

**Entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial identity:
Beyond stereotypes**

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Title: Entrepreneurship Education and Entrepreneurial Identity: Beyond Stereotypes

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Entrepreneurship Education and Entrepreneurial Identity

Abstract:

The entrepreneur is often conceptualised as an individualistic hero (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Gill, 2017). Although this portrayal has been criticised as highly romanticised (Acs & Audretsch, 2003) it is still influential in the contemporary entrepreneurship literature (Down, 2010). Consequently, prevailing social discourses around entrepreneurship may restrict and even prevent an individual to develop their own entrepreneurial identity (Down & Giazitzoglu, 2014; Gill, 2017). In order to explore this issue, the chapter presents insights into the entrepreneurial experience of student entrepreneurs by exploring the role of entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial identities in new venture creation. In-depth interviews were carried out with 11 student entrepreneurs who had, individually or in partnership with others, started a venture whilst they were enrolled in Higher Education courses.

These findings challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions entrenched in the characterisation of the homogenous entrepreneur (Jones, 2014) and suggest that individuals can arrive at entrepreneurship in different ways. In order to demonstrate the diversity of entrepreneurial identities, the chapter highlights those that fit the orthodox depiction of entrepreneurs through vignettes from Nicole and Georgie. This is then contrasted with alternative depictions through vignettes from Joanna, Christa, Darcie, and Paige. The experience of the latter demonstrates how entrepreneurial identities are formed through role enactment and socialisation into entrepreneurial communities. The findings propose universities can support student entrepreneurship through both formal and informal activities. The broader conceptions of entrepreneurial identities with respect to the role of universities and enterprise education are considered.

Keywords: **entrepreneurial identities, entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurial stereotypes**

Introduction

In order to encourage entrepreneurial graduates, the importance of enhancing the entrepreneurial capabilities of both university educators and students is increasingly emphasised by policymakers (Rosa, 2003; National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship, 2008). Universities, then, are increasingly considered to be important breeding grounds for

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the development of entrepreneurial individuals (Hatt, 2018). Consequently, there is an increasing number of university entrepreneurship courses on offer, alongside start-up support to students and alumni within many higher education institutions (Matlay & Carey, 2007; Politis, Winborg & Dahlstrand, 2012). Yet, little is known about the interplay between entrepreneurship education and development of entrepreneurial identity among students (Nabi, Liñán, Krueger, Fayolle, & Walmsley, 2017).

At the same time, entrepreneurship research has been criticised for failing to question the myths and taken-for-granted assumptions within the field (Blackburn & Kovalainen, 2009; Gibb, 2012) that have resulted in a narrow view of entrepreneurship which fails to reflect the heterogeneity of both the phenomenon and the actors who undertake it (Lerner, Hunt, & Dimov, 2018; Welter, Baker, Audretsch, & Gartner, 2017). Consequently, an emerging stream of scholarship suggests that an identity perspective, such that we adopt in this chapter, moves understandings of entrepreneurship beyond traditional economic rationality (Gruber & MacMillan, 2017) and avoids taken-for-granted assumptions by exploring how discourse impacts on entrepreneurial praxis (Ogbor, 2000).

In this spirit, we pursue a broader and more inclusive view of what constitutes entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial actor (Galloway, Kapasi, & Wimalasena, 2019; Welter et al., 2017) through a rich account¹ of the formation and reformation of entrepreneurial identity among eleven student entrepreneurs². Specifically, the chapter explores how these emergent entrepreneurs come to understand their entrepreneurial endeavours in relation to the identities that constitute their sense of self. Whilst parallels can be drawn between the conceptualisation of the stereotypical entrepreneur and some of the participants, the stories of other participants point to the development of entrepreneurial identity through the actual 'performance' of entrepreneurship itself during and after venture creation. Entrepreneurial identity, we suggest, is something that is crafted

¹ Phenomenological interviews underpin the accounts we present and are a powerful means of attaining an in-depth understanding of an individual's lived experience (Cope, 2005; Kvale, 1983). This type of interview allows researchers to capture and describe "how people experience some phenomenon - how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Cope, 2011; Patton, 2002, p. 104).

