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The social status of entrepreneurs: Contrasting German perspectives

Abstract

The German economy is praised for its stability, creating a seemingly strong economic environment in which entrepreneurship should thrive. Our research problem is that, in spite of the strong economy, new venture creation rates are substantially lower than in other comparable economies. We employ a social constructivist approach and find that the way entrepreneurs are valued offers an explanation for this apparent inconsistency. We found strong evidence that, far from the heroic figure often attributed to entrepreneurs, German entrepreneurial identity is characterised as reckless and not sufficiently serious. Our findings have implications for understanding entrepreneurship as a career choice in Germany. More broadly, they show nuanced national differences in meaning and applications of enterprise cultures.

Keywords: entrepreneurs; social construction; status; Germany, identity

Introduction

Germany is considered a successful and buoyant economy, resilient to the woes of the crises of 2008 onwards (Audretsch and Lehmann, 2015; Dustmann *et al*, 2014). However the rate of new business start-up and entrepreneurial intention, using Global

Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) measures of nascent entrepreneurs committing resources to starting a business or businesses that have been paying salaries for less than 42 months, is curiously low relative to other economies (GEM, 2017). Such a situation seems counterintuitive to the long-standing view connecting opportunity-based business creation to economic growth and development (Acs, 2006; Baumol, 1968). Given the acknowledged importance of entrepreneurship for developed economies, especially the rate of new business founding (Van Stel *et al*, 2005), this inconsistency is worth investigating as it perhaps points to some more unusual entrepreneurial phenomena than that found in the mainstream literature (Bureau *et al*, 2011).

Theories of new firm formation are typically economic arguments (Acs and Szerb, 2007; Wennekers and Thurik, 1999) and they predict that such a strong economy as Germany would foster a high rate of new firm formation. Yet in practice the number of new German firms accounted for in the GEM (2017) data has been consistently low, implying that individuals are not motivated to commit their resources to new business creation in spite of the favourable economic context. It therefore follows that economic conditions alone do little to explain this German situation, as such, this study examines alternative explanations for what may be inhibiting early entrepreneurial activity.

While some research has uncovered structural idiosyncrasies in the German labour market and entrepreneurial support systems (Brixey & Grotz, 2007). We take inspiration

from Bögenhold (2014), following Schumpeter's (1954, p 21) view of the benefits in combining social science disciplines; suggesting that while "*economic analysis deals with the questions how [sic] people behave at any time and what the economic effects are they produce by so behaving; economic sociology deals with the question how they came to behave as they do*". In following this argument, we look to the social drivers of entrepreneurship and investigate how the entrepreneur views herself and how she is regarded in German society. By addressing the sociocultural identity of entrepreneurship as a profession, we are able to uncover some clues which may help explain the comparatively low rates of early entrepreneurial activity in Germany. Our research question therefore fits nicely into Schumpeter's division of academic labour as we seek a complementary view on a traditionally economic problem. We attempt to address the economic puzzle presented by asking the question from a sociological perspective: what role does social status play in the low new business formation rates of the ostensibly successful German economy?

In this article, we compare the social constructions of entrepreneurship as ascribed by societal stakeholders with how individual German entrepreneurs establish their own identity. From this comparison, we are able to offer richer and fuller explanations of how the entrepreneur is socially constructed than from one perspective alone (Anderson and Starnawska, 2008; Downing, 2005). With this picture of entrepreneurship, we can examine whether an entrepreneur in Germany is considered a good thing *to be* – thus

indicating the social status taken from the role. The idea of social status as informing decisions comes from the notion of informal institutions (North, 1994). Moreover, the norms and values of a country's society help determine whether entrepreneurship is believed to be a good thing *to do* (Fritsch and Wyrwich, 2014), informing the idea of an enterprise culture (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2001). In turn, this article contributes to our understanding of entrepreneurial activity by offering an alternative explanation of entrepreneurship rates in Germany, reaching beyond accounts of opportunity availability and considering the social drivers influencing the decision to create a new business enterprise.

We continue by theorising the social construction of entrepreneurship, followed by an account of entrepreneurial activity in Germany. We then introduce our method, exploring the social construction of entrepreneurs in Germany, and present our findings. Our conclusions attempt to position the social constructions of entrepreneurship as an explanatory mechanism for the relatively low rate of new business formation in the German economy, and we consider further research to illuminate this curious scenario.

Background

When an entrepreneur is a cultural and economic hero (Anderson and Warren, 2011), the status, power and social acceptance of such a position acts as a motivator for individuals to engage in opportunistic entrepreneurial behaviour (Carsrud and Brännback, 2011).

However, Hytti (2005) argues that such a construction of entrepreneurship is sensitive to both time and place, implying that some cultures will view entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in different ways to others. In particular, Anderson *et al* (2009) point to the disparate ways in which young Europeans understand the entrepreneur: from predatory opportunists to victim of their vulnerable position against incumbents, or from maverick explorers to the engines of economic growth. Meek *et al* (2010) highlight the role of social norms and how entrepreneurs are culturally portrayed in influencing new business formation and new business behaviour. We therefore propose that the relatively low rates of new business formation are related to the portrayal of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur in the German context.

We see this as a cultural problem and consider it in two dimensions. First, we follow calls from Hechavarria and Reynolds (2009) to explore the social perception and values placed on what it means to be an entrepreneur. We ask what roles and tasks are attributed to entrepreneurs. The extant literature shows that if the role is seen as important for economic and social wellbeing, then the status associated with entrepreneurship will be high. Entrepreneurship is then seen as a good thing *to do* (Liñán and Chen, 2009; Liñán *et al*, 2011). Thus the esteem afforded to entrepreneurship will shape its consequent attractiveness and bolster entrepreneurial intention (Fayolle *et al*, 2014). The second dimension differs from social identity of role and looks at the entrepreneur's personal identity. Here we tap in to established views that the beliefs entrepreneurs hold about

themselves impact on entrepreneurial activity (McGrath and MacMillan, 1992). Individuals engage in understanding the entrepreneurial individual to establish if an entrepreneur in their context is a good thing *to become* (Cope, 2005; Krueger, 2000). We combine these two cultural dimensions in order to paint a picture of the value and status attached to entrepreneurship in Germany.

