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# **The performative (de)legitimation of entrepreneurial identity through business support**

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Sub theme 70: The Bright and Dark Sides of Entrepreneurship's Social Effects

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how the view of entrepreneurs as innovating, high growth risk-takers conflicts with how everyday entrepreneurs construct their identity. An ethnographic case study of a business incubator/accelerator in left-behind city, examines how traditional views of heroic entrepreneurship influences legitimation of their entrepreneurial identity, revealing how support both empowers and disempowers. This sheds light on how policy interventions guided by the positive view of entrepreneurship misses the self-employed and micro-businesses in those places most in need of the inclusive growth small business can bring.

### **Introduction**

Entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship are portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive light, both in academia and broader society (Blackburn & Kovalainen, 2009). Entrepreneurship is associated with employment creation and economic regeneration and has been the preferred solution to regional inequality for over 30 years as governments in developed and developing nations have abandoned welfare policies in favour of enterprise to address social and economic problems. Although this approach has failed to address poverty and deprivation in low-income urban communities, the image of the heroic entrepreneur regenerating the inner-city persists in academia, policy and practice. This view of entrepreneurs as innovative growth creators is reflective of 'Silicon Valley' type entrepreneurship that dominates the literature (Welter et al., 2016). This emphasises heroic and extraordinary stereotypes that take risks and create high growth businesses. While stereotypes conflict with the reality of everyday business that represent the majority of the economy (Welter et al., 2016), they shape the normative view of what entrepreneurs do and how they behave (Raible & Williams-Middleton, 2021).

This paper examines how the dominant, positive view of entrepreneurs as innovating, high growth risk-takers influences identity construction for everyday entrepreneurs in an economically left-behind city in the north of the UK. This research holds with the view that an

entrepreneurial identity is constructed through social and contextual processes as part of a legitimization process (Williams-Middleton, 2013; Down & Warren, 2008). Approaching entrepreneurship as a ‘process of becoming’, constructed relationally through interactions with others (Fletcher & Watson, 2007), the business support process influences how participants ‘make and remake’ their entrepreneurial identities. Identity is produced as people work in shaping a credible and coherent notion of self, in relation with others and within their social context (Marlow & McAdam, 2015).

As business support providers are a key conduit shaping entrepreneurial identity (Williams-Middleton, 2013), the research focuses on an ethnographic case study of a business support initiative seeking to incubate and accelerate local entrepreneurial businesses. It firstly examines the ideology underpinning the business support project before analysing how nascent entrepreneurs create their entrepreneurial identity through interactions with support providers, revealing how support both empowers and disempowers everyday entrepreneurs on the programme, building confidence and passion whilst providing direction, but also creating self-doubt and demotivation. In some cases the identity work taking place within the programme served to paradoxically create resistance to the business advice imparted. This has implications for policy and practice, as it sheds light on how interventions guided by the positive view of entrepreneurship misses the self-employed and micro-businesses in those places most in need of the inclusive growth small business can bring (Shuman, 2013).

## **Entrepreneurial identity, performativity and legitimisation in entrepreneurial training**

### *Entrepreneurial identity*

Entrepreneurial identity refers to how an individual views themselves in relation to the entrepreneurial role. This incorporates the meanings, behaviours and attitudes that they attach to the role of an entrepreneur, and the nature and extent to which they judge that they fulfil them. A persons’ construction of entrepreneurial identity takes on board social norms and expectations of what is expected of entrepreneurs, to construct their sense of entrepreneurial self - to ask the question ‘who am I?’ (Murnieks & Mosakowski 2007). Therefore entrepreneurial identity is ‘shaped by societal discourse of what it means to be entrepreneurial’, taking on board stereotypical characterisations of entrepreneurship through public discourses seen in media representations, and through their interrelations with others (Wagenschwanz, 2021 p. 72; Fletcher & Watson, 2007). Although there are different types of entrepreneurial identity recognized – e.g. competitive, social or community driven (Gruber and MacMillan

2017), without these alternatives and the stories of everyday and ordinary entrepreneurs, the newly forming identities will prioritise those dominating, in a desire to conform to norms

