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Business school students' social construction of entrepreneurship: Claiming space for collective entrepreneurship discourses

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Abstract Entrepreneurship education (EE) should be based on entrepreneurship theory and implemented in student-focused learning activities. However, entrepreneurship research has an individualized tradition elaborated by scholars and policy-makers. Even if otherwise highly valuable, this framework of entrepreneurship may become a problem for student-oriented learning if the students' construction of entrepreneurship differs from the frames. In this paper, we give voice to business school students in order to map the framings for EE. As we discern business, innovation, and lifestyle discourses that are permeated by collectiveness, we claim space for collective entrepreneurship discourses while respecting the traditional ones. This enrichment might be effective in encouragement of entrepreneurship among students while also being a source of new theoretical insight.

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Introduction

In recent decades, entrepreneurs' contribution to innovations, technological change, productivity growth, effective competition, wealth, and job creation has brought about a growing interest in entrepreneurship education (EE) (Kuratko, 2005; Matlay, 2005; Plaschka & Welsch, 1990). Scholars now agree that people can be trained and encouraged to become entrepreneurs or that entrepreneurship can be fos-

tered and taught (Fayolle, 2008; Kuratko, 2005; Ronstadt, 1987). Yet, just like any other field, the field of EE is not without problems (Bécharde & Grégoire, 2005; Fiet, 2001a; Katz, 2003; Kuratko, 2005). Researchers have suggested that effective EE should be based on coherent entrepreneurship theory (Fiet, 2001a; Katz, 2003; Kuratko, 2005; Mwasalwiba, 2010) and put into practice in student-focused learning activities (Fiet, 2001b; Vesper & Gartner, 1997). However, entrepreneurship studies have an individualized tradition mostly elaborated by scholars and policy-makers. Although EE is carried out in many forms (Fiet, 2001a; Jones & Matlay, 2011) and educational activities of various kinds can be considered of high quality (Vesper & Gartner, 1997), the adoption of the underlying presumptions of individualized entrepreneurship may become a problem if it maintains restricted and simplified frameworks for student-oriented encouragement and learning (Fayolle, 2008; Kirby, 2004;

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Laukkanen, 2000; Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011). Thus, we believe that EE could gain from listening to students' accounts of entrepreneurship in constructing the framework for EE.

This study began during an EE research project (see *YVI-project brochure, 2013*) from an inductively gained insight, which we discovered is supported by Edelman, Manolova, and Brush (2008), that we need to enable students to learn the most important knowledge and skills for future entrepreneurs considering the notion of relevance for the students. As relevance is based on people's experiences and backgrounds (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) and affects the acceptance of social realities and the perceptions of legitimacy of courses and programs among the students (Edelman et al., 2008), we came to understand that there is a growing need for a student-focused interpretation of entrepreneurship in EE. We decided to take a content perspective and to aim at providing comparative analytical frames (cf. Edelman et al., 2008; Steyaert & Katz, 2004) through giving voice to students who had begun Bachelor level business school studies and are regarded as potential future entrepreneurs.

In this paper, we view entrepreneurship as a socially constructed phenomenon taking its forms in mobilized discourses (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bouchikhi, 1993; Steyaert & Katz, 2004). Our main question is: *what kinds of discourses do the students mobilize in their accounts of their potential entrepreneurial futures?* By discourses here we mean organizing frames found in sets of statements of specific use of language coupled with meaning and produced in close-range contextual (i.e., micro) situations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). We do not move forward without any kind of a structure however. Instead, our analysis focuses around the following sub question: *how do the students construct the concept of entrepreneurship, reasons for entrepreneurship, potential barriers to entrepreneurship, and the means of becoming an entrepreneur within each discourse?* In prior research, reasons for entrepreneurship have been defined as goal-directed factors that motivate individuals to become and remain as entrepreneurs (Kuratko, Hornsby, & Naffziger, 1997; Naffziger, Hornsby, & Kuratko, 1994). Barriers have meant factors that could hinder or block entrepreneurship (Kouriloff, 2000; Sarasvathy, 2004), while the means of becoming an entrepreneur have been seen as the practice-related decisions and actions that a potential entrepreneur carries out in becoming an entrepreneur (Gartner, 2008). Answering the above questions allows us to discuss how the students' construction of entrepreneurship differs from or is similar with the traditional and more recent views of entrepreneurship constructed at the macro-level context of research (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

We utilize discourse analysis as a methodological technique to systematically search for micro-level sets of statements that are found in specific use of language coupled with meaning and can be put together in the form of discourses (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell et al., 2001). Our empirical material consists of texts that are produced in semi-structured thematic interviews (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) and represent the students' meaning-making of entrepreneurship (Weick, 1979).

We believe that the student-focused, discursive perspective is still an underutilized approach in EE but helps understand the complexities of entrepreneurship (Nicholson & Anderson, 2005) in a way that contributes to the relevance of educational content and practice to the students (Edelman et al., 2008; Fiet, 2001b; Greene, Katz, & Johannisson, 2004). Analyzing the micro-level educational actors' discursive meaning-making of entrepreneurship serves as a rich approach that differs from conventional perspectives by leaving room for multiple interpretations. The permissiveness of the discussions will not only help enrich the field but may have practical implications as well in the form of students' more readily acceptance of educators' concerns as they are enabled by discourses mobilized bottom-up (cf. Rojo & van Dijk, 1997). This serves to democratize not only entrepreneurship but the intellectual framings of it.

In the search for the enrichment of the discussion, we start by examining previous entrepreneurship research that we see as the comparative macro-level discursive framework to our analysis. The examination of the theoretical frame before the analysis might not reflect our inductive approach but is perhaps more common to the readers. Within this review we also discover some recent perspectives of entrepreneurship. Next, we discuss our methodological choices, research process, empirical material, and analysis technique. We also reflect on our own views on entrepreneurship. Then, we analyze the students' accounts and conclude by a call for an embrace of collective entrepreneurship while valuing the traditional individual-level perspectives in EE.

The discursive framework of entrepreneurship education

Many scholars state that the attempts to settle on a precise and single definition of entrepreneurship have resulted in infinite number of arguments and contradictory views (Gartner, 2001; Howorth, Tempest, & Coupland, 2005; Low, 2001; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, the abundance of studies does not necessarily indicate diversity in the discussions or mobilized discourses (Grant & Perren, 2002). As Berglund and Johansson (2007: 78) state, "the ambiguity and vagueness surrounding the meaning of entrepreneurship can in fact be viewed as a challenge to us to throw some light on the taken-for-granted assumptions" (see also Cooney, 2005; Gartner, 2001; Zahra, 2007).

The individualistic presumption of entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is often defined by asking who the entrepreneur is and what does this person do (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). From the point of view of EE, it is important to examine who and what are included to reflect who and what might be left out (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009).

Probably the most persistent endeavor of entrepreneurship research consists of efforts to understand the entrepreneurial individual (Sarasvathy, 2004). This perspective entails that entrepreneurship is predetermined by the individual (Johannisson, Landström, & Rosenberg, 1998; Low & MacMillan, 1988) who is guided by one's entrepreneurial nature (Kets de Vries, 1985). The research tradition supports a

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