We employ a social constructionist theoretical framework to address this research problem. This is the most appropriate approach because we want to explore the meanings held about entrepreneurship (Fletcher, 2006; Downing, 2005; Aldrich and Martinez, 2010). Social constructionism views entrepreneurship, and indeed the entrepreneur herself, as being “*subjectively and inter-subjectively understood by human beings*” (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009, p 30). In this way, interpretative understanding is attributed to action; people are conceived to respond to constructed interpretations of, and interactions with, the social context (Martin *et al*, 2011; Zafirovski, 1999). Perceived thus, the entrepreneur is not an isolated agent, but instead embeds and enacts entrepreneurial action within a context of social interaction and perception (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). As such, we seek to develop knowledge of entrepreneurship by delineating and understanding multiple individual and collective interpretations to build an inter-subjective construct of what is it to be an entrepreneur (Fletcher, 2006).

Entrepreneurship as socially constructed

The constructionist framework investigates entrepreneurship as a social activity embedded in the surrounding culture and social structure (Nicholls, 2010; Granovetter, 2000). In particular, we consider how culture (Hayton and Cacciotti, 2013) could help explain the relatively low levels of entrepreneurial activity in Germany. We follow Lavoie's (2015) view that entrepreneurs, and potential entrepreneurs, read from discursive practices and interpret these practices to guide their entrepreneurial intentions and actions (Swail *et al*, 2013). These discourses represent a local ontology, which Downing (2005) views as responsible for producing understandings of what is right and good. We argue that what people 'know' as the 'reality' of what it is to be an entrepreneur, and the role entrepreneurship plays in society, is rooted in their understanding of this local ontology.

Constructionist perceptions of entrepreneurship purposefully move from the more output-oriented economic perspectives that have dominated the entrepreneurship studies landscape (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009; Mitchell *et al*, 2002). Functionalist, mostly quantitative, methodologies have developed our understanding entrepreneurial impact (Grant and Perren, 2002). Nonetheless functionalist approaches have limitations for understanding perceptions about the role of entrepreneurship in society (Jennins *et al*, 2005). Thus, we answer calls for more subjective depth in our understanding of entrepreneurship (Gartner and Birley, 2002; Hindle, 2004).

The constructionist turn in entrepreneurship research illuminates several aspects of meaning and sense-making. Fletcher (2006) highlights how the creation of a new business is relational and communal, rather than individualistic and stand-alone activity. This reflects entrepreneurship as a related response to the people, cultural, structural, and historical contexts in which it is embedded (Jack and Anderson, 2002). Insights have been generated about what Steyaert (2007) calls ‘linguistic forms and processes’ in entrepreneurship. These include metaphors of entrepreneurship that articulate perceptions of the entrepreneurial role in society (Anderson *et al*, 2009; Drakopoulou Dodd, 2002); the use of dramatization in creating identities (Downing, 2005); and the subjugation of the entrepreneur through the discourses of government (Perren and Jennings, 2005). Moreover, Lawrence and Phillips (2004) showed how cultural discourses interact and influence new business formation. Thus the discourses surrounding entrepreneurship are found to critically influence attitudes towards entrepreneurial activity, and ultimately dictate its acceptability and attraction.

We follow Steyaert (2004) (who in turn borrows from Davies and Harré, 1990) by understanding entrepreneurship as, at least in part, a social production understood from interwoven everyday narratives and discourses (Steyaert, 2007). Distinctive themes have emerged; for instance, enterprise culture casts the main protagonist as a heroic entrepreneur (Carr and Beaver, 2002). Johansson (2009) argues that the hero image of an entrepreneur is a by-product of industrialisation in certain societies, where captains of

industry command respect. Kenny and Scriver (2012, p 627) argue images of heroic *everyman* entrepreneurship are used to build a “*social fantasy*” of future economic success. Others take this argument even further by painting the entrepreneur as a quasi-religious figure, a saviour, of not only economic function, but also in the realm of human creative furtherment (Sørensen, 2008); where the entrepreneur is tasked with countering the conservatism of incumbent monopolies. Furthermore, Banks (2006) considers how the ‘cultural turn’ casts the entrepreneur as an economic saviour, involved in the generation and regeneration of the nation’s economic fortune.

We have therefore seen constructions of entrepreneurs develop from the traditional, coordinator of resources role of the early industrial era, to portray a social actor of such importance that their heroic status transcends the economic, with connotations of moral value and human development (Anderson and Smith, 2007). Malach-Pines *et al* (2005) link this heightened cultural importance of heroic entrepreneurial stories and metaphor to a psychological attachment and identification in the mind of the individual. The heroic construct creates a desirable role to play in society. Desire to be a hero inspires entrepreneurial activity, actualised through the process of self-identification (Nielsen and Lassen, 2012). Mental prototypes help people project an image of their own performance in the role of entrepreneur and how that performance is received by a societal audience (Farmer *et al*, 2011; Hoyle and Sherill, 2006). This implies that active entrepreneurs, positioned as heroes, can provide strong representations in the minds of potential

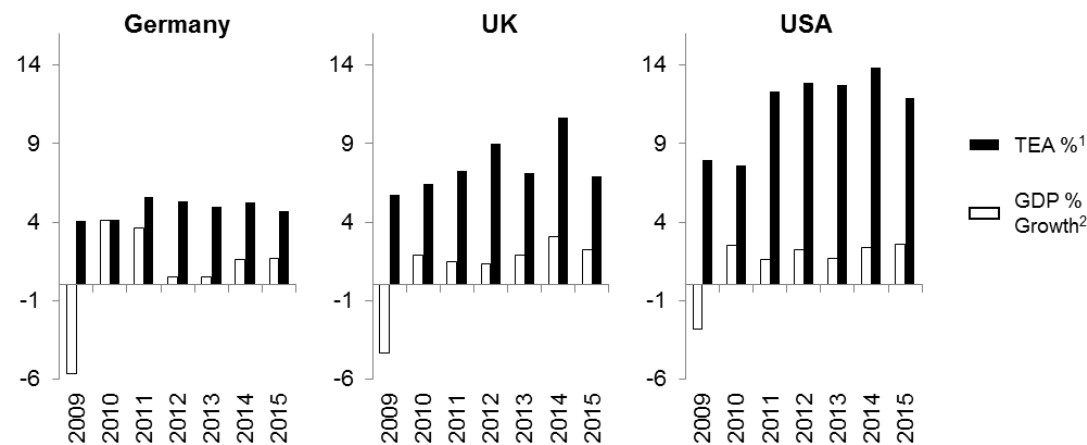
entrepreneurs in the form of a desirable role model (Bosma *et al*, 2012); or as an affirmation of the self-realisation that they seek (Carter *et al*, 2003).