The identity work of entrepreneurs concerns how they form and manage their identity, recognizing that identities are in a continual state of flux (Wagenshwanz, 2021), and in pre- and early business stages concerns how individuals are constructing their entrepreneurial identity (Clarke and Holt, 2017). Their sense of entrepreneurial self is balanced alongside multiple other identities, for example gender, parent, employee, creative, environmentalist, or social campaigner; and differences in meanings and attitudes can be a source of inner conflict as they transition to take on the mindset of the entrepreneur. Hence, a significant body of work explores how women entrepreneurs have struggled to navigate the masculinity associated with entrepreneurship (Galloway et al., 2015). As fluidity of identity can influence the new businesses motivation and self-efficacy (Werthes et al., 2018), entrepreneurial training and business support has a key role in supporting entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurial identity construction, through learning, mentorship and business support (Raible & Williams-Middleton 2021, Newberry et al., 2018)

Identity is relational, constructed and reconstructed through an individual's interactions with others (Fletcher & Watson, 2007), and as such it requires validation from the social group (Clarke & Holt, 2010). As the group shares knowledge about the meanings, behaviours and attitudes of entrepreneurship, the individual builds a sense of belonging or difference from the group, conforming to or resisting the group norms (Donnellon et al., 2014). This goes beyond discourse to take on visual symbols such as the physical environment, artwork, formal dress and body-language (Donnellon et al., 2014), in a multi-sensory process of affect (Katila et al., 2019). Katila et al. (2019) use performative identity theory to argue that affective processes involved in entrepreneurial identity construction serve to create an attachment between the entrepreneur and the dominant logics of exceptional entrepreneurship, which serves to reinforce these norms.

### *Performativity*

Performativity refers to the idea that reality is enacted by our words and actions (Law, 2004). Butler (1988) explains how gender roles come into being through repeated performance, a continual process of crafting identity through interactions with others that goes beyond discourse. Performativity explains how logics of entrepreneurial exceptionality continue to be

reproduced across different contexts, as entrepreneurs and narratives in everyday interactions and the media are active in creating the reality of entrepreneurship (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Muellerleile, 2013). Feminist researchers use performativity to expose how entrepreneurship is enacted as a masculinised concept, improving understanding of how entrepreneurial ideals are represented and created (Galloway et al., 2015). This draws attention to how dominant logics of entrepreneurship are continually re-inscribed, affecting the identity formation of potential entrepreneurs who model themselves in a performative act of becoming (Phillips and Knowles, 2012).

The hegemonic discourse that presents entrepreneurship as heroic, risk-taking, glamorous, wealthy, as well as white, well-educated and middleclass, creates a set of affects that serve to normalise the dominant form (Cockayne, 2015). Icons of entrepreneurship, political discourse and heroic media representations are all part of the processes of affect that influence feelings which normalise this form of entrepreneurship and constructions of entrepreneurial identities. The discursive influences of enterprise culture include personal-branding to create an entrepreneurial-self accompanied by a belief in personal potential to achieve power and prosperity despite economic precariousness (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). The perceived meritocratic rewards for entrepreneurial effort, the glamour and respect afforded to entrepreneurship, the perceived autonomy, flexibility and job-satisfaction from self-employment provide seductive inducements to become entrepreneurs (Cockayne, 2016). Cockayne (2016) suggests that the hope provided by entrepreneurialism maintains attachment to it, identifying how entrepreneurial affect produced and reproduced attachments to precarious working conditions, as emotions of ‘love’ and ‘passion’ maintained insecure work, pro-bono and under-paid contracts.

#### *Entrepreneurial Legitimization through training and business support*

Constructing entrepreneurial identity is also an important factor in entrepreneurial training, and business support providers are a key conduit shaping entrepreneurial identity (Nabi et al., 2017, Williams-Middleton 2013). Given the large proportion of new businesses accessing support, understanding their influence on entrepreneurial development is of key importance (Mole and Caperas 2017). Business support concerns providing advice and guidance to entrepreneurs in navigating institutional norms of the industry and ecosystem, constructing networks, helping to address business challenges and reduce uncertainty, and provide encouragement and reassurance (Redien-Collot & Lefebvre, 2015; Arshan et al., 2018). Most research on business

support concerns the dyadic relationships between entrepreneur and coach or mentor (Redien-Collot & Lefebvre, 2015, Bennet & Robson, 2005, Arshed et al., 2019). Here individual support providers use their personal traits, experiences and understandings in adopting strategies to influence the entrepreneurial attitude and/or behaviour of the aspiring entrepreneur. They draw on different influence tactics of persuasion, engagement, criticism and provocation which have different affects according to the situation (Redien-Collot & Lefebvre, 2015)

Entrepreneurial identity is recognized as having a central role in the entrepreneurship process, and central to the legitimizing process (Ladu-Lefebvre et al 2021; Williams Middleton, 2013; Down & Warren, 2008; Navis & Glynn, 2011). A credible entrepreneurial identity is important to gaining stakeholder confidence in the viability of the business in order to access resources and secure investment necessary for success (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Delmar & Shane, 2004). The potential of the entrepreneur and business must be conveyed to others through demonstrations of their meeting expected behaviours, attributes and achievements considered necessary for acceptance (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). In the early phases of business start-up founder and venture identities are intertwined, to the extent that personal legitimacy represents business legitimacy (Fisher et al., 2016). Within a business support environment, participants must meet expectations of entrepreneurial performance to be accepted as credible (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). This involves a power relationship, whereby the dominant members determine what constitutes acceptance.

