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Images of entrepreneurship: divergent national constructions of what it is to 'do' entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

In this research note, we further Alistair R. Anderson's argument that an atomized view of entrepreneurship as an economic function provides limited understanding of what it is to actually *do* entrepreneurship. We take the stance that entrepreneurship, as a process, is born of social context. What it is to be and what it is to do entrepreneurship is informed directly by the images of entrepreneurship accepted in society. To better understand the implications of this, we access the ways in which entrepreneurship is imagined in three ostensibly similar country settings: UK, Italy and Finland. We analyse the social discourses surrounding the concept from a sample of enterprise students across the three areas. Importantly, these participants are not entrepreneurs in their own right, but are considered interested stakeholders, in that the meaning they ascribe to entrepreneurship will partly inform their future approaches to it. We contrast data from 15 semi-structured interviews with policy commentary and measurable outcomes and find nuanced differences in how entrepreneurship is perceived and enacted. The implications of our findings encourage a more holistic approach to the study of entrepreneurship, avoiding the self-affirming dogma of the purely economic or purely constructionist.

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Context; entrepreneurship; social discourse; international comparison; process

Introduction

It is long argued that enterprise is the dominant factor in driving economic growth. In fact, the economic benefits of enterprise have been somewhat hegemonic in directing our scholarly discussion, seeing entrepreneurship as a function of success at global, national and regional levels (Van Praag and Versloot 2007; Minniti and Lévesque 2008). Such a heavy responsibility on the function of entrepreneurship has in turn led to an economic validation of enterprise culture, where entrepreneurs are considered cultural heroes; prompting the celebration of individual success, a desire to appear supportive, and the design of self-affirming educational and policy programmes to bolster confidence and ensure our brave entrepreneurial souls can forge ahead on our behalf (Foss et al. 2008; Carr and Beaver 2002; Nicholson and Anderson 2005). However, narrowly viewing entrepreneurship in the realm of individualized charge and acute agency ignores the fact that entrepreneurial actions only ever occur within a broader social context and discursive framing (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson 2007).

In this research note, we follow Anderson (2015) in arguing that an atomized view of entrepreneurship, as an individualistic endeavour for the benefit of economic growth, is reductionist and in turn offers poor, even erroneous explanations of the process. Rather, a fuller understanding of what

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entrepreneurship *is* and what it is to *be* entrepreneurial is needed, if we are to avoid problematic assumptions and misdirected encouragement (Gartner 2001; Lindgren and Packendorff 2009). Our argument pulls together a number of threads in Alistair R. Anderson's work. Principally, we consider entrepreneurship as emerging from social and cultural conditions (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2009), not on a pedestal of celebrated economic reification, but rooted in the realities of societal perception and social (un)acceptance (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012). In doing so, we highlight the importance of the moral fit of entrepreneurial actions within context (Anderson and Smith 2007). We see the social institutions of context as informing this morality, with the character of entrepreneurship contingent on the institutional images dominant in society (Anderson and Starnawska 2008).

To operationalize this, we look to the national settings of Italy, Finland and the UK, following Anderson's empirical works which look to country specific situations (Harbi and Anderson 2010; Kalden, Cunningham, and Anderson 2017). While we acknowledge the concept of a national setting is itself problematic, we see this as a way to illustrate divergent constructions of entrepreneurship among ostensibly similar economic settings. Theoretically, we borrow from Anderson's (2005) metaphor of theatricality, viewing entrepreneurship as a performance of social interactions, and look to the prevalent 'stories' of certain contexts and how these shape the behaviours and practices of our entrepreneurial actors. Our qualitative data come from an exploratory sample of those interested in enterprise, but not yet entrepreneurial themselves – students of enterprise in three country settings, societal stakeholders, if you will (Kalden, Cunningham, and Anderson 2017). Essentially, we ask: *How is entrepreneurship accepted as a social action*?; and, *What does it mean to 'do' entrepreneurship in various social contexts?*

Importantly, though our interpretations of these data build our social constructions, we do not seek to prioritize this as the only factor informing enterprise development – for danger of entering the same folly of economic imperialism (Granovetter 1992). Instead, we look to connect perspectives, to build an inter-subjectivity which takes into account the economic, the objectively measurable, and the socially constructed (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012). We therefore contribute to the recent work of Gaddefors and Anderson (2017) by looking to the interaction of the entrepreneur with their broader context and further this by exploring the juxtaposition of various contextual constructions and how they collectively inform entrepreneurial practice. Our arguments highlight that the interaction individuals have with the dominant images of entrepreneurship form attitudes and approaches on what it is to be an entrepreneur. We have no intention of this analysis as a comprehensive 'final word' on entrepreneurship in the respective settings, but see this research note as a provocation to highlight the potential for more holistic and interconnected views on the entrepreneurial process.

