer interface. Long-term customer relationships were particularly valued because they enabled continuous cycles of construction, enactment and re-evaluation of product and service opportunities in collaboration with the customer.

Despite my insistence on returning to the topic of the international customer interface, the entrepreneurs continued to narrate about product and service opportunity processes without any clear separation of their country contexts. While the country contexts mattered in the narratives in terms of international growth opportunities, they did not play an explicit role in the product and service opportunity processes. Daniel and Joel stated that they did not separate international and domestic sales. Whether the service or product opportunity narrative started with IOs at the interface between entrepreneurs and foreign customers or opportunities enacted with domestic customers, IO construction and enactment occurred across these interfaces (with domestic and international prospective customers) that I had insisted in maintaining separate. What was relevant in tailoring service solutions was not the customer’s country of origin but its type and size.

Mechanisms of international opportunity narrated as business model opportunity

Sipola (2015: 62) notes that entrepreneurs looking to develop an innovation with scalability and venture capital objectives and those with employment and more
moderate growth intentions view opportunities differently. This occurred in Laura’s
narrative as a constant consideration of how the business model could be developed
to scale the business: how product IO processes across countries in sales could be
organised, how the revenue model should be, and how the product and support
would be offered globally. Daniel’s narrative, however, focused on the target of
constructing innovation opportunities, and hence, the emphasis was on the
customer interface and product IO envisioning. Kai, Joel and Maria, for their part,
narrated the influence of their growth and employment targets on a business model
IO that could be transferred across borders but would rely on controlled (non-
scalable) growth through optimisation of sales and service IO processes.

The entrepreneurial team’s envisioning of a business model IO for controlled
growth or scalability was based on joining the entrepreneurs’ prior experiences and
know-how, and it involved circulating ideas and developing a model that reflected
the envisioned product or service IOs and identified foreign market IOs. The
business model IOs were also developed in interaction with local intermediaries:
both Laura and Daniel discussed with a local sales agent to decide how the pricing
model and ‘packaging’ of the product and service solution should be adapted to
make purchase decisions easy for local customers. Re-evaluations of the foreign
market IOs among the entrepreneurial teams, and also partly with local
intermediaries, led to development (minor adjustments) of business model IOs in
terms of the channels of prospecting, customer segments, and ways of negotiating
and communicating value and competitive advantage within different competitive
environments and (mature) markets. The international exposure was expected to
bring about changes to the practices and offering (Daniel and Laura) or the
development of the business model was based on international interaction to start
with or from very early on (Maria, Joel, Kai). In line with Fletcher’s (2004)
suggestion, the former approach could be viewed as cross-border extension and
adaptation of regional opportunities while the latter could be seen as construction
of business model IOs in relation to international (not local) markets.

A strong linkage was built between the business model IO development and
the service and product IO envisioning among the entrepreneurs and with
(prospective) international customers. A business model for scalability or more
moderate growth could only be developed if the envisioned, constructed and
enacted service and product IOs resulted in replicable or optimised (even if tailored)
solutions.
Mechanisms of international opportunity narrated as relationship opportunity

When approaching the ‘who’ in the foreign market areas, the relationship IOs were approached in multiple manners, through diverse interactive spaces. As suggested by e.g., Fletcher (2004), building international business relationships and transactions can be opportunistic and even chaotic process. Kai narrated an ad hoc method of utilising personal networks to identify foreign market IOs, but more particularly, relationship IOs, which he learned about from people that he knows. In Joel’s story, his networks led directly to identifying relationship IOs with particular prospects in particular market areas: he knew about the firms already before the business was set up.