This paper explores how the dominant view of entrepreneurs as innovating, high growth risk-takers is performed in an entrepreneurial learning and support in an incubator setting, in affective processes that influence how everyday entrepreneurs construct their identity, and serve to legitimise or delegitimise their businesses. This goes beyond dyadic relationships between individual mentors and entrepreneurs, but considers the combination of support relationships that take place within a group learning environment.

## **Research approach**

The research focuses on a case study of staff and participants of an intensive business support programme – Velocity - offering a week-long boot camp followed by weekly seminars, mentors, networking events, pitching events and weekly business ‘panel meetings’ where a team of mentors advised on progress and actions. The ethnographic approach adopted

considered the interactions of a ‘milieu of social actors’ to examine the experiences of the participants in the programme and the staff and mentors influencing them (Peren and Ram, 2004), with time spent in the setting digging below the surface, to provide an insider’s interpretation (Watson, 2011).

### *The research setting*

The chief executive of a local business membership organisation established Velocity in 2014 with a goal to develop 500 ‘super businesses’ that could ‘demonstrate meaningful and sustainable long-term growth’ measured by GVA, employment generation and long-term investment. This focus on high growth, mirrors the focus on Silicon Valley type entrepreneurship and the search for gazelles and unicorns characteristic of much entrepreneurship policy, laying the foundations underpinning the rationale of the programme.

The research took place in Liverpool, an economically left-behind city to the North of the UK. The city has had mixed fortunes, growing and with the fortunes of the port that declined from the 1930’s, followed by post-war diversification into branch-plant manufacturing that was decimated by de-industrialisation in the 1970’s and 1980’s, with the Conservative government at the time suggesting it be left to ‘managed decline’. The decline of the city and at times radical resistance to its fate led to negative media portrayals that constructed a negative discourse of both people and place (Boland 2008), with stereotypes that position local people as un-dynamic and un-enterprising (Southern, 2013), Boris Johnson describing it as ‘self-pity city’ when editor of the Spectator (Johnson, 2004). In the last 20 years Liverpool has reinvented itself through physical regeneration and redevelopment and rebranding as a cultural destination. This was accompanied by a focus on ‘serious’ economic development and global competitiveness rather than local manufacturing or social enterprise (North, 2010), that appears set to continue in Local Enterprise Partnership strategies (Thompson, 2017). When the research was carried out increased start-up rates still fell below national averages, and were accompanied by low survival rates (Nowak, 2018).

### *Data collection*

Over 80 hours of participant observation was carried out, with data collected in the form of written field-notes describing and reflecting upon observations of, and participation in, various meetings and events, and of interactions around the shared office space. I followed one cohort, joining them as the programme started, and observed the recruitment and boot-camp of another

over a six-month time period between June and November 2015. I attended workshops, 1:1's, meetings, and spent time observing interactions in the co-working area, and observed three business panel meetings involving six different mentors. The business panel was central to the Velocity model bringing knowledge and experience from CEOs and financial directors to start-up businesses. A de-facto board comprising 3-4 mentors drawn from a rotating group convened fortnightly to listen to businesses progress and problems, offering direction and advice, leveraging introductions to their networks and resources, with follow-up sessions with the Velocity facilitators to check and support progress.

Observation enabled me to see what actually happened in the business support process rather than relying on accounts given, witnessing how participants, facilitators, and mentors related to each other to understand what was important to them (Van Maanen, 2011). This enabled me to explore how the Velocity understanding of entrepreneurship was constructed and 'taught' and note observations of episodes navigated by nascent entrepreneurs as they constructed their entrepreneurial identity (Emerson et al, 2001). As I was there in the role of researcher it was easy to make fieldnotes either in my notebook or on a laptop as events unfolded. My notes described workshops that I attended, the participants contributions and my reflections of my own emotions and perceptions of how others were feeling, highlighting transcribed verbatim comments alongside expressions and my understanding of feelings (Emerson et al. 2001). I noted down instances that I was able to explore in more depth during interviews.