However, a limitation of such universal views is that studies are often confined within national boundaries. Indeed, Ogbor (2012) claimed that entrepreneurship studies suffer from an inherent bias if conducted under an ideology of enterprise. Work that examines cross-cultural constructions has found considerable variation in how entrepreneurs are presented (Drakopoulou Dodd *et al*, 2013). Moreover, differences increase when related to entrepreneurial intention. For instance, De Pillis and Reardon (2007) found the role of self-image common, yet critical distinctions between the stereotypical achievement-oriented entrepreneur encouraged by US culture, and a discouraging social pressure on entrepreneurial risk-taking in Ireland. Pruett *et al* (2009) found a range of sensitivities to the various barriers and motivators to entrepreneurship across US, European and Asian cultures (see also Giacomini *et al*, 2011), mirroring Liñán and Chen (2009) on the role of national culture in modifying the way entrepreneurship is perceived. Such findings highlight the inappropriateness of homogenously projecting enterprise culture assumptions of hero entrepreneurship onto other cultures (De Pillis and Reardon, 2007; Gorman *et al*, 1997). Indeed Moriano *et al* (2012) and Stephan and Uhlaner (2010) call for investigation into the cultural desirability of entrepreneurship as a factor for explaining national entrepreneurship rates; a call we address in this work from the German perspective.

Entrepreneurship in Germany

Germany's economy is Europe's largest, known for the apparent strength and stability of its recovery from the 2008-09 financial crises (Buell, 2015; Jones, 2015) and considered firmly established (Audretsch and Lehmann, 2015). This comparative strength is evident by comparing GDP growth figures of classically innovation-led economies. USA has an annual average GDP growth of 2.17% since 2009, while the UK reports 1.99% - Germany has an average annual growth rate of 2.01% (World Bank, 2017). In respect of these comparable rates of economic growth, it might be assumed that there would also be similar rates of entrepreneurial activity. This is not the case. Figures from GEM (2017) show that Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) in Germany has an average over the same time period of 5.01% of the total population, compared to 11.87% in the US and 7.90% in the UK (Figure 1). Moreover, since 2009, we observe a gradual and steady rise in entrepreneurial activity in both the UK and the USA, which may be expected if we link entrepreneurial activity to a stable economic climate. However, the same cannot be said of Germany, where rates of entrepreneurial activity have remained consistent, despite economic growth. In fact, if we consider trends over a longer 15 year period (Figure 2), we can see a modest but consistent level of German entrepreneurial activity (average of around 4.88%; range: 3.77%-6.28%), seemingly impervious to fluctuations in economic growth. This suggests that linking entrepreneurship to purely economic arguments of opportunity availability and stability cannot explain the low rate

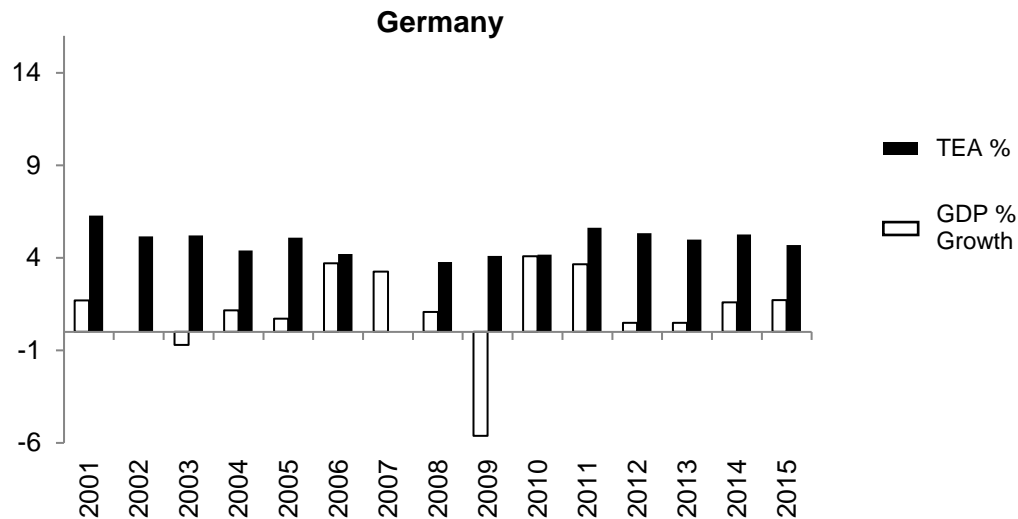
of entrepreneurial activity in Germany; implying there must be other explanations for entrepreneurial activity.



¹ Source: Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2017

² Source: World Bank, 2017

Figure 1: Comparator Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) and GDP growth: 2009-15



¹ Source: Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2017

² Source: World Bank, 2017

³ TEA data for 2007 unavailable

Figure 2: Germany Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) and GDP growth: 2001-15

Relatively little work has investigated entrepreneurship in Germany, and much of what does exist, focuses on outcome-based quantitative analysis of employment options and regional distributions (for examples see: Fritsch and Wyrwich, 2014; Grüner, 2006; Obschonka *et al*, 2013). However, elements of this work do point to some interesting trends. For instance, Wagner and Sternberg (2004) note a highly clustered structure to business formation in Germany, with more nascent entrepreneurs to be found in areas of dense population and high growth rates. This is perhaps unsurprising, and is well-

known in the entrepreneurship literature (Audretsch *et al*, 2012). However, Wagner and Sternberg (.ibid) add that in areas sparse in population, and therefore with lower levels of nascent entrepreneurship, there is a heightened fear of failure associated with entrepreneurial activity, which the authors suggest is more prevalent in Germany than in other entrepreneurial nations.