The local sales agents served as helpful ‘door openers’ between the entrepreneurs and the prospects when initiating relationship IO building, but only direct interaction between the entrepreneur-seller and the prospect enabled the building of relationship IOs in foreign market areas when enacting product and service IOs. Through building relationships with local intermediaries and prospects, the entrepreneurs were hoping to access market information (cf. Fletcher 2004) that would enable further product, service and relationship IO envisioning and construction. Similar to the findings of Johanson and Vahlne (2009), the narratives indicate relationships with all involved actors (Schweizer et al. 2010) as part of IO because it is the interaction with prospects, customers, intermediaries and other network members that enables co-construction of knowledge, ideas and shared interests. Due to my focus on how relationships are narrated as socially constructed opportunities, and not the events that ‘actually’ happened as objective conception, my analysis differs from interaction-focused IO studies that assume dyadic data at a relationship level to result in evidence of collective IO development (see Mainela et al. 2014). The narratives allow us to study relationality of IOs, the social aspects of international entrepreneuring (cf. Fletcher 2007). Relationships narrated as IOs move the analytical focus beyond relationships as enablers of IO manifestations and intersubjective spaces in which products and services are enacted to relationships as valued opportunity contents.

Discontinuation of enacting market IO entry efforts and relationship building with a local agent were depicted in Laura’s narration, when the entrepreneur herself did not become involved in direct prospect interaction in the selected area and the collaboration with the local representative ended. Also Daniel narrated a relationship IO with the local intermediary: despite a troublesome start in the UK
market, the relationship with the local sales agency has continued, but the market IO and approach to it is being re-evaluated amongst the team and with the local intermediary. Whereas prior studies indicate more success in international negotiations when external agents are involved (e.g., Herbig 1997), the narratives indicate that giving responsibility of IO construction to a representative can hamper relationship building in international sales negotiations. Laura’s expressed wish to be present in the US market to directly interact with prospects reflects her confidence in being able to construct relationship IOs through entrepreneurial selling. Yet, the limited resources and multiplicity of roles that the entrepreneurs need to take responsibility of set major challenges for building direct relationships with foreign prospects.

Mechanisms of international opportunity narrated as foreign market opportunity

Much of the entrepreneurs’ ‘opportunity talk’ revolved around foreign market IOs that cover potential geographical areas to enter and expand in for constructing and enacting product or service IOs, building relationship IOs, and eventually, possibly replicating business model IOs. Foreign market IOs are essentially a means to stay in business and grow. Joel narrated a foreign market IO realisation as closely related to the emergence of the new business as an international entity since the very beginning. Here entrepreneuring can be viewed to occur in the process of internationalisation, whereas narratives of extension of domestic product and service IO, like in the case of Daniel and Laura, could be described as the process of entrepreneuring through which international activities occur (see Fletcher 2004).

The geographical areas where the entrepreneurs located business opportunities related to the entrepreneurs’ backgrounds: based on the core entrepreneurial team’s international experience and market knowledge, they started by envisioning early international growth opportunities in familiar areas in which they thought there would be demand for the envisioned product or service IOs and where the business model could be replicated or adjusted. Within the entrepreneurial teams, foreign market IOs were identified and evaluated for sales and growth opportunities in certain locations that were then targeted. The identification of foreign market IOs was rather planned when it arose from within the firm, but when the market IOs were identified on the intersubjective boundary of entrepreneurs and their personal networks, they could be highly improvised (cf. Bingham 2009). For example, Maria narrates a very planned and sequential approach to market IO identification
and evaluation based on geographical proximity (cf. Johanson & Vahlne 1997) but tells how the first US customer was contacted through a (customer) connection that needed to be utilised when the opportunity presented itself. Kai narrates a more ad hoc approach to utilising his own networks to identify foreign market IOs and customer relationship IOs. His narrative resonates with effectual approach to foreign market IO through making use of who he knows (Sarasvathy 2001, Sarasvathy et al. 2014).

The ‘where’ of foreign market IO could also be identified by consultants (often local intermediaries), who, in Daniel’s and Maria’s narratives, not only provided insights into whether there was interest in the offering in the area but also whom to visit during a roadshow for building relationship IOs. Such identification and evaluation of foreign market IOs in interactions between the entrepreneurs and local intermediaries could also lead to the discontinuation of actions in the specific market area. Joel provides an example of this, as he tells about how a consultancy performed market research for product ideas in Latin America but then never returned to talk about this market as a perceived opportunity again. It seems that the firm is no longer considering this market IO, at least for the time being.