In-depth, unstructured interviews were carried out with the Chief Executive (CEO), two staff facilitators, a mentor and 14 participant businesses. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and two hours and were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis - an overview of participants shown on Table 1 below. Interview questions were open ended to stimulative narrative biographical storytelling (Kvale, 2007) and enable emergent issues to be explored. Interviews with those working at Velocity gave additional insight to the ethos of the organisation, their views on entrepreneurship, entrepreneurialism in the city and the impact of support on small business recruited to the programme. Interviews with programme participants sought to understand their motivations and views on entrepreneurship through telling me their entrepreneurial stories and their experiences of the programme. Businesses were selected from the main cohort studied at Velocity. I carried out an additional interview with a and mentor in September 2016, where they reflected on organisational developments following the initial research period, and participant progress since completing the programme.



Table 1: Velocity Case Study Interview Participants

Interview	Name	Role/business
Staff facilitator 1	Helen	Business advice and support
Staff facilitator 2	Tony	Business advice and support (+ follow up)
Staff/mentor	Francesca	CEO and business support
Mentor	Jill	Entrepreneur in Residence (+ follow up)
Participant	Briony	Social enterprise providing training
Participant	Hannah and Mike	Drinks manufacture
Participant	Dean	Specialist vehicle hire
Participant	Rob	App creator
Participant	Sally	App creator
Participant	Bruce	Training provider
Participant	Brian	Film Maker
Participant	Charly	HR Consultancy
Participant	Paul	Gourmet food subscription service
Participant	Yazmin	Sports consultancy
Participant	Valerie	Architect
Participant	Melissa	Artist

### *Analysis*

Both observational and interview data was coded using nVivo software. The coded data was grouped into themes that discerned between experiences of participants and business support provision, moving between theory and data in an iterative process (Saldana, 2015). Views of participants were compared against those of employees and mentors to identify incongruities and themes for focus. Once the theoretical themes were established I moved back to fieldwork notes to connect episodes observed with the themes identified (Emerson et al, 2001), using interview data to understand the broader context behind conflicted entrepreneurial identities, bringing theory and experience together to illuminate the issues (Willis and Trondman, 2002). The findings section below blends interpretation with participant voices discerning between participant observations (PO), and transcribed dialogue. Analysis provides further interpretation that seeks to challenge the current practices of Velocity and consider an alternative more empowering approach (Schwartzman, 1993; Thomas, 1993).

## **Findings**

### *Velocity's conception of entrepreneurship*

Velocity drew inspiration from the MassChallenge programme dominated by technology driven, high growth start-ups associated with Silicon Valley type entrepreneurship (Welter et

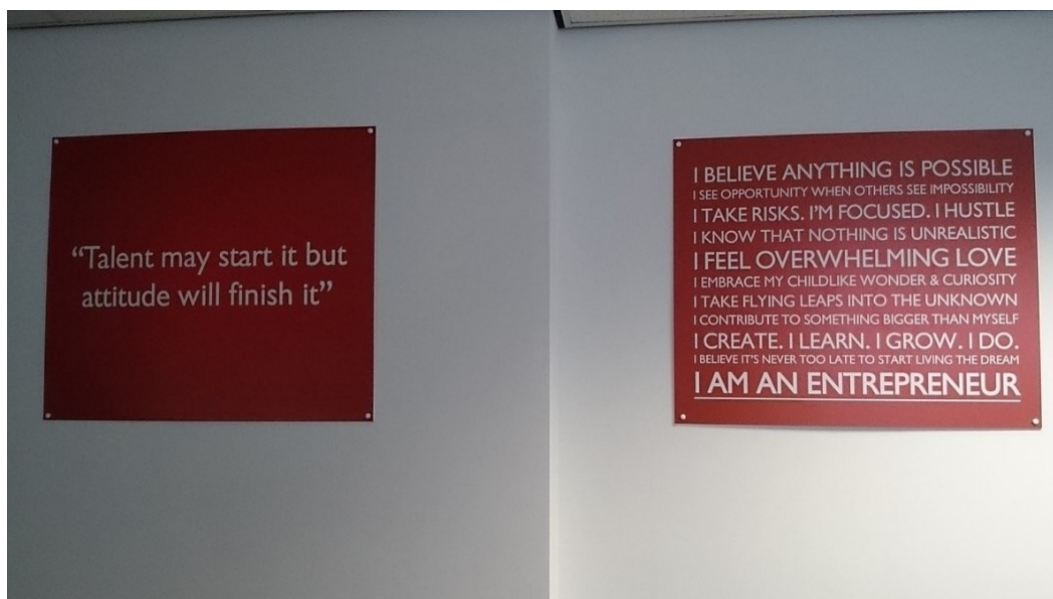
al. 2016). They aimed to identify ‘real entrepreneurs’ and support them to grow to contribute to local economic development. Velocity’s CEO perceived entrepreneurs as naturally inclined towards business;

I don’t think that entrepreneurs are made ... I think that they are born, and what I mean is that there is a very small percentage of entrepreneurs who have the vision and the ability put together to create a high growth business (interview).