² These individuals started their respective ventures whilst enrolled on a higher education programme.

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and re-crafted on an ongoing basis as individual's orient themselves to the 'entrepreneur' label and its connotations as we generally understand them. This arguably holds significant implications for entrepreneurship educators and curriculum designers.

In order to demonstrate the diversity of entrepreneurial identities, the chapter is structured as follows. After a brief methodology section, we highlight those that fit the orthodox depiction of the entrepreneur through vignettes from Nicole and Georgie. This is then contrasted with alternative depictions through vignettes from Joanna, Christa, Darcie, and Paige³. The following sections then consider the broad conceptions of entrepreneurial identities with respect to the role of universities and enterprise education and provide the conclusions and implications of the work.

Methodology

The chapter is borne out of a larger interpretative study exploring student and recent graduates' understanding of their entrepreneurial experiences. In order to explore the entrepreneurial experience from the perspective of the participants, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted. IPA is a qualitative methodology developed principally by Jonathon Smith (Cope, 2011) that utilises small, purposively selected samples who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Gill, 2015), in this case starting a venture whilst enrolled on a higher education programme. Consequently the student entrepreneurs had no graduate level work experience prior to starting their venture and were all age 18-24. The participants were recruited through a combination of the first author's own networks such as social media connections (University 2) and enterprise support services at two universities (University 1 and 3). In addition, snowball sampling was utilised to recruit others from University 3. See Table 1 for details of the 11 student entrepreneurs.

³ Participant names have been changed

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Table 1: Sample of Student Entrepreneurs

Pseudonym	Degree discipline	Business	Level of study	University*	M/F	Age bracket
Robert	Business & Enterprise	E-commerce	UG	Uni1	M	18-24
Kate	Teaching	Tech start-up	UG	Uni2	F	18-24
Paige	Business & Enterprise	Dog walker	UG	Uni1	F	18-24
Dan	Philosophy & Politics	Coffee importer	UG	Uni3	M	18-24
Christa	Retail Management	Candle maker	UG	Uni1	F	18-24
Nicole	Business Studies	Confectionary	UG	Uni1	F	18-24
Georgie	Food & Nutrition	Allergen free cakes	UG	Uni1	F	18-24
Darcie	Music	Music publishing	PG	Uni3	F	18-24
Will	Business management	Coffee importer	UG	Uni3	M	18-24
Lauren	Events	College	UG	Uni1	F	18-24
Joanna	English Literature	Coffee importer	UG	Uni3	F	18-24
* Uni1, Post-92 North of England. Uni2, Post-92 North West of England. Uni3 Russell Group North of England						

Loosely structured, phenomenological interviews, typical of an IPA approach, were used to collect the participants' stories told in their own words (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In line with IPA's idiographic principles, all transcripts were analysed individually prior to the meta-level analysis being carried out (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The research findings offer an interpretative account characterised by rich descriptions that resonate with the participants (Smith, et al, 2009).

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The orthodox depiction of the 'hero' entrepreneur

In Western and European discourse and popular culture the entrepreneur is all too often conceptualised as an individualistic, white male hero (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Gill, 2017). Despite much critique, this highly romanticised portrayal, focussed on traits such as autonomy, independence, self-efficacy, control, and risk-taking, is still influential in the contemporary entrepreneurship literature as well as educational settings (Acs & Audretsch, 2003; Down, 2010). Consequently, this "persistent myth" leads educators to focus on entrepreneurial success that may result in students aspiring to unattainable goals (Williams Middleton & Donnellon, 2017, p. 116); one significant impact being that those individuals who do not identify with a stereotype may choose not to participate (Smith & Boje, 2017).