Entrepreneurship and social acceptance

As entrepreneurship scholars, we have become accustomed to eulogizing enterprise for its role in economic change and growth (Henry, Hill, and Leitch 2003), presenting an often unquestioned panacea (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2009). The danger is that we begin to see entrepreneurship as a universally applied notion. What is often missed is that entrepreneurship is itself shaped by, and in turn, shapes our society (Steyaert and Katz 2004). Seen as a social process, entrepreneurs must draw on societal cues to form their practice, meaning existing structures and understandings become an important point of reference (Jack and Anderson 2002). While terms such as innovation and disruption *'shout for attention'* (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012, 960), entrepreneurial actions must be sensitive to how that change is received by the existing structures which host them. Societal values are thus privileged in such a view, as a precedent of enterprise development (Anderson 2015).

Anderson and Smith (2007) have framed this connection to societal values as a 'moral space' which has the power to either legitimize or vilify entrepreneurial activity. The hyper-rationality of a purely economic perspective (Alvey 2000; Kelemen and Peltonen 2001; Banks 2006) severs this link between

entrepreneurial activity and the context in which it is set (Bucar, Glas, and Hisrich 2003). However, adopting a wider-angle lens allows us to see that which shapes more broadly (Ebner 2005; Jennings, Perren, and Carter 2005). Social perceptions, priorities, and biases produce a localized ontology on what is considered *good* (Downing 2005) and entrepreneurs, or better said, prospective entrepreneurs, read from this to guide their intentions and practice (Swail, Down, and Kautonen 2013). Though this is broadly understood, and somewhat intuitive, we do still prioritize the economic agency of entrepreneurs in our scholarly approaches, with social context often a passive background element (Zahra 2007). By doing this, we produce an incomplete picture and skewed understanding, as approaches to entrepreneurship differ greatly depending on the values and meanings ascribed from the local setting, and the process of emergence (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012).

Cast internationally, local settings and national culture influence entrepreneurship in a number of ways. Dodd, Jack, and Anderson (2013) found at the very fundamental level, national patterns around the approval and disapproval of entrepreneurship as a human activity, with clear implications for its attractiveness as a career option. Add to this the role of religion (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Scott 2000), political ideologies and their resulting structures (Farias et al. 2019), and idiosyncratic historical development (Wadhwani et al. 2020), and it is clear to see that even in a globalized world, national culture continues to shape how entrepreneurship is seen and done (Kalisz et al. 2021).

The dominant image of a heroic entrepreneur as the main protagonist in economic success is something of fantasy state, useful in encouraging enterprise in more industrialized nations (Malach-Pines et al. 2005; Johansson 2009). However, this image of a saviour should not be considered universal (Sørenson 2008; Banks 2006). Ogbor (2012) points out that when we assume this stance, we operate under a bias of enterprise ideology, which may have become the story of a burgeoning industrial America, but will take on a different character in other contexts (Anderson and Smith 2007). A number of studies have found this to be true, and present an often striking variation, even across those economies with comparable enterprise ambitions (Pruett et al. 2009; Giacomin et al. 2011; Liñán and Chen 2009). National and regional variations on ascribed social status (Kalden, Cunningham, and Anderson 2017), attitudes to risk aversion (De Phillis and Reardon 2007) and desirability of success (Franco, Haase, and Lautenschläger 2010) all influence how entrepreneurship is framed and storied.