Staff shared these views, highlighting personality traits and behaviours that positioned entrepreneurs as innovative, risk-taking, and growth-creating profit-makers. It can be seen in the décor of the co-working space, with inspirational quotes portraying entrepreneurs as extraordinary people decorating the walls (Image 1). The Velocity team reinforced this view of the exceptional entrepreneurial personality linking it to business growth. Both the CEO and facilitators determined whether a person is entrepreneurial via a set of positive traits, combined with business growth.

I think fundamentally it is a mind-set. It is a series of personality traits like risk taking, motivation, perseverance, all of those kind of things and to some extent there has to be an intent to or a passion for making money... [the term entrepreneur] doesn’t necessarily apply to someone who is like a freelancer that has created say their little HR consultancy and they have got a few clients and that provides them with like a wage. (Facilitator 1, interview)

**Image 1: Workspace artwork**



Mentors demonstrated how they shared the dominant Velocity view that ‘entrepreneurs are born and not made’ in discussions taking place between business panel meetings. They talked about their frustration with the speed and scale of business growth that they attributed to participants seeing their businesses primarily as a way to make a living. They complained participants lacked ambition:

Panel talk about how they can see progress [in rate of business development], but sometimes it isn’t happening to the extent that they would like. “A lot of them just want to make a living. How do you change that?” (PO – including verbatim quote)

Here mentors associated a focus on providing a livelihood with being un-entrepreneurial. The response from another panel member reinforces the functionalist view by a discursive return to intrinsic entrepreneurship:

It is an attitude .... It is the difference between a businessman and a man with a business. An entrepreneur is more about a vision and making a difference (PO verbatim comment)

To further illustrate this view, when discussing the imperative of quickly scaling participant Rob’s app business given a competitive market, mentors characterised him and other Velocity participants with an inability to delegate work that hinders growth:

The concept of growing a global business is not on the radar. The question is ‘do you want to make money or do you want to make wages’? The problem is that they just want to make wages. Even when they say they want to make money, the reality is that they want to make wages. (PO verbatim comment)

### *Conceptions of entrepreneurial Liverpool*

Velocity staff and mentors associated the USA with the ideal entrepreneurial mindset, characterised by positive thinking and perseverance, and the UK with caution and giving up under pressure, with Liverpool singled out as particularly risk averse. In interview the Velocity CEO acknowledged the resilience of city residents in dealing with unemployment and economic instability. However, having taken the knocks there was an expectation that it was up to the residents to ‘step out of the box and think forward’, and self-preservation criticised for creating risk-aversion. Mentors reveal a negative view of the entrepreneurial culture in the city – blaming an ‘ingrained dependency culture’ for low start-up rates. They relate this to historic reliance on public sector support following the withdrawal of large companies, arguing that start-ups had come to expect free advice and financial support

The councillor outlook is symptomatic of the Liverpool culture around business and entrepreneurialism – it's 'more about welfare than self help' (Mentor PO with verbatim comment)

You talk about it...the culture in Liverpool. That there is a dependency culture, that people expect a hand out and things, and that they don't do it for themselves (Facilitator 1 interview)

Moreover, they link the view of the city to their opinion of participants. When explaining why the city is risk-averse and lacking in ambition, the CEO used Rob's hesitation in growing his app business as an example.

### *Legitimising conceptions of entrepreneurship through performance*

Whilst the business panel members had experience of starting and running their own ventures or specialist knowledge in the field, employees legitimised themselves by referring to Velocity as a start-up, drawing parallels between their own creativity and entrepreneurial innovation. Velocity staff and participants recognised the Velocity CEO as the driving force, participant Charly noting that the ethos was "about CEO and her energy, and her vision." As Velocity's parent organisation had no funding, the CEO drew on existing resources and networks to support the initiative, securing input from the banking sector, a University and several local businesses who between them provided mentors, advice, business panel support, workshop facilitation, prizes and free business banking. The CEO referred to her 'boot-strapping' to access resources, and 'selling' the idea to mentors and partners, drawing on this in workshops to demonstrate how she pitched the idea to obtain investment, drawing parallels to the participants new business ventures:

So I have basically begged stolen and borrowed everything that we have. I have got a spare office which is already being paid for by us [the parent company] anyway – so I just moved people around so we could have that space. I have stolen and borrowed the desks from people who needed to change the furniture. All my mentor support is delivered to me free of charge – all of those guys at business panel give me their time free of charge... I think I can sell the product very well. I can sell the concept and I think what happens is people do want to give back ... In order for them to continue with it they would really like to see an outcome...they may see an opportunity to be part of that business, either in terms of investment or for those businesses to employ them later on down the line. (CEO interview)

Facilitators' entrepreneurial credentials came from frequent references to Tony's past management role in a micro-business, and Helen's experiences of her parents' family business. Their conversational references legitimised their roles to participants, and during interview the discussed how they similarly applied their ambition and creativity in Velocity. In many ways the Velocity CEO and facilitators adopted entrepreneurial roles as laid out in mainstream rhetoric, and traits theories that if you try hard enough, think big, be creative and believe in yourself that you can succeed in a venture (Kerr et al. 2017).

### **Velocity's approach to entrepreneurial learning**

#### *Competing for business support*

Velocity candidates were required to pitch for a place on the programme in a seemingly competitive process, although almost all who applied were accepted. Participants believed in this competitiveness and took their winning a place on Velocity as endorsement of their business - and their 'entrepreneurial-selves' - boosting confidence and self-belief. The competitive element continued with regular pitching competitions, and progress in developing their businesses was rewarded by enhanced support, business mentoring and entry to the weekly 'business panel' meetings, whilst those whose businesses who did not grow were excluded from aspects of support. All participants were able to access support from the Velocity facilitators and CEO who were often available in the co-working space, led workshop sessions and provided 1:1 support alongside mentor and entrepreneur in residence, Jill.

#### *Encouraging entrepreneurial identity formation*

The core Velocity team acted as entrepreneurial role models, performing the role of passionate, confident, innovating entrepreneur talking about entrepreneurial qualities such as 'ambition', 'resilience' and 'perseverance'. Efforts were made to enthuse and inspire participants to take on the entrepreneur mantle, including advice on how entrepreneurs dress, behave and speak – with participants encouraged to become a special type of person;

CEO: What skills do you think we need? Communications, presentation, time management, IT, technical. What about attitude? Positivity, motivation resilience, perseverance, tenacity.

'this is the hard part, as much as we can give you 12 weeks of knowledge and skills what is more difficult is to change your attitude. Who holds the key? How do we change your attitude?

CEO- Entrepreneurs are always on time. Always up early. Always talking to people. Always pitching. Always got your business on your mind. We can encourage, lead, show you the way. Put you in the position when you are with entrepreneurs - See what they do. See their habits. CEO (boot-camp PO)

Participants were encouraged to be resilient and battle against the odds; as Facilitator 1 said while discussing the challenges faced by participants; ‘if you can’t take the knocks you’re not an entrepreneur’.

The team referred to participants as ‘entrepreneurs’ in day-to-day conversation, the photo gallery of participants was referred to as ‘the wall of entrepreneurs’ and the group were addressed as entrepreneurs. For example, introducing a speaker the CEO announced: ‘Entrepreneurs please stand up and give a big entrepreneurial welcome to.....’ and on a hot summers day when the room was overheating asked ‘the entrepreneurs by the window, please open it’. Participants appeared to accept (and welcome) this identity, and I observed them referring to each other as entrepreneurs.

#### *Pitching - building confidence, passion and self-belief*

A recurring theme when talking about the influence of Velocity was how it built confidence – from obtaining a place on the programme and the knowledge and skills learned. Participants talked about how they lacked confidence in themselves but had confidence or passion in their business idea, here relating back to traits theories (Cardon 2015; Kerr et al. 2017). Briony told how she had no self-confidence but belief in her social enterprise addressing social needs of young disabled people, her belief stemming from her passion:

I think you have got to believe in whatever it is you are trying to, whatever your business is you have got to believe in it 100%. You have got to go to bed thinking about it and you have got to wake up in the morning. You have got to live it... You’ve got to want it all the time. (Briony, interview)