In turn, entrepreneurial identity (e.g. seeing oneself as a risk-taker or highly autonomous) is theorised to propel entrepreneurial action (Murnieks & Mosakowski, 2006), acting as a catalyst for individuals to take the first steps towards new venture creation (Down & Reveley, 2004). From this perspective, possession of an entrepreneurial identity precedes venture creation and is closely linked to entrepreneurial motivation (Obschonka, Silbereisen, Cantner, & Goethner, 2015). This was borne out in the stories of some of our student entrepreneurs who were motivated to start their venture by a chronically salient entrepreneurial identity (Powell & Baker, 2014) which existed prior to an entrepreneurial career. We see in the vignettes about Nicole and Georgie, below, the desire for financial independence, autonomy in decision-making, distaste for rule conformance and economic rationality, characteristic of the orthodox entrepreneur. We also observe the use of "dividing strategies" (Parker, 1997, p. 135) to signal the differences between them (as 'the entrepreneur') and employees or managers (as 'others').

Nicole - International Business Student

Nicole, who founded a confectionary business in her first summer vacation whilst at university, describes her motivation to start a venture as stemming from an innate entrepreneurial identity. She recounted many incidents of entrepreneurial behaviour during her childhood including washing cars and making cupcakes and expressed an enjoyment of making sales. Once at university, Nicole was keen to support herself financially. She had worked at stalls at county fairs but felt frustrated that, despite all her hard work resulting in

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healthy takings, her earnings were relatively meagre. Driven by the challenge and seeing an opportunity to make a profit, she started selling homemade fudge at outdoor events during her first summer vacation. In order to keep up with demand, she switched to contract manufacturing and expanded into other confectionary. She worked on the business all the way through university, employing staff to help during busy periods. Despite a number of job offers at the end of her course, Nicole decided to work on the business full-time with the intention of growing the brand and developing its online presence. The enjoyment of making her own decisions as well as her vision for the future reinforced Nicole's commitment to the venture.

Georgie - Food & Nutrition Student

As an elite athlete with food allergies, Georgie had a keen interest in nutrition. She liked to experiment with recipes and share them via social media. Focusing in particular on healthy convenience foods free from common allergens, she started reviewing selected products and, in her first term at university, set up her blog as an affiliate and started selling other people's products through her site. However, it was whilst working part-time in a health food café that she spotted a gap in the market for healthy, allergen free cakes. She visited the university's enterprise service and started to develop cake recipes which she tried out at food fairs and markets before moving to contract manufacturing and online sales.

Despite her confidence that her Food and Nutrition degree would lead to a well-paid graduate role, Georgie felt that she was destined to be an entrepreneur. She felt that even if her venture ultimately failed, she would simply reassess the situation and start again. Georgie cites her desire to do things her own way and her tendency to bend the rules as incompatible with long term employment and acknowledges that even her managers don't expect her to stay long in any role.

The two vignettes are illustrative of interviewees who demonstrated a salient entrepreneurial identity that both preceded and provided the motivation for new venture creation. Accordingly, they resemble the dominant entrepreneurial stereotype. Not all of the student entrepreneurs in the study, however, constructed an entrepreneurial identity that preceded venture creation. Rather, it was a desire to fulfil other personal or creative

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identities that provided impetus for entrepreneurial careers in these cases, as we elucidate below.

Alternative depictions of the entrepreneur

With much extant literature focusing on (pre-existing) entrepreneurial identities (Obschonka et al., 2015), the impact of personal identities on entrepreneurs' motivations and opportunity recognition tends to receive scant attention. Numerous student entrepreneurs within this study discussed how their non-entrepreneurial identities prompted their entrepreneurial action. The venture creation process, therefore, enabled them to immerse themselves in activities, communities and environments that fulfilled and reinforced a non-entrepreneurial identity that was central and authentic to their sense of self. This suggests that the dominant representation of the entrepreneur offers only a partial understanding of the phenomenon and that there is a recursive relationship between entrepreneurial and personal identities. For this group of emerging entrepreneurs, it was only through creating a new venture that they formed entrepreneurial identities – representing a process of 'becoming' through role enactment (Anderson, Warren, & Bensemman, 2018). Here, entrepreneurial identity is characterised by a growing passion for and commitment to the venture, self-confidence in one's entrepreneurial abilities, growth plans and a vision for the future.