All of my interviewees described the foreign market IO as best pursued through direct or mediated export sales in which at least one of the entrepreneurs was involved with, meeting prospects in person. Additionally, they emphasised how they wanted to keep operations in Finland except for sales subsidiaries in strategic market areas. Joel linked the reasoning of an own sales subsidiary to the need to control the quality of the foreign market IO enactment from nearby. Locating office in a foreign market may also serve for legitimation purposes, that is, to overcome the disadvantage of foreignness and to signal growth potential to prospective investors (Turcan 2013). Another reason was the entrepreneurs’ observation of difficulties that their employers had faced with widely spread operations. Particularly the USA was discussed as a market area in own sales office could be needed, unlike when approaching other foreign markets. Successfully enacted market IOs (as entry or expansion to a market) were narrated as taking place at the interface of entrepreneurs and prospective foreign customers but not between local intermediaries and (prospective) customers.
Fig. 14. IO processes across intersubjective spaces of sensemaking and interaction in entrepreneurial selling.
5 Departing the scene

5.1 Summarising the aims of my study

I began my study with the following question: How do entrepreneurs construct international opportunities in their narratives of entrepreneurial selling? My aims were twofold: to understand IO better through the changing meanings that entrepreneurs assign to it over sales and to understand what type of mechanisms they described as being involved in the processes. I interviewed five entrepreneurs, who narrated their stories from different standpoints in two or three interviews, constructing heterogeneous narratives in content and structure. In the analysis, I have focused on the meanings that these entrepreneurs give to IO and discussed changes in these meanings when analysing the content of the narratives. I also looked at the meaningmaking structures of the narratives to analyse mechanisms explaining why and how decisions, actions and events took place. For a more holistic understanding of the meanings, I needed to reflect on how the stories were generated in interactions between me and the entrepreneurs in a particular temporal and spatial setting and to attach the analysis of the narrative to the broader institutional, economic, social and historical environment (cf. e.g., Hytti 2003).

I have applied the SSC approach to integrative IO discussion to make sense of IO (meanings, mechanisms) in the emerging and changing business practices of entrepreneurs. I have also discussed entrepreneurial selling to view IO in a particular context that I found crucial to early internationalizing firms. In this study, I have taken a social constructionist approach to narratives to allow the sensemaking to be social and situated. Next, I will discuss my contribution to the theoretical and methodological discussion in the IE field. I will also briefly discuss potential implications for practitioners and reflect on the quality of the study. Finally, I will also discuss possible avenues for future research.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

In this study, the social constructionist stance to narrative approach has directed the perspectives I have taken to IE. Viewing IO as socially constructed provided me with the means to widen the theoretical discussion of entrepreneurial IO practices (cf. Fletcher 2006) and using the narrative constructionist lens as an overarching
approach gave me the opportunity to illustrate the potential of the narrative approach, which goes beyond its methodological contribution in IE research.

5.2.1 Contextualising the changing meanings and mechanisms of international opportunity

Prior IE research has argued that we know little about entrepreneurs’ motivations for internationalisation and the effects of these motivations on entry mode and other mechanisms to construct and exploit IOs (Zahra et al. 2005). In this study, I have utilised the socially situated cognitive perspective to introduce more diversity and depth into the IE field and, particularly, the IO discussion. With this approach, I am able to enrich our understanding of socially situated sensemaking through IO processes that the entrepreneurs describe based on their decisions and actions in internationalisation and sales, development of the offering and business model, and relationship building. Hence, I further the cognitive (often constructivist) perspective, which tends to restricts focus to the entrepreneurs’ internal mental models, by taking a social constructionist view to make use of the intertwined assumptions of embedded, action-oriented, situated and distributed cognitions (cf. Dew et al. 2015). With further emphasis on the productive intersubjective spaces that spur socially situated sensemaking, I respond to the call of scholars to ‘socialise’ the entrepreneur (e.g., Dew et al. 2015, Fletcher 2006, Venkataraman et al. 2012).