Entrepreneurship as enacted in social discourse

In building a fuller understanding of what it means to an entrepreneur, we therefore have to consider the social context in which entrepreneurship occurs. In an early work, Anderson (2000) explains that entrepreneurship, as process, involves the coming together of the entrepreneurial self, with the prevailing circumstances of context. Entrepreneurship is therefore understood better in the social milieu, where identity and actions bridge individual agency and what is accepted within situational social structures (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson 2007; Watson 2009). It is through a comprehension of the various contexts surrounding them that an individual views entrepreneurship as an activity, and makes judgements as to what this consists of (Welter, Baker, and Wirsching 2019). Gaddefors and Anderson (2017) encourage us to embrace the dynamism this interaction creates. As a result, in this work we do not look to entrepreneurship as something directly contingent on context (Korsgaard 2011), but nor do we look at the entrepreneur as the primary source for us to understand what it is to be entrepreneurial (Scott and Rosa 2002). Instead, we look to how the various meanings and expectations are brought together and where multifaceted context(s) produce an image of entrepreneurship in the individual. It is this image, forged in social discourse, which can be adopted as a unit of analysis.

Discourse is how social actors articulate their meaning from the milieu (Hytti 2005). Language and ways of speaking guide our sense of social reality and allow us to adapt our understanding and practices accordingly (Chell 2000). This discourse emanates from various sources in society, notably

media and educational institutions (Anderson and Warren, 2011), which individuals then read from to provide meaning to what they do (Lavoie 2015; Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2009). Collective interpretations of these meanings allow us to build localized constructions of entrepreneurship (Fletcher 2006). We look directly to the relationships between language, context and the processes of enactment to understand the values associated with entrepreneurship and how people experience these (Berger and Luckman 1966; Aldrich and Martinez 2003). As Anderson and Smith (2007) explain, the representations formed in social discourse create preconceived images on what it is to be an entrepreneur, and whether this is good or bad in relation to the moral demands of society (Atherton 2004).

The research context and European comparisons

To explore our argument that images of entrepreneurship emerge from the social conditions of context, it is important to first consider structural characteristics from our geographical settings, following Kalden, Cunningham, and Anderson (2017). We echo Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack (2009) by focusing on ostensibly comparable European economies: Italy, Finland and the UK. By doing so, we highlight the role of socio-cultural context over political and economic divergence. In introducing our national locations, we summarize a number of policy initiatives, designed to influence a functionalist form of entrepreneurship (Perren and Jennings 2005). We supplement this with some selected data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, Table 1), which has become a dominant source for international comparisons in entrepreneurship studies (Álvarez, Urbano, and Amorós, 2014; Levie and Autio 2008). The following country briefs should be seen as providing a contextual backdrop, a useful point of reference, against which our analysis of social discourse can be cast.

United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, a succession of governmental policy initiatives have intended to support the economic contribution of small business and entrepreneurship (Henry 2013). Economic development through localized approaches has been argued to have led to the continued development of regional enterprise policies (Danson and Lloyd 2012; Barca, McCann, and Rodríguez-Pose 2012). Despite this continued governmental support, productivity in the UK has been reported to show little progress in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 (Harris and Moffat 2017). The involvement of universities as a catalyst for economic development has emerged in response, with universities increasingly engaging in entrepreneurial support and collaborative activity with early-stage business (Fuller and Pickernell 2018). Enterprise education has been accepted, embedded and

Table 1. Latest GEM data on selected variables: UK, Italy and Finland.

Attitudes to entrepreneurship				Expert views on the ecosystem[c]			
	UK	Italy	Finland[a]		UK	Italy	Finland[a]
Entrepreneurship as a Career Aspiration (% agree)	69.6	19.0[b]	40.30	Government support for enterprise	2.8	2.7	3.3
Good opportunities around to start a business (% agree)	27.3	62.2	49.1	Supportive tax & Bureaucratic system	3.1	2.0	3.2
High status for successful entrepreneurs (% agree)	77.1	13.1[b]	83.0	Post school enterprise education	2.8	2.7	3.0
Intentions to start within 3 years (% of pop.)	8.2	4.5	10.4	Supportive cultural and social norms	3.3	2.5	2.73
Total Entrepreneurial Activity (% of pop.)	7.8	1.9	6.7				

[a]Most recent Finland GEM data from 2016
[b]Data only available from 2019
[c]Based on 5 point Likert scale, 5 = 'completely true'

expanded in the national curriculum, with strong focus and promotion of start up as a career option (Matlay and Westhead 2005), a notion reflected in the GEM data (Table 1). Attention has been afforded to the advancement of entrepreneurship centres in higher education in raising the awareness of entrepreneurship and the opportunities that entrepreneurship affords (Jones, Ratten, and Hayduk 2020). However, the impact of this is challenged when we consider only 27.3% view there to be good opportunities to start a business, and so a gap appears between the expansive policy & education drive and perceptions of entrepreneurship 'on the ground'.