Joanna - the English Literature Student

As a key member of a student society, Joanna wanted to raise awareness of their work with organisations in developing countries. She developed an idea for a fund-raising project which would involve importing coffee from a farmer-owned cooperative and selling it in her university city. When she received an email from her university about a social enterprise competition, she joined forces with other students and pitched her idea. It was only when Joanna and her partners won the competition that she began to feel that her idea had currency. By this time, she was nearing the end of her final year at university. She enjoyed creative writing and liked the idea of a career in teaching however with the social enterprise project taking shape she felt like she had a difficult decision to make. Having never previously considered starting a business, Joanna was hesitant about putting her other aspirations on hold. Entrepreneurship was not on her to do list and the stereotype of the

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lone, maverick entrepreneur further alienated her from her entrepreneurial endeavours. Her unfamiliarity with the language of business caused her to doubt her ability to start a venture. Working with a start-up mentor provided by the university's enterprise service as well as socialisation into entrepreneurial communities served as an induction that allowed her to learn the language of business. In contrast to the entrepreneurial stereotype, Joanna's entrepreneurial experience has involved working collaboratively with an extended team. However, she rejects the term entrepreneur preferring the term businessperson. Through her first-hand experience of entrepreneurship Joanna has come to the realisation that she does have the capability to run a business.

Christa - the retail management student

Seeing Christa's enjoyment in her new hobby and hearing her criticisms of her work placement environment led Christa's mother to suggest turning her candle-making hobby into a business. Using her savings to buy materials, Christa spent the next few months experimenting with techniques and fragrances. About four months after starting to make candles as a hobby, Christa began trading. She sought out support from the enterprise team at her university who put her in touch with business and marketing advisers whose help she really valued.

Christa's experience of running her own business has allowed her to develop her confidence and skills and enabled her to put some of the learning from her course into practice. Her university course has been helpful in terms of developing her finance and marketing skills and getting involved with extra-curricular activities such as enterprise projects within schools has allowed her to reflect on how far she has come.

However concerns about people's reaction to her business put her off attending some networking events. She felt that her age, being a full-time student and the unusual nature of the business could lead to people being dismissive. One entrepreneurship conference she attended seemed to be all about high growth firms that she couldn't relate to however when she heard speakers at an event for female entrepreneurs she was able to identify with their experiences. She still wouldn't call herself an entrepreneur however she does consider herself to be enterprising.

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Entrepreneurial identity, from this perspective, is therefore performatively produced and can be described as performances of the self (Anderson et al., 2018). Entrepreneurs enact what it means to be entrepreneurial through their networking activities (Jack, Moulton, Anderson, & Dodd, 2010), which bring benefits other than resource and information acquisition, including emotional support, confidence building, social learning and identification with a collective (Jack et al., 2010; Pearson, Carr, & Shaw, 2008). Individuals are thus socialised through both cognitive and symbolic mechanisms (King, 2017), such as workshops and the success stories of other entrepreneurs. Socialisation into entrepreneurial communities, including working with a mentor (Rigg & O'Dwyer, 2012), and the resulting immersion into the discourse of enterprise (Cohen & Musson, 2000) can act as an induction for new entrepreneurs, enabling them to learn how to 'be' (Obschonka, Goethner, Silbereisen, & Cantner, 2012; Rigg & O'Dwyer, 2012). In this way, social identification promotes a feeling of oneness with a social group and the sense of shared experiences (Anderson et al., 2018).

Our student entrepreneurs' relationships with others influences the development of their venture ideas and these exchanges with sense givers enabled participants to enact their new venture (Hoyte, Noke, Mosey, & Marlow, 2019). Interactions with informal and formal advisers and supporters, as well as involvement in business networks and start-up communities, were an opportunity to give and receive feedback as well as a source of learning and a sense of belonging and legitimacy. Research has shown that positive feedback can lead to positive emotions (Markowska, Härtel, Brundin, Roan, & Hatel, 2015) and our study lends support to the view that interaction with key stakeholders legitimizes the entrepreneurial identity (Williams Middleton, 2013).