The literature I have reviewed in this study offers an important point of departure for novel research on IO because it brings the individual entrepreneur and his or her context into the analysis, richly connecting the process view with entrepreneurs as temporally, socially and spatially embedded actors (cf. e.g., Garud et al. 2010, 2014a, Garud & Giuliani 2013, Fletcher 2006, Steyaert 2007, Zahra 2007). From this viewpoint, I have been able to provide a situated conception of sensemaking involving the entrepreneurs’ immediate spatial and social contexts (particularly with co-entrepreneurs, intermediaries and customers), and the broader industry, societal and timely context reflected in the use of narrative elements that reproduced or contradicted prevalent discourses. Despite some groundlaying work in the entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Cornelissen & Clarke 2010, Dew et al. 2015, Mitchell et al. 2011), the SSC approach remains underexplored in the IE field. Cognitives studies of IO in IE advocate entrepreneur’s sensemaking process in social context (Rasmussen et al. 2001, Zahra et al. 2005), but have paid limited attention to the interplay between entrepreneur and her context in IO creating action and interaction (Ciabuschi et al. 2012). By locating the entrepreneurial IO
processes in time, the lived experience and world, and avoiding the object-subject dichotomy (Steyaert 2007), I could provide a ‘thicker’ understanding of the processes, as suggested by the proponents of integrative approaches to entrepreneurship and opportunity (e.g., Fletcher 2006, Sarasvathy et al. 2010, Zahra 2007) and to IO in IE (Mainela et al. 2014, 2015).

My view of IO as an integrative process and my analysis of the non-linear dynamic mechanisms of IO processes contribute to a stronger process view of IE (cf. e.g., Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2014, Langley 1999). The narrative approach provided me with a particularly strong approach to studying the content and structure of narrations that could be interpreted holistically to understand processuality in its richness: what happened and why, who did what and when, and how and why did events evolve (cf. Elliot 2005, Langley 1999). With multiple interviews with each entrepreneur, I was also able to observe changes in how they made sense of the past and future IO processes: they narrated multiple IO’s ‘content’ but with varying emphasis (e.g., on product IOs or relationship IOs) and different mechanisms–adapted to context or changing through experience–for envisioning, constructing and enacting IOs. Product and service IOs as new offerings to the market (innovations) or new and developed offerings of the firm were envisioned (imagined, identified), constructed by organising (re)resources, and enacted (realised) within and across the productive borderlines of entrepreneurs’ situated interaction contexts. Business model IOs were narrated as IO manifestations when the entrepreneurs envisioned and developed methods to scale or transfer the business across country and customer contexts, and they were adjusted or replicated via e.g. pricing, productisation, channels of prospecting, and ways of communicating value and competitive advantage. Identification, initiation and building of relationships IOs, which were understood to be customer and partner relationships, was narrated as crucial not only for gaining returns but also for gaining references and validation and developing the product and service IOs. Finally, foreign market IOs were identified, evaluated and enacted, or suspended from in connection with product or service and relationship IO mechanisms. Through uncovering transformations between these IO manifestations and interactions producing them across diverse intersubjective spaces (cf. Mainela et al. 2015), I was able to address the ‘journeys’ of IOs, not merely constraining the processes to their beginnings and ends. Such attention to the dynamics that transforms articulated representations of new meanings into concrete, objectified opportunities has been called for (Puhakka & Stewart 2015). IO-based market entry and new venture establishment have been discussed extensively in empirical IE
research (e.g., Chandra et al. 2012, Crick & Jones 2000), and these studies have shifted research focus to entrepreneur’s networks and cognition. By taking a stronger processual view to socially constructed IOs, I continue from these notions and move from studying IO as trigger for internationalisation (see Mainela et al. 2014) or entrepreneuring (see Fletcher 2004) to the IO itself.