Italy

Jafari-
Sadeghi, Kimiagari, and Biancone (2019) suggest that despite a history of entrepreneurship in Italy, there is a lack of governmental support and resource for entrepreneurs. While this is confirmed in recent GEM data, the difference between Italy and other nations appears slight (Table 1). University entrepreneurship education has also been suggested to lag behind European neighbours, as it is suggested to be driven by certain individuals with a passion to promote this approach in their teaching, rather than through a considered and embedded strategy (Iacobucci and Micozzi 2012). In response, policy initiatives such as the *Principi Attivi* programme, to promote employability of young entrepreneurs (De Lucia et al. 2016), and the recently created *Contamination Labs* initiative (Secundo et al. 2020) intend to promote interdisciplinary entrepreneurialism in university students and nurture entrepreneurship. While 62% see good opportunities to start a business, these initiatives may still have some way to go, as the status afforded to entrepreneurs and career aspirations are found to be very low in relative terms (Table 1). With policy initiatives relatively recent and fragmented, this suggests that the image of entrepreneurship as a 'good thing to do' may not yet have aligned in broader society.

Finland

Finland has a long history of governmental policy and investment in supporting entrepreneurship, although it is suggested that the past decade has seen a stronger focus to foster and improve start-up activities (Sipola 2022). Following a severe recession in the 1990s and the decline of traditional industries, there was an effort made by government and educators to focus on entrepreneurialism as a way to address this decline (Nurmi and Paasio 2007). Since the 2000s, governmental approach to entrepreneurship policy has ensured a focus on start-ups and SMEs whilst also focussing on supporting growth in existing businesses (Heinonen and Hytti 2016). More recently, Finland is said to have experienced something of an entrepreneurial movement through its thriving student enterprise societies, dubbed the 'Helsinki Spring', which has reportedly brought a renewed vigour for business start-up (Lehdonvirta 2013). However, despite such an enthusiastic support ecosystem, recent GEM data suggest seeing entrepreneurship as a career option is low, with only 40.3% of the population surveyed – compared to 69.6% in the UK. Again, this implies a disconnect between a seemingly ample structured support, and those making choices on whether entrepreneurship is the right thing to do with their lives.

Methodology

There are some interesting themes which can be built from such policy commentary and output measurement; for instance, suggestions of a shift towards formal enterprise education and the central role given to entrepreneurship in economic rebuild. However, these macro views seem more characterized by contradictions and unexplained gaps, than they are by clarity. We contend that the crucial missing piece is an understanding of the entrepreneurial process (Hjorth, Holt, and Steyaert 2015). To address this, we explore a broader aesthetic of entrepreneurship brought into

being through social discourse, not from the perspectives of those who seek to reinforce the enterprise agenda, but from those who are exposed to it and make judgements based on what they read from the images around them. A useful metaphor in articulating our view is that of theatricality (Anderson 2005). When we see entrepreneurship as a social performance the spotlight goes on interaction, we ask how certain stories and images come to dominate the scene, and what these contextual cues mean for our protagonists' practical performance (Jack and Anderson 2001).

We do not seek to pass judgment on the validity of the images of entrepreneurship we present, but instead look to what they mean for the character and intention of entrepreneurial processes. We appreciate that representation in discourse may be both value-laden and contradictory (Korsgaard and Anderson 2011), and consider how individuals navigating these images position themselves in relation to 'the entrepreneur'. Our qualitative data are drawn from a purposeful sample, where semi-structured interviews access our participants' understanding of entrepreneurship and what it is to be entrepreneurial. The respondents were approached due to their career stage, and potential interest in entrepreneurship, allowing us to select individuals who would be particularly informative on how entrepreneurship is perceived in the respective locations (Anderson and Jack, 2002). Importantly, these are not self-declared entrepreneurs, as is common in our research field, but are seen as interested stakeholders in entrepreneurship. Each is a university student in their respective country taking an enterprise-related course. We approached 'enterprise societies', or equivalent, through social media channels or existing relationships, with thanks to our student research assistant (in acknowledgements), adhering to the ethical procedures of Robert Gordon University. A total of 15 participants individually contribute to our analysis, 5 from each national setting. While this sample is small in size, we find the participants to be thoughtful and elegant in their input, allowing us to build vibrant constructions of how entrepreneurship is perceived. As a result, we do not claim generalizability in our findings, but rather look to how the images surrounding entrepreneurship impact on individual judgment of what it is to be an entrepreneur.