More recently, Mrożewski (2014) reflects on the attraction of entrepreneurship at the time of a more stable German economy. He suggests that with the country “*experiencing the lowest unemployment rates in 20 years*” (.ibid, p 73), motivated individuals find it easier, and indeed more lucrative, to gain employment in the broader labour market than by entering entrepreneurship. This echoes Block and Wagner (2010) who suggest the emphasis from German state support, on entrepreneurship as a solution to unemployment (articulated in: Baumgartner & Caliendo, 2008), leads to many who engage in entrepreneurial activity remaining ‘self-employed’ for only a short period, until more favourable employment opportunities emerge. Moreover, Braches and Elliot (2016) point to structural constraints on woman entrepreneurs from a largely conservative welfare state, disincentivising any activity out with traditional employment roles. This results in those who are highly-skilled, well-educated and ambitiously-inspired being less willing to engage in entrepreneurial activity in an economically buoyant Germany. Fuchs *et al*. (2008, p 376) describe the limited nature of entrepreneurship education in Germany, claiming that “*German schools diminish rather than encourage pupils’ ambitions to*

become self-employed”. This in turn echoes Klandt and Volkmann (2006), who highlight the crucial differences between the requirements of practice-based entrepreneurship education and what is more typically taught in the theory-driven German BWL, a German business school standard.

The above work uncovers idiosyncratic issues in the formal and informal institutions which make up the German entrepreneurial context and affect support, labour market structures and education frameworks. Nonetheless we identify a significant gap in our understanding of what it means to be an entrepreneur in Germany. In particular, the association of high levels of entrepreneurship with economic stability and growth (Audretsch *et al*, 2006; Galindo and Méndez-Picazo, 2013), apparently true in many countries, does not hold in Germany. We investigate why this might be the case from a social perspective: asking if, why and how entrepreneurship appeals to Germans.

Methodology

Approach

We investigate the social construction of entrepreneurship from two perspectives. First we examine social perceptions of, and status attributed to, entrepreneurial individuals (Hechavarria and Reynolds, 2009). This allows us to assess the value of identity ascribed to the entrepreneur and consider how this promotes or suppresses entrepreneurial

aspirations. Second, we look at how entrepreneurs identify themselves. This subjective construction identifies how entrepreneurship is experienced and practiced in Germany. The study examines the following themes:

- 1) How entrepreneurial identity is ascribed by German society
- 2) How individual German entrepreneurs establish their own identity, and
- 3) Whether it is considered a *good thing* to be an entrepreneur in Germany.

Research Design

We use a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following established procedures in theory building, our theoretical constructs develop from a process of initial coding, interpretation against existing understandings, and continued refinement against further data (Baker and Nelson, 2005).

Sample

Theoretical sampling collected data from two groups: societal actors (non-entrepreneurs) and active entrepreneurs, seeking out any variation between these groups (Eisenhardt, 1989). The sample of societal participants was purposefully selected to include a range of occupations and social positions to capture a range of understandings. These participants were adults, who were not currently or had not previously started a business, and had no direct association with anyone who had. The first author is a native or northern

Germany and was able to use personal contacts to identify key informants in various selected peer groups, such as: workers in the traditional German industries, members of local community groups, and importantly, students (important as they may, or may not, consider entrepreneurship as a career option). Subsequent societal participants were identified through a combination of snowball sampling and random selection calls at peer group locations. Our entrepreneur group had all at one point founded a business which, following the GEM definition, involved the commitment of resources and the undertaking of financial risk. Initially, entrepreneurs were identified through reports in local press and online. After this initial stage, purposeful snowball sampling identified the majority of entrepreneur participants for this group. Data collection continued until we believed theoretical saturation had been achieved. This led to a total of 18 participants identified as entrepreneurs, and 18 societal participants (Table 1).

Table 1: Our respondents

Societal Participants				Entrepreneurs					
Indicator	Gender	Age	Occupation	Indicator	Industry	Gen.	Age	Start year	No. of emp.
SP-A	M	27	Employee - IT	Ent-A	Engineering	M	28	2010	10
SP-B	M	25	Student	Ent-B	Healthcare	M	56	2003	28
SP-C	F	25	Student	Ent-C	Healthcare	M	33	2010	11
SP-D	F	51	Employee – Banking	Ent-D	Engineering	F	35	2010	2
SP-E	M	58	Employee – Engineering	Ent-E	Energy	M	31	2012	1
SP-F	F	56	Employee – Education	Ent-F	Social sector	M	29	2009	10
SP-G	F	55	Employee – Social sector	Ent-G	IT	M	28	2011	5
SP-H	F	28	Student	Ent-H	Consulting	F	36	2009	4
SP-I	M	55	Employee – Communal sector	Ent-I	IT	M	32	2000	20
SP-J	F	24	Student	Ent-J	Social sector	F	33	2011	3
SP-K	F	25	Student	Ent-K	Consulting	F	52	2003	1
SP-L	F	26	Student	Ent-L	IT	M	25	2008	3
SP-M	M	73	Retired	Ent-M	IT	M	25	2013	2
SP-N	F	74	Retired	Ent-N	IT	M	25	2013	2
SP-O	F	29	Homemaker	Ent-O	Consulting	M	66	1990	20
SP-P	M	54	Employee – Automotive	Ent-P	IT	M	38	2014	12
SP-Q	F	34	Employee - Automotive	Ent-Q	IT	M	28	2003	4
SP-R	M	49	Employee - Automotive	Ent-R	Consulting	M	38	2010	160

Data collection and interviews

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author during the summer of 2015. Interviews typically lasted between 20-40 minutes; were conducted in German and later translated into English.