I also highlighted the changing meanings of IOs: the entrepreneurs’ narratives do not only contain shifts in focus when discussing different types of opportunity manifestations; rather, they also exhibit dichotomies within and between the different meanings and the related actions and interactions (cf. Feldman 2003). I discuss the contradicting needs for specialisation to product or service IO but flexibility in negotiating these along with relationship IOs; the necessity of entrepreneurs’ involvement in envisioning IOs (product/service, relationship and business model) in selling but need for professional salespeople to replicate IOs (product/service and business model); and, the view of IO processes being similar anywhere but recognition of contextual differences when constructing market and relationship IOs. These tensions and dynamics in the narratives emerged from attempts to make sense of (interprete and re-interpret) the actions and interactions of and with entrepreneurs, sales representatives, consultants, prospects and customers. With these findings I illustrate the complexity of IO that is often stated but not further examined in detail (cf. Zahra 2008).

With regard to the international context of IO in sales, I move from sole focus on IE as entrepreneuring in a cross-national setting towards the empirical focus on opportunity producing intersubjective spaces (cf. Mainela et al. 2015) that are very much intertwined. The mechanisms of how and why IO actions and decisions take place are narrated as linked across sensemaking contexts of entrepreneurial selling with the different actors involved. These actions and decisions are also described as being dynamically interrelated, with (re)evaluations and (re)interpretations based on interactions within and across boundary-spanning spaces that involve the entrepreneurs, their personal networks, sales agents, other intermediaries, and (prospective) customers. With initial reluctance, I moved from an emphasis on if and how culture and different institutional contexts impact IO negotiation in entrepreneurial selling to the question of under what circumstances it matters (see Engelen & Brettel 2011, cf. Hansen et al. 2011). This sort of understanding could have a major influence on a practical level and could remove emphasis from sales representatives’ and managers’ ability to acknowledge cultural differences (Walle 1986) to their ability to adapt to IO processes in international sales situations in a very situation-dependent way (cf. Hallén & Wiedersheim-Paul 1979), as narrated
by the entrepreneurs in this study. Based on Maria’s narrative, a circumstance in which culture and the different institutional context seems to matter is when gaining initial access to right people in a prospective customer firm requires fluency in the local language and understanding of the business culture. The role of cultural differences appears to be accentuated also when prospect feedback is mediated by a local representative. Laura described how direct contact with US prospects would be needed to really be able to interpret their feedback.

5.2.2 The narrative constructionist approach beyond a methodological contribution

In this study, I have taken a “double interpretive” approach to discussing both the narratives and their analysis as social constructions (see Welch et al. 2013: 251). First, I see the narrative material as socially constructed. Second, the theorising efforts in this study are not merely a product of my subjective interpretation but were constructed in interaction with the interviewees and in dialogue with scholars. Hence, I view the theoretical contribution of my study in terms of (critical) interpretation and not the dichotomy of exploration or explanation. My purpose has been to gain in-depth understanding of IO, with its multiple and changing meanings, as narrated by entrepreneurs. These narratives serve to illustrate the theoretical point of the complex mechanisms involved in IO sensemaking and construction. Such an approach provided me with the opportunity to study and theorise about the IO phenomenon in relation to the particular social setting (cf. Dyer & Wilkins 1991, Mainela et al. 2011). Narrative interviewing and analysis enabled me to gain a deeper awareness of the contextual dimension of the narratives and allowed me to appreciate and articulate multiple perspectives (cf. e.g., Johnson & Rowlands 2012) on and meanings of IO contents, activities, events and intersubjective spaces. Not only the immediate contexts of the entrepreneurs’ interactions with customers and intermediaries but also the broader business environment was narrated as meaningful when making sense of IOs. The national market context, particularly the prevalent start-up boom, raised divergent opinions among the entrepreneurs, but also within the individual stories, the perception of the domestic market opportunities changed.