Following Kalden, Cunningham, and Anderson (2017) our participants may or may not consider entrepreneurship as a future career option, and so their views offer some insight into the attractiveness of entrepreneurship without the bias of entrepreneurial self-celebration. As such, we echo Anderson and Warren (2011) by avoiding a self-fulfiling 'presentation of self', akin to Goffman (1959), and consider more the presentation of entrepreneurship by society. Our analysis took the form of a constant-comparative (Anderson 2015), with themes being built in a grounded manner through numerous discussions between the co-authors, and iterative conceptualizations. Findings are presented in visual and narrative format, so as to illuminate the connections made in the data and the interplay of the various contextual elements. Empirical findings are presented against the contextual background and structural characteristics we have discussed from each country, providing either explanatory or contrasting views on experiences of entrepreneurship within these social structures. Each thematic category takes the three national contexts in turn: UK, Italy, and Finland. This analysis does not intend any privilege or hierarchy to the various claims made, whether from the primary qualitative data or the measured and structural characteristics, but instead looks to bring the assorted understandings of entrepreneurship in each context together.

Findings

There are four main thematic categories we can construct in how entrepreneurship is considered in our data, these are: *ecosystem support; impact of formal education and learning; character of the entrepreneur*, and *desirability and curiosity*. Our constructions are summarized in Table 2, and we now take each one in turn to discuss the images apparent and how they are formed.

Table 2. Data structure.

	UK	Italy	Finland
Ecosystem Support	**Inaccessible and elitist** • [the support] is really something that you have to find yourself . . . it's not really promoted. (UK-D) • I think it can be quite hard for some people. It depends on their background if the bank will allow them to get their funds. (UK-B)	**Deprived** • I don't want to say [government should] support forever, but at least to start-ups and to young, to help them build. (IT-D) • I only know that you need to register your company . . . but I am not sure about how to do it and what else after that. (IT-E)	**Abundant and available** • [Creating my company] took me maybe 30 minutes, but kind of easy and free . . . if you want to get more information, you will get it pretty easily. (FNL-D) • a couple of forms that you need to fill and then you are an entrepreneur in Finland (FNL -A)
Impact of formal education and learning	**Workplace Training** • There isn't much on entrepreneurship [education] actually. (UK-E) • University doesn't motivate you much, they could do more but the skills from university are definitely something important that prepares you. (UK-A)	**Academic Ivory Tower** • University has helped me understand my limits and resources and knowledge, so while before it was a dream, I am now starting to do things concretely. (IT-B) • Education gives a strong basic knowledge, but you don't know how things in the real world are. (IT-C)	**Entrepreneurial Space** • The university world, with so many different opportunities and options available, has taught me a lot already . . . everything that's happening at the campus . . . has been an influence here. (FNL- C) • It is really strongly advocated to become an entrepreneur. (FNL-B)
Character of the Entrepreneur	**Valued Function of the Economy** • Entrepreneurs are doing a lot for society, even if they're probably taken for granted, they're creating jobs, they're creating value for your society. (UK-E) • It's definitely something that is encouraged, to support one another. (UK-A)	**Aspiration and Envy** • I always wanted to be someone who runs his own business, I do not like to obey anyone. I like to be independent and do my own things. (IT-A) • Let's say the truth, in Italy we think that an entrepreneur is a millionaire. (IT-C)	**Superior Beings** • In Finland, I think they have a pretty good reputation. (FNL-A) • This is also something that not everybody is good at, so to be an entrepreneur and have a good business you also need to have a strong character. (FNL-D)
Desirability and Curiosity	**Motivational inertia** • The reason why I want to be an entrepreneur may be a victim of my arrogance, I don't really like working for any other people (UK-C) • The fact they would provide you grants definitely influences me (UK-A)	**Difficult and fruitless** • Let's say that in Italy, entrepreneurship is often limited by bureaucracy. (IT-B) • Here, unfortunately, everyone aims for a full-time contract and the choice of opening your own businesses is very risky and may be not even worth it. (IT-A)	**Reserved for 'the gifted'** • [Becoming an entrepreneur] wouldn't be the obvious choice to go straight from university, being motivated and ambitious is important. (FNL-C) • You have to have the risk taker nature. (FNL-E)