Darcie - the Music student

Darcie had studied music for most of her life and knowing that she did not want a career as a classroom music teacher, she was concerned to learn that there were few jobs for music graduates. With her identity as a musician under threat she decided to take things into her own hands and create her own job. She had written a business plan for a music publishing venture as part of a final year module and decided to take it forward whilst studying towards a master's degree in Music Composition. Darcie's musician identity was linked to

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the notion of career (Holmes, 2015) reinforcing the view that students of higher education often form discipline based identities (Dahlgren, Handal, Szkudlarek, & Bayer, 2007). The end of university coupled with the lack of relevant employment opportunities posed a threat to her musician identity and provided the impulse to start a music publishing venture in order to allow feelings of fulfilment and authenticity.

Darcie approached her university's enterprise support service and secured funding which enabled her to buy a professional printer. She also successfully applied for a scholarship programme promoted to students, which opened the door to training and networking opportunities within the music publishing industry. These experiences positively benefited the development of her venture in practical terms in that she was able to apply new knowledge and skills but also on a personal level by boosting her confidence in her entrepreneurial capabilities and providing her with a sense of belonging to a relevant community.

Darcie's entrepreneurial identity developed out of her lived experience of enacting an entrepreneurial role and she began to enjoy the feeling of ownership that running the business gave her. The satisfaction gained from her achievements further reinforced her commitment to the venture and resulted in her prioritising entrepreneurship over the potential employment opportunities which could result from her newly expanded networks.

Paige - the Business and Enterprise Management student

Paige had been an animal lover all of her life and held a long-term ambition to work with dogs. However, despite some voluntary work she had little relevant experience and doubted her chances of being offered a job. Paige's need to fulfil her personal identity as an animal lover motivated her to start a small-scale venture in her final year of university. The resulting dog-walking business allowed her to immerse herself in her passion for dogs. Initially she was concerned about people taking her seriously and lacked confidence in her idea but eventually she sought out the support of the university's enterprise service. Through the service she gained access to grant funding (which enabled her to buy a van), was assigned a business mentor and became part of a start-up community.

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She gained confidence in her entrepreneurial abilities by seeing positive outcomes to key decisions as well as customer endorsements. She researched her competitors and formed clear ideas about how she could differentiate her dog-walking business. Going against the advice she was given, Paige's increased self-confidence was shown in her determination to make her website reflect her personality. It was important to Paige to present herself and the business as one and the same by ensuring that her passion and commitment for the business was demonstrated through her website.

Although she was aware that her peers were now earning considerably more than her in their first graduate roles, Paige felt that the fulfilment gained from working with dogs and the satisfaction she felt at developing her own venture were their own measures of success. Having proved that it was financially viable, Paige began to see the dog-walking business as a starting point that would allow her to diversify into other related ventures.

Paige's entrepreneurial identity emerged as a result of enacting an entrepreneurial role and feeling part of an entrepreneurial community. The passion that motivated her to start the venture guided her in her decisions and gave her the confidence to challenge expectations. As a result, she has developed an entrepreneurial identity that is expressed through her dog-walking venture.

The participants' enactment of entrepreneurial activities and roles as well as their immersion in entrepreneurial networks and communities changed the way they saw themselves. These vignettes demonstrate that entrepreneurship was experienced as performative; a process of becoming through enactment and socialisation. New entrepreneurs undertake unfamiliar activities within new environments, make new contacts and build relationships within networks and join communities that they would not previously have had access to prior to embarking on their entrepreneurial endeavours. Thus, the enactment of entrepreneurship and the process of becoming are linked to the context in which it occurs. The accounts of their entrepreneurial experiences given by participants reveal a process of identity formation and development which was apparent in the participants' growing passion and commitment to their venture, as well as their increased confidence in their own entrepreneurial capabilities.