By renarrating detailed processual narrative accounts of each participating entrepreneur, I aimed to provide interesting accounts “against which others can compare their experiences” (Mainela 2012: 231, cf. Dyer & Wilkins 1991). Through reporting the interpretive, reflexive process of the empirical study, I also
demonstrated how my theorisation of dynamic and sometimes dichotomous meanings attributed to IO related activities and mechanisms of IO processes—particularly in pursuing growth opportunities in foreign markets and in developing new or replicable service and product opportunities, in building relationship opportunities, and in developing business model opportunities—was based on processual, contextual narrations. I aimed to write a compelling story with the point of theorising from individual, particular stories, which is why I have drawn from an extensive range of integrative theoretical insights (cf. Hytti 2003: 80, Czarniawska 1999: 14–23). I believe that I have managed to make a meaningful theoretical point based on reflection of these conceptual insights and the field report.

5.3 Practical implications

I hope to have also provided practitioners with an interesting read that they can perhaps partially relate to. While my aim was not to produce guidelines for international business and product development nor one for selling, I wish to highlight a few ‘take-aways’ from the narrated experiences to note why sales and IO processes should be viewed as intertwined and not separate processes in practice.

When looking at international growth opportunities and opportunities to develop service/product offerings with new or refined elements, the customer interface in the sales negotiation is a context that cannot escape entrepreneurs’ attention. Focus on internal product and service development can only bring a firm so far before validation must be gained from customers. IO development in entrepreneurial selling is highly personalised and interactive, particularly when international operation is not merely an option to extend business across national borders by replicating opportunities constructed domestically but a necessity to establish a profitable and growing business from early on. Despite a vision to internationalise early, the domestic market can be used as a field to ‘practice’ doing business and to develop initial service and product.

Success in constructing IOs with foreign customers from early on relates to complex mechanisms of IO market selection, specialisation for certain new, adaptable or replicable product and service solutions, the use of personal networks and local sales agents, and ways of interacting with international customers in constructing IOs. While the use of local sales agents can save resources, help to overcome contextual differences when approaching a new market, and bring contacts to new networks, the benefit of using external agents is not straightforward. The narratives in this study indicate that the entrepreneur cannot be replaced as a
salesperson if the IO is based on a highly specialised tailored service or when IO (service/product) development is at an early stage and validation and replicability are not yet achieved. Professional salespeople (whether internal or external) can be helpful in managing the IO process in terms of guiding the sales and they are certainly needed later to achieve scalability. Local representatives in foreign markets can play an essential role in identifying and evaluating market opportunities. However, the entrepreneurs’ direct interaction with prospects and customers is essential at the beginning because gaining an understanding of customer needs and (latent) problems is crucial for developing IO jointly with customers. Entrepreneurs can best evaluate what types of IOs can be constructed and how to demonstrate their offering and expertise. Only when an understanding of the prospect and its context is reached through joint IO envisioning, can the fit between customer expectations and the firm’s (future) offering be determined and value proposed. It is the interaction in building long-term customer relationships, allowing much customer feedback, that is of priority for developing product and service opportunities and a business model that helps the entrepreneurs to find methods to achieve growth targets. In brief, the stories of this research suggest that IO development in terms of service and product innovation or adaptation should be sales focused and that the entrepreneurs have a central role to play in this.