Ecosystem support

In considering ecosystem support, UK participants focus on the process of support and exhibited leanings towards access issues, suggesting that this support is accessible only to those who know where to find it, a privileged position to be in. A strong need to be led is espoused, where explicit support only becomes apparent if '*you know what you need to do*' and '*have a clear idea*' (UK-C). While there are *'certain skill sessions for entrepreneurship'* (UK-D), the dominant image is that access *'can be quite hard for some people'* (UK-B).

These perceptions are in contrast to Italian participants who argue that they understood and had access to the support available in the surrounding ecosystem, but saw this to be limited. One expressed a need for *'having a system that supports entrepreneurs'* and access to *'a specialist that can tell them what to do'* (IT-A). This discontentment and want for support is entangled with a view that the educational system did not prepare for entrepreneurship. Interestingly, there was a perception that university was seen as a *'continuum of high school'* where they *'never had the possibility to put into practice [their] abilities'* (IT-D), even when there has been an enterprise focus:

> *'People think that when students of economics graduate, they should be the ones who know how to make business, how to do business, and from my experience and from people I know, I don't think that is the case.'* (IT-E)

Perhaps the recent introduction of regional *Contamination Labs* in Italy can be seen as a reaction to this expressed need (Secundo et al. 2020), as supplementary to an education system which is not seen to develop practical skills, suggesting that policy interventions are a reaction to negative images portrayed of other areas.

Finnish participants recognize an abundance of support and foundational infrastructure for entrepreneurial endeavour with good knowledge:

> *'In Finland, the opportunities to get entrepreneurship financing is very good. I would say that there is definitely support to start the business.' (FNL-C)*

There was also a recognition that the system provided was accessible, with a straightforward and quick business registration process which is *'easy and free'* (FNL-D), where *'you have the support, you feel safer'* (FNL-C). This makes it somewhat surprising to see relatively modest GEM measurements in relation to entrepreneurial activity, suggesting something else is going on in Finland which detracts from entrepreneurship as a life choice.

Impact of formal education and learning

Strongly related to views on ecosystem support, UK participants explain that despite the substantive entrepreneurial education provided (Matlay 2005), students were using entrepreneurship education as training for the workplace. It seems that entrepreneurial skills are understood to be provided for, but this does not create a drive to be an 'entrepreneur', particularly not when entrepreneurial skills are so ubiquitously sought after. This leads to a criticism that universities, while focused on entrepreneurial skills, do not foster a culture of entrepreneurship:

> *'I don't think to set up a full-blown business the university offers enough I would say … our courses aren't really related towards that … we learn about stuff that will help us when we go into the world of work as in working for someone else, I would say; it's all about graduating and going to the workplace.' (UK- A)*

Our Italian participants also present a picture of a university system which does not encourage the act of entrepreneurship, but instead prioritizes academic theory. This supports the image of a deprived entrepreneurial system. Although '*education gives a strong basic knowledge*', they see

themselves ill-prepared for entrepreneurship and '*don't know how things in the real world are*' (IT-C). There is an overarching theme that Italian universities are too theoretical in approach and lack a practical angle:

> *'The skills gained help you to be a bit more motivated as you are more capable of doing and understanding things [but] there is no point to study thousands of pages of theory and then at a practical level, you don't know how to do anything.' (IT – A)*

In contrast, Finnish participants suggest their university provision *'went deep into the actual practical things'*. (FNL-A). There was also a recognition of the involvement of businesses and entrepreneurs supporting the learning environment, providing ideas and opportunities:

> *'[Our university] works together with small businesses, medium-sized and big companies and they have shared spaces where they work with different companies … Almost every single course has included business visitors and people that have graduated from university that have started their own businesses have come and told us how they've done things.'* (FNL-B)

Thus higher education in Finland is considered as an engaging and inspirational entrepreneurial space – an engaging intersection between enterprise and structured learning, seemingly playing its part in the 'Helsinki Spring' (Lehdonvirta 2013). However, the impact of this on entrepreneurship as a thing to do is challenged by the GEM measurements on career aspirations and supportive cultural norms. There is further explanation of this when we consider the images around the character and desirability of entrepreneurship.