Analysis

In line with the grounded theory approach (Stewart, 1991), we first developed open and axial coding of our data; followed by selective coding to uncover integrated core categories to inform the development of our propositions (Bowen, 2008), represented in Figure 3 and Figure 4. These representations are adapted from the data structures presented by Strike (2013) and display the final coding in a transparent and analytical manner, as recommended by Hair and Sarstedt (2014). We first present our findings on the status of entrepreneurship, informed by the non-entrepreneur participants. We then consider constructions of entrepreneurial identity in Germany, based on data from active entrepreneurs. Throughout the presentation of each element, evidence is presented to support the findings portrayed in the data structures.

Findings

The social constructions of entrepreneurship from our two perspectives exhibit divergent notions. For instance, from the societal perspective there appears to be a mixed, even begrudging admiration for the role entrepreneurs play in society. It seems our typical societal participant acknowledges the principles of entrepreneurship as a driver for the economy, and even society itself; but he does not consider the individuals performing this task as ‘serious’, worthy business people. Taken to extremes, a picture is painted of the entrepreneur as an economic dilettante, who fails expectations of contribution to the

Germany economy. He sees entrepreneurship as rejecting safer, wiser employment options to pursue over-optimistic aspirations. Remarkably, his image of the entrepreneur as imprudent, even irresponsible, is a far cry from the heroic persona of the literature.

For their part, the entrepreneurs acknowledge the often unflattering view from society, but instead of identifying as outsiders, they rather see an image of being the misunderstood of the business world. They point to a misrepresentation of what entrepreneurs do. In direct contrast to the constructs of society, the entrepreneurs picture themselves as very serious individuals, with a critical contribution to make in leading the economy and indeed society. We present and unpack the underlying details of these constructions; first, exploring more of how society's construction of entrepreneurship is formed, and then by contrasting the entrepreneurs' construct. We will offer explanations for the contrast in constructions, and discuss implications for entrepreneurial activity in Germany.

The entrepreneurial role in society – what entrepreneurs are?

Society shows some appreciation of the potential contribution entrepreneurship makes to the economy and society. For example, “*competition for the economy*” (SP-J) is noted, with the acknowledged result of, “*progress and innovation for society*” (SP-M). Interestingly, the data also point to the importance of entrepreneurship as “*creative expression*” (SP-F), with links made to how entrepreneurs can influence the future of

both industry and employment. However, for the entrepreneur as an individual, perceptions include some positives as a “*person of respect*” (SP-R) even “*cool looking*”. Yet this grudging respect is treated with cognitive distance as “*outstanding people totally different from me*” (SP-O). There is a strong emphasis on how different entrepreneurs are, carrying little relation to the everyday lives of broader society. This is not admiring a hero, or even approval as a role model for emulation. It is a portrayal of social exceptionality with purse lipped disapproval, “*entrepreneurs are more careless nowadays*” (SP-K). Moreover, there is scorn about the glamorisation of the role. In presenting entrepreneurs as social ‘outsiders’, several respondents described risk-taking and overly optimistic profit-orientation, for example;

[The] fancy young Berlin hipster start-ups that I cannot bear... young people are daring, hence, it can backfire pretty fast. SP-K

Mainstream media portrayals are mentioned by many societal respondents, but claimed to misrepresent value by sexing up entrepreneurship. Media presents entrepreneurship as more “*positive*” than “*negative*” (SP-N). However, breadth of entrepreneurial activity is seen as “*almost non-existent*” (SP-J), with a positive Berlin-focused bias. Respondents told us the media focuses on success, “*more than failure*” (SP-N) creating both envy and scepticism. This envy, the hubris, of rock star like success is matched with a near delight in failure. Where success is attributed to glamour rather than hard work; failure is blamed

on the individual; “*put on a personal level*” (SP-J); an assumption of “*mismanagement and overestimation*” (SP-H). This is startlingly clear in the following;

It is easy to handle success because then [the entrepreneur] is on the safe side. [People] have esteem and respect because one has created something that works. But also, the enviers arise in the case of success. If one has failed, one will be laughed at. SP-I

Many are held back from starting a business because they fear failure and being seen as losers within society. Also, success is often connoted with envy and prejudices that he or she [the entrepreneur] may exploit employees. SP-P

A final category found in the societal data includes a curious expectation placed on successful entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are expected to be primarily socially responsible and should compensate society for the privilege of being successful. There is a notion that entrepreneurs should “*stay down to earth and not become arrogant*” (SP-R) and accept greater responsibility in terms of creating “*jobs and something that is good for humanity*” (SP-N). Indeed:

The entrepreneur should not only build his dreams, but should see his commitment towards society. SP-F

Our analysis indicates some respect for the functions of entrepreneurship, but almost disdain for the entrepreneur. Pictured as outside conventions, outside ‘real’ economics and on the margins of society, they are characterised as reckless and overly optimistic risk-takers. Worse still, they are amateurish, selfish and attention-seekers. The media conspires by presenting hipsters with a Berlin-bias, and representations lack depth. One consequence is the prim tight-lipped disapproval of entrepreneurs and ‘I told you so’ when they fail. We see it important that society, rather than entrepreneurial effort, is deemed to produce success, with entrepreneurs selfishly exploiting success for their own purposes. Moreover success itself is only approved, if it brings ‘real’ benefits for German society and if entrepreneurs are ‘serious’.