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Following Lewis (2004), the transformational shift into business ownership led to significant changes in the participants' sense of self. People tend to identify with activities that they are good at (Cardon & Kirk, 2015) and, for these participants, a growing confidence in their own abilities enabled them to internalise the entrepreneurial role. The positive emotions experienced in relation to their entrepreneurial activities also encouraged participants to identify with the entrepreneurial role (Markowska, Härtel, Brundin, Roan, et al., 2015). In the accounts of their entrepreneurial experiences, participants revealed that the passion for their venture stemmed from engaging in meaningful activity and, as a result, the venture was closely linked to their sense of self. This builds upon the claim that emotions play a role in the formation and reinforcement of the entrepreneurial identity (Markowska, Härtel, Brundin, & Roan, 2015) and supports the assertion that entrepreneurial passion results from engagement in activities that are meaningful to their sense of self (Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009).

Participants who had not previously considered an entrepreneurial career emphasised their initial lack of knowledge and experience and spoke of a growing confidence in their ability to undertake entrepreneurial tasks. This suggests that entrepreneurial confidence, or self-efficacy, can develop post start-up and, therefore, can be understood not as a static trait associated with economic motivations and driving entrepreneurial action (see Brändle, Berger, Golla, & Kuckertz, 2018) but a fluid element of entrepreneurial identity evolution. This depiction offers a more nuanced understanding of entrepreneurial identity emergence by emphasising the interrelationships between entrepreneurial passion, self-efficacy and identity.

Beyond the stereotyped entrepreneur: Universities and Enterprise Education

The myth of the heroic entrepreneur in the extant literature, likened to a deity by Farny, Frederiksen, Hannibal, & Jones (2016), leaves universities and enterprise educators in danger of focusing on entrepreneurial success resulting in students aspiring to unattainable goals. Within entrepreneurship education, the focus on the success of exemplars can reinforce the myth and result in students missing opportunities to approach entrepreneurship as a team effort as well as to learn from failure (Rae, 2006; Williams Middleton, 2013). Indeed, Henderson & Robertson, (1999) found that it was young people's

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attitudes to entrepreneurs that prevented many of them considering entrepreneurship as a career choice, suggesting that if they did not identify with these traits then they would not pursue new venture creation. As with the vignettes presented here, the majority of their respondents actively engaging in entrepreneurship education felt that they lacked (amongst other characteristics) an innate propensity for risk-taking required to be a successful entrepreneur (Henderson & Robertson, 1999). In addition, female graduates are less likely to opt for an entrepreneurial career than their male counterparts (Connolly, O’Gorman, & Bogue, 2003).

Collectively, these findings suggest that providing students with structured opportunities to reflect individually and collectively on their values, passions and motivations as well as the values, passions and motivations of a broad range of entrepreneurs can promote entrepreneurial empowerment (Santos, Neumeyer, & Morris, 2019) as well as develop self-awareness and self-efficacy. Through their enhanced self-awareness, students can create ventures that enable them to experience feelings of authenticity and compatibility with their overall sense of self thereby enhancing their motivation to persevere.

Students can also be encouraged to critique representations of the entrepreneur in the entrepreneurship literature as well as the media. The emphasis of the initial stages of entrepreneurship programmes should be on encouraging students to consider what type of entrepreneur they want to become by enabling them to recognise their agency in the crafting of their entrepreneurial identity, rather than emphasising the need to emulate those entrepreneurs celebrated by the media. In this way, entrepreneurship programmes can equip students to overcome difficulties by enabling them to create ventures that fulfil their identity needs and provide them with a sense of authenticity.

Given that the enactment of entrepreneurial activities prompts entrepreneurial identity emergence, the curriculum should also include opportunities for students to experience entrepreneurship, albeit in simulated circumstances or small-scale projects. Concrete experiences contribute to the development of students' belief in their ability to perform entrepreneurial activities (Santos, Neumeyer, & Morris, 2019). In addition, it is suggested that receiving feedback on the development of their business empowers aspiring entrepreneurs and increases their self-belief (Santos et al., 2019). Therefore, in order to

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promote identity development through socialisation and belonging, educational institutions can create start-up communities on campus as well as facilitate connections with mentors and established business networks through the creation of co-working spaces, informal and formal events and social media networking.