Character of the entrepreneur

While entrepreneurship is broadly approved of across our sample, there are nuanced differences in ideas of what it is to be an entrepreneur. For instance, in the UK a very functionalist view is taken, where it is *'rewarding to think you [can] create a business on your own'* (UK-B). This is seen both economically, through job creation, and also socially, with reference to entrepreneurs helping others and creating 'value'. In contrast, our Italian participants neglect functionality and consider entrepreneurship as more individualistic. Painted as aspirational, the entrepreneur is considered rich, powerful and dominant. Interestingly, this is accompanied by an envy of those who achieve such giddy heights, akin to Kirkwood's (2007) 'tall poppy' syndrome. This has potential to create a social barrier to pursuing entrepreneurship in Italy, for fear of being considered self-centred, or aspirational to the point that it is a betrayal of culturally embedded roots. One participant explains that, while she understands this image not to be true, it is still prevalent:

> *'People nowadays associate the word 'entrepreneur' to a colossus, forgetting that an entrepreneur is also an owner of a restaurant. Usually people with money are the ones making decisions for the overall society, this means that often it is attributed a darker figure to them, compared to what it really is.'* (IT-B)

With implications for how society treats them:

> *'[Entrepreneurs] are not supported by the society and by the government … the society in which we live is very jealous … there is no reciprocal help and support.'* (IT - E)

Meanwhile, in Finland, the entrepreneur is also held in high esteem, but does not invoke the same emotional reaction. As with the UK, the Finnish see entrepreneurs as adding value to society, with *'many things that could not be done without entrepreneurs*' (FNL-B). But in addition, they move beyond a purely functional approach to consider the inherent skills and talent of the individual, akin to a cultural icon (Malach-Pines et al. 2005):

> *'I think they're very good, they're skilled, they're hard working, they're very dedicated.'* (FNL-C)

While this is a very individualized view, it is also noted that the *'risk to take when you start a new company is so much smaller'* with the presence of abundant support (FNL-A), but there is certainly an 'othering' of entrepreneurs here, a singling out of the entrepreneur as a particular being.

Desirability and curiosity

There are implications from the Finnish view of entrepreneurial heroism, this projects entrepreneurship as a reserved activity for those with the specific skills or talents to achieve it. While it is acknowledged that education and support services can *'make me feel I want to be an entrepreneur someday'* (FNL – A), one must have the *'nature'* (FNL-E) to pursue it. This limits the desirability of entrepreneurship as a career option, perhaps explaining our GEM findings. Entrepreneurs, to our Finnish participants, are a select bunch, with inherent ambitions and disposition to risk which will drive them forward – not dissimilar to elite athletes (Boyd, Harrison, and McInerny 2021). We can suggest that, despite the abundant support and ease of path, our Finish participants feel that entrepreneurship is destined for some, but not for others. Our Italians also see the pursuit of entrepreneurship as a difficult endeavour, related to the distant aspiration of what it is to be entrepreneurial, removed from the realities of our participants' every-day lives. Despondent views on the potential for success mean mere mortals must find more mundane forms of employment, as outcome expectations weigh heavy (Liguori et al. 2020). The process for our Italian participants is difficult, a successful outcome unrealistic in its expectations and often treated with suspicion. Entrepreneurs in such a context would have to tolerate both the administrative barriers and the social consequences of becoming.

In contrast, our UK participants look more to the motivations to pursue entrepreneurship. Perhaps this is an acknowledgement of the various policy initiatives to motivate enterprise creation (Matlay and Westhead 2005), and perceptions have been shaped by these initiatives to expect, even rely on motivation (Steyaert and Katz 2004). It is certainly striking that, in comparison to the Italians and Finnish, our UK participants focus on the need for something *'pushing us to go out, start our own company, become entrepreneurs'* (UK-A). While personal drive is noted, there is an onus on institutional structures to make entrepreneurship a desirable choice. For instance:

> *'If the government gives you subsidies to help you start I think that would encourage people a lot more to get involved in that kind of thing.'* (UK-E)