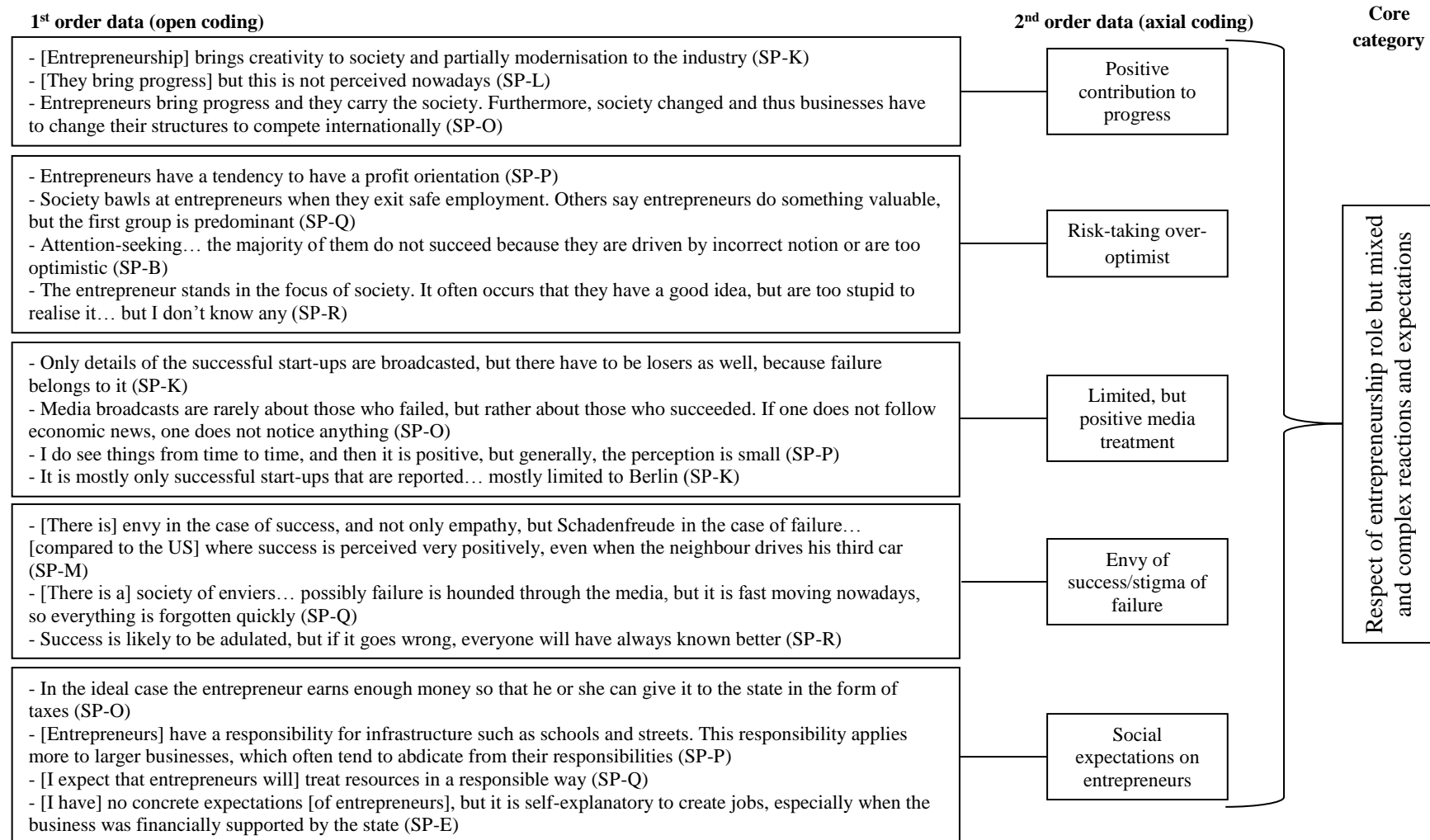


Figure 3: Data structure (societal dimension)

Construction of entrepreneurial identity – what entrepreneurs do?

Our entrepreneurs' constructions reflect some of these social constructs, but unsurprisingly emphasise the positive benefits of better economic structures, innovation and value creation. They acknowledge the negative image, but saw themselves as misunderstood. Entrepreneurs:

bring things forward and are problem solvers. Ent-O

create something new and provide fresh energy. Ent-P

However, this celebration also acknowledges that broader society does not take them as seriously as they take themselves. This often emotional perception of belittlement seems to feed off the societal construction of entrepreneurs as individuals outside the serious realities of working life. At its most dramatic, entrepreneurs feel they are looked down upon or even ridiculed by a broader society underappreciating, even undermining, their legitimacy.

Entrepreneurs are suited for being the scapegoat and the enemy image.

Additionally, society does not consider [us]; entrepreneurs are not seen in

their significance... Furthermore, start-ups are not taken seriously,

although it is the salt of the earth, but they are not appreciated. Ent-O

There seems to be a perception that standing out as different is wrong, *“in general, people don’t like it when others stick out of the mass”* Ent-Q. They see their efforts as trivialised and themselves as misrepresented, *“kindergarten people”* (Ent-P) who are not serious players. Our entrepreneur talks about start-up hype, but sees this as superficial,

There is an increasing hype around entrepreneurs, and start-ups are celebrated, but surrounding society laughs at them. Moreover, banks don’t give capital, and many don’t believe in what one does. Ent-P

They feel misunderstood and misrepresented,

Only people who understand the value chain see the necessity of entrepreneurs..... Generally, the perception is low and many people don’t understand what [entrepreneurs] do. [Many] perceive a hipster-form of entrepreneurship, which I call ‘partypreneur’. Those are entrepreneurs by heart, but they don’t move forward. Ent-K

The lack of appreciation is partly blamed on the shallowness of media reporting and the news value of presenting them as weird and working in *“big hipster sheds”* (Ent-P), leading to belittling *“disesteem”* and *“scepticism”*. Moreover, there is envy of success,

Success... brings envy. There is ambivalence between envy and admiration.

In general, people don't like it when others stand out. Ent-Q

The envy turns to glee when things go wrong;

[There is a] pleasure when failure occurs. At least that is the tenor. Ent-Q

Consequently, failure becomes individual stigmatisation which persists as a 'branding' long after the fact. In combination with the envy of success, the vilification of failure leads entrepreneurs to characterise themselves as people who 'cannot win' in the eyes of society, in spite of, or perhaps because of their entrepreneurial efforts. Thus they feel social 'outsiders', misunderstood and under-appreciated economic actors.