An awareness of potential ambivalence and even aversion to the term 'entrepreneur' could lead educators to consider how they present their offer to different groups. Given that the majority of private sector business activity is classed as micro-business and self-employment (Galloway et al., 2019), this study questions the use of high growth discourse. The findings suggest that a more inclusive language of start-up support is required that recognises the entrepreneur as an individual made up of multiple identities and not as a generic entrepreneur.

Prevailing social discourses can restrict and even prevent an individual developing their own entrepreneurial identity (Down & Giazitzoglu, 2014; Gill, 2017). Following Lewis & Llewellyn (2004), the student entrepreneurs in the study were often ambivalent about the label 'entrepreneur' and, whilst they actively accepted aspects of the stereotypical entrepreneur that were relevant and meaningful to them, they rejected other characteristics that were incompatible with their sense of self. Therefore, in contrast to the view that emphasises the power of prevailing social discourses in identity construction (see Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008 and Cohen & Musson, 2000), the participants' evolving entrepreneurial identities, although influenced by the social discourse, were not just passively received but actively shaped.

Conclusion

Given entrepreneurial identity within entrepreneurship education is not well understood (Nabi et al., 2017), this study makes visible other types of entrepreneurs who do not conform to the entrepreneurial stereotype. Thus, it is argued that people who do not identify with the entrepreneurial role can also become entrepreneurs. This challenges taken-for-granted assumptions entrenched in the characterisation of the homogenous entrepreneur (Jones, 2014) and suggests that individuals can arrive at entrepreneurship in different ways; not necessarily because of a fixed set of attributes.

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Taking an identity perspective, therefore, calls into question the theoretical entrepreneur as an autonomous lone operator. The entrepreneurs in this study sought out contact with networks and were embedded in entrepreneurial communities. Following Anderson et al. (2018) and Rae (2004), the study suggests that a sense of belonging, receiving feedback, and gaining endorsements prompted entrepreneurial identity emergence. Belonging to a community of practice can impact on individual identity (Wenger, 1999) and the study offers insights into how entrepreneurial communities of practice can stimulate the evolution of entrepreneurial identities through sharing experiences with like-minded people, and the positive emotions and self-confidence this generates.

Implications of the study

The study has implications for the design and implementation of curricula of entrepreneurship courses. Firstly, critical engagement with discourses of privilege and deficit could be incorporated into entrepreneurship courses in order to avoid designing programmes (and the selection criteria for entry on to these programmes) which reinforce narrow representations of the entrepreneur (Jones, 2014, 2015). One way this can be achieved is to include guest speakers and case studies from a broad range of entrepreneurs and venture types. Students should also be encouraged to critique representations of the entrepreneur in the entrepreneurship literature as well as the media in order to develop a more rounded view of who entrepreneurs may be.

Furthermore, induction onto entrepreneurship programmes should encourage students to consider what type of entrepreneur they want to become from the outset by enabling them to recognise their agency in the crafting of their entrepreneurial identity rather than emphasising the need to emulate those entrepreneurs celebrated by the media.

Accordingly, entrepreneurship programmes should be re-designed to stimulate entrepreneurial identity development, rather than the traditional emphasis on the development of skills and knowledge which are assumed to be deficient in the student (Jones, 2014). Given that the performance of the entrepreneurial role and socialisation into entrepreneurial communities prompts entrepreneurial identity emergence, courses should centre around opportunities, real or simulated, to undertake entrepreneurial activities and projects. In order for students to develop a sense of belonging, educational institutions can

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create start-up communities on campus as well as facilitate connections with mentors and established business networks through the creation of co-working spaces, informal and formal events and social media networking.

Limitations of the study and areas for future research

The study shows that further insights can be gained by researching all types of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. However, it represents a snap shot in time and therefore cannot provide insights into the long term impact of identity formation on the entrepreneurial experience. A longitudinal study could usefully explore the entrepreneurial experience over time and provide insights into how identities influence the strategic direction of the business.

The research is informed solely by the Western depiction of the stereotypical entrepreneur. Utilising alternative ways of 'knowing' the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship through different socio-cultural lenses (for example from the Global South) would provide more diverse understandings of identities, processes of identity formation and insights into spatial variations.

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