5.4 Reflection on my study

As a young researcher, engaging in this study without personal experience in entrepreneurship or selling puts me in a certain position: I do not necessarily fully feel or comprehend what it means to risk much and devote time and money to something and then to encounter difficulties and successes. Hence, the sensemaking of the entrepreneurs’ experiences in our interview interaction was aimed to provide me with more understanding of what they viewed as important to IO processes. However, this position has also freed me to question and to be reflexive towards the ‘taken for granted’ presumptions about international entrepreneuring and selling. Having said this, I could not adopt a fully unprejudiced approach towards my research material. I have tried to reflectively and critically reveal many of my personal preconceptions and deficiencies regarding the study, e.g., my persistent focus on international context as a determining factor in IE, my initial focus on juxtaposing entrepreneurial and professional selling, and my assumptions of what a salesperson is like. I also acknowledge the limitation of general conditions that I as a researcher was bound by: the limited timeframe over
which narratives could be collected, the hardship of locating interviewees, and the difficulty of managing a vast amount of data and trying to ‘do right’ by the entrepreneurs when renarrating their stories.

My recognition of the contextual dimension of the interview situations (Sparkes & Smith 2008) and also my interaction with the interviewees outside of the interviews was needed to appreciate the implication of the space and time of narration; these are highly relevant when viewing narratives as socially constructed within the interviews. While entrepreneurs draw from different discursive resources in their narrations, they often reproduce prevalent discourses and ideas, but the ways in which they narrate and the content of the narration are also partly particular to the interview situation. They may speak of the same topics differently at different points in time (from a current frame of reference) and in a different type of interview situation, in which the narration is (re)directed differently by the active interviewer and shared understanding of motives and interests in the interview interaction are interpreted differently.

While the contribution to our ‘understanding’ can appear to be a modest and atheoretical purpose of a study from “modernist” scholars’ perspective (Welch et al. 2013), I have tried to highlight the power of illustrative narratives in providing theoretical insight (in-depth understanding of meanings and mechanisms in IO processes) and to give voice to individuals who represent different viewpoints to IE (cf. Hytti 2003: 278, Welch et al. 2013), e.g., without bringing up only a high-growth start-up perspective or a ‘traditional Finnish’ perspective to entrepreneuring. There are certainly other interesting stories that my study does not give voice to, such as perspectives of purely product-based opportunities and of different business fields, but collecting more stories and finding more interviewees to engage in this research was not possible given the time constraint for this research and the difficulty in locating suitable interviewees.

5.5 Where to go next?

I see that the narrative approach to research provides the IE field and IO discussion with multiple opportunities for developing the theoretical discussion. Social constructionist views of IOs remain undetermined and scattered (Fletcher 2006, Mainela et al. 2014, Puhakka & Stewart 2015), leaving many questions unanswered. I personally view the performative aspects of narratives in IO construction processes (cf. e.g., Garud et al. 2010, 2014a, Garud & Giuliani 2013), i.e., the use of stories to gain funding, to gain the support of relevant actors, and to convince
customers about the potential value of joint IO construction, as an interesting avenue for research. Recent research emphasises how crucial it is for entrepreneurs to “be able to communicate the benefits, promises and values of the opportunity to the surroundings, in order for the opportunity to become mutually interesting and attractive” (Puhakka & Stewart 2015: 76).

IO narratives also deserve more attention from a critical discursive perspective to answer the following question: why do entrepreneurs talk about international opportunities in the ways that they do? I have briefly touched upon this in my analysis by discussing what type of prevalent societal discourses and events were being utilised and reproduced in the entrepreneurs’ narratives. This interest also relates to the performative aspect of interviewing, which is recognised to require further attention (Sparkes & Smith 2008). What is done in an interview interaction and how entrepreneurs ‘do things’ in dialogue with their narratives, are issues that deserve more research attention.

I would also wish to see more scholarly research performed in entrepreneurial selling within both the entrepreneurship and IE fields. Entrepreneurial selling in diverse contexts, including small firms and early internationalisation, deserves attention, and focus could, for example, be directed towards the intertwined and separate roles and actions in (international) entrepreneurial selling and marketing. A further interesting aspect for research that I could not cover in this study is the maturing EIF: how and why is international sales organised at different points in time over the process of maturing, and possibly growing, an international venture?

I leave this research journey with the hope that my audience is stimulated by this narrative, and that the ideas and interpretations I have presented spur further sensemaking efforts regarding IE processes.
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