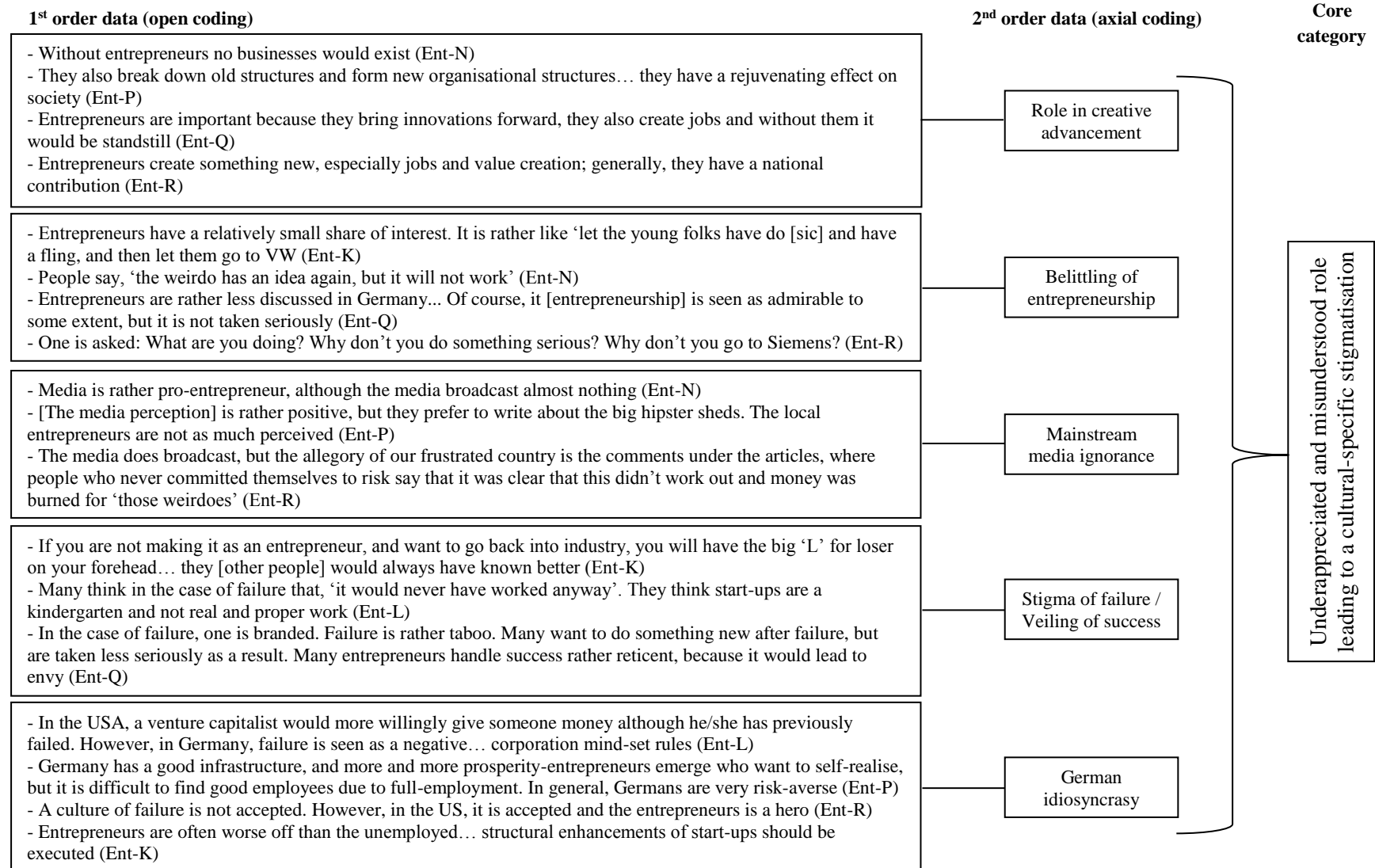


Figure 4: Data structure (entrepreneur dimension)

Discussion - alienation of the entrepreneur

Our analysis shows that entrepreneurship as a process is socially approved, but that entrepreneurs are certainly not regarded as economic heroes (Johansson, 2009; Kenny and Scriver, 2012). Entrepreneurs are well aware of how they are perceived, but disagree and feel belittled by the lack of appreciation. Malach-Pines *et al* (2005) have noted the importance of a positive cultural identification of what it is to *do* entrepreneurship, we identify how this manifests in a negative sense in Germany. The derision aimed at entrepreneurs is acutely felt by those on the receiving end and taken as a judgement on their place in society. Entrepreneurial activity is a passing phase from which actors enactors will grow out with the realisation of their folly, or with the opportunity of ‘more serious’ and relatively safe employment. Consequently an unappealing image may well impact negatively on an individual’s desire to become an entrepreneur; regardless of the economic role they play.

The decision to start a new business is rarely entirely logical, or always sensible. Uncertainty and risk are evident in the high failure rate of new firms, whilst hard work and long hours characterise most start-ups. Fortunately, the emotional appeal of being your own boss; making your own decisions and being in charge of your own destiny (Anderson and Ullah, 2014) combine with the possibility of exceptional success to become powerful attractors. Indeed, Cardon *et al* (2012, p 1) describe the “*extreme*

emotional context” of new firms, including Goss’s (2005) account of the pride that arises from being entrepreneurial. This pride reflects the prestige that can be ascribed to being seen as entrepreneurial (Anderson and Jack, 2000). Biniari (2012) suggests that dealing with such sensitivities in an emotionally-embedded entrepreneurial act requires an individual with heightened emotional skills. Our findings take this further, by suggesting that, instead of a pride associated with entrepreneurial activity in Germany, there is a certain envy of others associated with success. Indeed, entrepreneurs in this context need to challenge the socially constructed identity imposed upon them to gain legitimacy (Valliere and Gegenhuber, 2014). As such, would-be entrepreneurs may need to develop a thick-skin, an ability to ignore personal criticisms (Farmer *et al*, 2011).