Support and advice in constructing pitches encapsulates how Velocity influenced constructions of entrepreneurial identities as the pitch is a form of both narrative sensemaking and sense-giving (Gaddefors and Anderson 2017), where the nascent entrepreneur constructs a story that legitimises their role both to themselves and others. Having noted that ‘entrepreneurs are constantly talking about their business’ in boot-camp the CEO encouraged participants to pitch to everyone they met. This represented a call for participants to perform the role of entrepreneur as laid down by Velocity, in a performative construction of the entrepreneurial self (Phillips

and Knowles 2012). The CEO talked about feeling proud of participant development through seeing their pitch, and participants measured their progress through development of pitches, signalling increasing confidence and assurance in their businesses:

The pitching was amazing. That was brilliant. I would never have done that on my own. [the CEO] was saying, like 'you can do this'... 'We believe in you!' I'm like 'Why?'... ...it was dead nerve-wracking but if they said 'pitch now' I'd just get up and pitch. I practice my pitch on the train coming in in the morning because you never know when the CEO will just go 'right stand up and pitch'. She just makes you pitch all the time. You'd feel like you are letting her down if you do it wrong. If you had to stand up and pitch to someone and you were like 'I can't!', and you'd been here like 20 weeks she'd be like 'are you messing?' So you do owe her. We do owe her. (Briony, interview)

Some found difficulties with pitching as something they had to overcome in order to succeed in business. Sally referred to her lack of confidence with pitching when explaining why she does not see herself as entrepreneurial, referring to other people being confident and motivated.

I don't know. I think a lot of people in here are quite, erm, what's the word? Very motivated, know exactly what they want, they are going to get it, they are not scared of anything. Lots of, erm, confidence, erm, lots of guts, and I don't think I'm like that at all. I think I am very like probably quite quiet, like if there is a big group of people like when we started I don't think I spoke. Erm the pitching thing, I'm really terrified of that. (Sally, Interview)

Here revealing how the mainstream conception of entrepreneurship rooted in the classical theorists and traits theories as adopted by Velocity is at odds with the participant businesses. Mastering the pitch performance influenced confidence that was reinforced by winning 'pitch of the week' or by accessing further support, however those that struggled with pitching were alienated and barred from the additional support they needed.

#### *Guiding, advising and questioning - Business Panel*

Whilst the workshops were focused on providing generalised knowledge to the group the expert panel provided tailored advice that ranged from support and advice on how to grow through expanding markets or capacity, changing focus of the business idea, and sometimes discouraging participants from proceeding with what the panel viewed as an ill-advised venture. Participants were invited to take part based on the amount of progress the CEO and

facilitators judged they had achieved, and it was an intense experience for participants, who referred to the panel as ‘Dragons’ after the TV show Dragons Den.

They encouraged participants to take risks in order to grow the business. Rob – who designed apps for schools – was advised to expand his market geographically and to take on sales support staff. Hannah was guided in moving smoothie production from her kitchen to manufacturing premises to build capacity and meet food safety standards. Dean was encouraged to secure investment for his specialist vehicle hire company. The panel often talked about how the individual was entrepreneurial but the idea was not, and encouraged them to change their focus. Over a series of sessions the panel encouraged Melissa to refocus away from her initial web-design business to build on her passion for art, then moving her from her idea to set up as a commissioned-based artist, to creating homewares reproducing her own designs. At the time I noted how they boosted Melissa’s self-belief and ambition while guiding her towards a business idea: “The Dragons have belief in her talent – they make this clear. It is almost like they are giving Melissa confidence in her own abilities” (PO notes from business panel)

Only businesses deemed viable by the facilitators and CEO were able to attend panel, and exclusion meant they considered the business was making insufficient progress. Although participants talked about ‘getting a ‘grilling’ or ‘roasting’ from the panel, this was clearly preferable to not being invited to attend. Observed interactions in the co-working space on panel days show how it dominated conversations. When Barry and Jack talked about how they were not attending as they were busy with their businesses, I reflected that they may be reluctant to reveal exclusions to the peer group to maintain their entrepreneurial legitimacy. With an air of bravado Jack tells how ‘[He] isn’t going in today as nothing has changed, doesn’t have anything to say. He [says he] never has a problem with panel – they can help him with the business side but not the ins and outs of his business’ (PO of co-working space notes).

Panel judgements also appeared to provide legitimisation of entrepreneurs with the rest of the group, as it was equated with success. Although Patsy appeared to be doing the right things – securing investment, raising her profile, and thinking big - the panel and CEO did not view her business as viable, questioning the product and projections. When Patsy related her negative panel experience to the group, I observed her seeking validation from her peers. Patsy was complaining that she hated attending panel as they were ‘always critical’ of her and how ‘they don’t give credit where it is due’ (PO notes). Whilst Patsy was talking, I noted how the other



participants wandered off until I was the only person listening to her story, and I felt they did not want to associate with her perceived failure. Conversely, Velocity's attention to those deemed as having growth potential created a hierarchy within the group. Mentor Jill discussed disparities between businesses relating how two entrepreneurs became arrogant after securing investment looking down on those who were still trying to establish, suggesting that the gulf between growth potential of businesses on the programme harmed the group dynamic.