Discussion and implications

Our findings suggest that commentary on localized policy and measured outcomes of entrepreneurship are limited, even contradictory, in the story they present. Instead, we gain fruitful understanding by adopting a more holistic approach, discovering the multiple ways in which the surrounding structures of entrepreneurship are received and ascribed meaning. This supports Anderson and Jack's (2002) view of entrepreneurship as a concept born of the interaction between individual and context, where understandings are shaped by, and can in turn shape society (Steyaert and Katz, 2004). We do offer some caution though. Our interpretations benefit from the juxtaposition of institutional initiatives and broad-stroke outcome measures with the more micro processes of evaluation and judgment on the part of individuals. Greater analytical power lies in the connections made between the various approaches (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012). To prioritize social construction alone would be to suffer the same analytical tautology we lament in functionalist standpoints. In viewing entrepreneurship as a social performance, we must accept some elements of fact and fiction, of the objective structural scene and the (mis)interpretations made of it (Anderson 2005). A more multi-faceted analytical stance has the potential to deepen our understanding further and illuminate the performative processes of interaction.

Our study highlights the importance of social discourse and how this should be considered in understanding what it is to be an entrepreneur, accentuating the ways in which entrepreneurship is socially accepted, its moral fit with society (Anderson and Smith 2007). Although we have taken a national-level view, we accept this is in itself an artificial construct. However, we recognize that this approach offers a starting point to explore the nuances around entrepreneurship imagery. That said, we must understand that the picture can be more complex. There is a need to explore the potential for within country differences; for instance, the view from Milan may be very different from the view in Palermo; urban and rural, north and south, and any provincial industrial focus, should all be considered in exploring contextual divergence – multiple contexts fostering a plurality of imagery (Welter, Baker, and Wirsching 2019).

There are implications for the localization of enterprise policy (Jafari-Sadeghi, Kimiagari, and Biancone 2019), but we recommend that policy makers and educators further recognize the potential to provoke mixed reactions when they encourage *entrepreneuring* (Arshed, Mason, and Carter 2016), embedded in the culture and context of the surrounding area. We suggest policy interventions and education initiatives will be received in different ways, and that which is read from policy can take a life of its own, sometimes with unintended consequences. For example, in the UK where strong policy support seems to have instilled a reliance on this support for entrepreneurial motivation. As such, policy makers need to carefully consider messaging and 'fit' with the expectations of the social context in order to build a tangible entrepreneurial energy around their initiatives. While it is not within the scope of this analysis, it is interesting to note that the more positively perceived initiatives in this study are those encountered by our Finnish participants, where there is a focus on local implementation of policy (Heinonen and Hytti 2016).

Theoretically, our constructions and their relationship with broader contextual factors allow us to comprehend the processes of enactment in the entrepreneurial event (Aldrich and Martinez 2003). This allows us to speculate on what it means to *do* entrepreneurship in the context of our research settings. While we purposefully avoid 'the entrepreneur view' in this research note, it is interesting to consider what our findings may mean for those who do become our eponymous 'heroes'. For instance, can we say that Italian entrepreneurs will be more resilient, as they have overcome a deprived support setting and developed a thick-skin to withstand societal envy? Does a reliance on institutional motivation mean that our UK entrepreneurs will be more guided by the drivers of external structures? Are the Finnish shy to volunteer themselves as entrepreneurial, for fear they do not have the innate talent and born pedigree to engage in what they see as a righteous pursuit?

Conclusion

In asking how entrepreneurship is accepted as a social action, we take our lead from Anderson (2015) by prioritizing the impact of social perception (Anderson, Warren, and Bensemann 2019) and the cultural conditions of context (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2009). Ultimately, the interaction an individual has with the dominant images around them will inform how they go about entrepreneurial activity, if they do at all (Swail, Down, and Kautonen 2013).

As Alistair R. Anderson continually emphasized (Nicholson and Anderson 2005; Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2009; Gaddefors and Anderson 2017; Anderson, Warren, and Bensemann 2019), entrepreneurship is enacted in places, and the accepted imagery of those places needs to be taken seriously if we seek to understand what it is to be an entrepreneur. These images are present in context but are given meaning by individuals. As we move forward, we must move past artificially separating the two. Studies looking to understand what it is to *do* entrepreneurship in a particular place should avoid an individual and/or context approach, and instead consider a more holistic view on how the various understandings come together.

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