This thick skin may also be useful for dealing with the issue of ‘being better than others’. The ‘tall poppy syndrome’ (Kirkwood, 2007) indicates that there may be social disapproval of success, rather than the acclaim of an entrepreneurial meritocracy. Following Kibler and Kautonen (2016), it may be that aspiring German entrepreneurs struggle to gain ‘moral legitimacy’ in a social environment which sees them as selfish and arrogant. Moreover, there suggestions of a darker side of the effects of this social construction. The enduring stigma associated with entrepreneurial failure may be a serious discouragement. So, the energizing and motivating element of pride in entrepreneurial achievement (Goss, 2005) appears nullified in the German context, by fear of provoking envy and a stigma of failure in broader society. We can therefore

suggest that only the most driven individuals, impervious to the reactions of others, will be inclined to undertake activities to become an entrepreneur.

Images of the autonomous, independent and financially self-sufficient entrepreneur have been found to dominate and motivate the minds of individuals looking to start a business for some time (Stephan and Uhlaner, 2010; Carter et al, 2003). However, we find it curious, given the low status afforded to entrepreneurs, that these notions are replaced with high expectations and strong normative demands about how entrepreneurship *should* be practiced. Not only should they provide good jobs for others and contribute strongly to tax; they should always be socially responsible. The implication is that it is society that has offered the opportunity, rather than the entrepreneur creating and developing a new business, so due credit and reward should be given back to that society. Such weighted expectation and responsibility tarnishes ideas of independence and autonomy. Schumpertian entrepreneurial rent for risk-taking is completely absent; entrepreneurs appear to owe society!

Social construction is useful for explaining what people believe and describing their experiences. However, it cannot tell us why these beliefs arise. We may however speculate by drawing on related examples. One such example is the high social status of engineers in Germany. They are seen as admirable professionals. Engineers are precise, careful and meticulous in their craft and create a very tangible output. In contrast, entrepreneurs are flexible, adaptable and need an assortment of skills but may be master

of none. Entrepreneurship is about innovation and change, perhaps German society values stability and structure more highly.

Conclusions

We apply a qualitative social constructions lens to our research problem of the low rate of start-ups in the strong Germany economy. Economic theory could not explain this anomaly, but our social analysis offers an alternative explanation. Entrepreneurs are not held in great esteem in Germany and the trivialisation of their practices may deter potential entrepreneurs. Economic theories, linking the opportunity structures of economies to rates of entrepreneurial activity, were mostly developed in countries where entrepreneurs, as well as entrepreneurship, are admired. Our findings support Liñán *et al* (2015) by suggesting that this assumption may not be universal, but is instead linked to cultural values. Cultures shape meanings and we propose that Germany's culture encourages stability over change. Conformity is valued more strongly than non-conformity, so entrepreneurs are seen as marginal and on the periphery of the economy. We suggest that a lower social status for German entrepreneurs, than those in other economically successful countries, may limit individual desire to form a new business venture.

The main contribution of this work is in its application of social constructions of entrepreneurship to enhance our understanding of what influences new business

formation. We extend the work of Ogbor (2012) in demonstrating the limitations of heroic images in entrepreneurship as a universal notion of attraction by identifying a culture where this does not hold true. Our German constructions of the entrepreneur project an image far removed from the messianic presence ascribed by much of the US-influenced literature. We believe therefore, that such constructions of the entrepreneurs are culturally specific, based on the sensitivities of the context in which they are set. This has clear implications for how we perceive entrepreneurial motivations, the drivers for opportunity recognition, and the barriers to entrepreneurial activity. We have shown that, in Germany, the entrepreneur is contrasted unfavourably with more ‘serious’ ideas of conventional employment in established industry. The resulting outsider image portrays the entrepreneur less as a leader showing others the way (Banks, 2006; Sørensen, 2008) and more as a tolerated inefficiency in the fringes of the economic system, providing some explanation to Germany’s low rate of entrepreneurial activity in spite of favourable economic circumstances.

We also contribute to discussion on the limitations of economic explanations for the take-up of entrepreneurship. Specifically, we highlight the curiosity of countries with similarities in recent economic experience having very different experiences in new venture creation. This draws into question the view that economic growth leads to a greater number of new businesses. Our findings underline the importance of examining the entrepreneur in her social context, if we are to more fully understand the nature of

how entrepreneurship occurs as a social phenomenon. This may be particularly important for examining business formation in areas without a more classical enterprise culture.

Limitations and future research

While we have uncovered some elements in the social construction of entrepreneurship in Germany, it cannot be claimed that our picture is complete. There are aspects beyond societal and entrepreneurial constructions which have the potential to offer explanation for relatively low rates of new venture creation. For instance, Block and Wagner (2010) discuss the various structural and institutional incentives for entrepreneurship in Germany, while Klandt and Volkmann (2006) offer a critical view on the role of German business education. Also, while we have discussed the key role that media portrayals of entrepreneurship have in its social construction, we have not assessed the actual representations of media output (for example: Anderson and Warren, 2011; Radu and Redien-Collot, 2008). To strengthen our understanding of entrepreneurship in Germany, future works could combine all such elements in order to produce a more comprehensive explanation.

Furthermore, while we have made great effort to establish the problems with images of entrepreneurship as a universal concept, we suffer from the limitation of treating Germany as a homogenous entity. While this has offered us much in terms of contrasting Germany with peer economies, some studies have already considered the regional variations in German entrepreneurship (for instance: Bergmann and Sternberg, 2007; Wagner and

Sternberg, 2004), highlighting clustering in particular areas. While we designed the study to ensure as representative a cross-section of Germany society and of German entrepreneurs, a limitation of our data is the potential for snowball sampling to provide similar participant types, due to our access and the nature of our approach. The natural critique follows that the social constructions of entrepreneurship may vary more widely throughout Germany. Future studies might consider a more structured regional focus, as opposed to the broadly national view taken here. In turn we wonder if the notion of the entrepreneurial hero is hegemonic and universal even in countries which have a strong enterprise culture. Will we find the same extent of cultural appeal in Nebraska as New Orleans; do entrepreneurs feel the same in rural Virginia as in the Boston metropolis?

An obvious limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability associated with our qualitative methods. We believe that our conceptualisations may be transferable to other contexts, but our findings remain unique to our sample. Nonetheless they illustrate the utility of different approaches for addressing difficult entrepreneurial problems.

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