## **Participant experiences of Velocity's entrepreneurial learning**

### *Conceptions of entrepreneurship*

Participant business were asked to describe an entrepreneur during interviews and given that they were in the midst of the Velocity programme they invariably repeated the functionalist rhetoric adopted in workshops. Reflecting the influence of traits theories they talked about having belief or passion, creativity and taking risks (Kerr et al. 2017). However, they also referred to 'making a difference', being 'nice to people and open up opportunities for others'. In one 'What is an entrepreneur?' workshop session participants were asked to shout out a word they associated with entrepreneurs – as expected they referred to 'innovation, creative, brave, passionate, high-energy, self-belief'. However, during break out discussions there was evidenced of more varied conceptions, with one participant noting 'they are just people', and another referring to 'dark side' issues of criminality and dishonesty (Kets de Vries 1985). However, only heroic stereotypical aspects were fed back to the main group as participants conformed to the dominant narrative.

### *Taking advice and dealing with failure*

There was an implicit expectation that participants would-and should-progress by following Velocity's advice. Facilitator's maintained that participants needed to be 'pushed along', 'having someone to answer to' for lack of progress. Following advice meant conforming to the views held by the team and the subsequent acceptance and legitimation of the participant as an entrepreneur. This influenced a sense of belonging, and people left or reduced their engagement with the programme when advice conflicted with their plans for the business.

Patsy abandoned the programme following the panel's criticism of her business. The CEO viewed this as part of a 'weeding out' process and considered Patsy 'un-entrepreneurial' with a 'weak business idea', she talked about how she wanted the programme to help those who were not entrepreneurial 'to [fail] fast, fail cheaply and realise very, very quickly that actually

they need to go and get a job, or they need to be just a freelancer'. Others persevered despite setbacks, although the judgements from Velocity regarding their growth potential clearly impacted upon their confidence. Paul was setting up two businesses while working full-time, and he talked about how participants received differential treatment according to who is perceived as more successful. He struggled to commit time to growing his businesses as he had to earn a living. Despite winning pitching competition and making network connections he was side-lined for not making enough progress.

I've been working 16 hours a day for the last year and I'm not asking for personal support but I think they [Velocity] should understand the situation. But I didn't get that. They asked me not to go to any more business panels, so I have only been to two of them and I didn't get a mentor...even winning the prizes! ... The business is moving. Not as fast as they would like but it is moving fast. And I get good feedback from other places. (Paul, interview)

It is evident here that Paul having been rejected by Velocity is seeking legitimisation from elsewhere, telling me how he had found a mentor from his network. Failure to meet growth expectations impacted on the amount of support he received, which he felt was a barrier to growth, and he felt trapped in a vicious circle.

Yasmin was also excluded from business panel. She recognised that her business would remain small scale but was confident that it could provide her with an income. She told how she found the growth focus of the programme demoralising, repeatedly noting that the advisors did not believe in her, which led her to consider giving up completely.

A lot of the focus has been on getting finance into the business so you know going for loans or going pitching... it was never my intention to go and get finance to put into the company in the first place into [name of business]. Because I knew that the returns would be so low that chances are I wouldn't get that sort of money anyway. Also, I didn't particularly want to put the organisation into debt from the outset ... And also it seems to have been in growing the company quite quickly as well. So, you know a lot of the questions being asked was how many employees have you got or do you intend to have... I always knew that there would never be any other employees by the end of the year or even in two years ... So yes it's been quite challenging when you go into a panel session and basically all three people in the room tell you should just give up and not bother and go and get a job stacking shelves down in Tesco! (Yasmin, interview)

As Yasmin's entrepreneurial identity relates to 'everyday' entrepreneurship conflicts with that of Velocity staff and mentors, it has threatened her fragile entrepreneurial identity causing her to deeply question the future of her business.

Others resisted advice that their business was not viable. During his interview Bruce talked about years of struggle and just getting by with his training business having accessed numerous business support programmes. The business panel and advisors were trying to guide him down an alternative business route, but he was resisting their advice. Acknowledging precarity Bruce internalised the rhetoric of the entrepreneurial self (Read 2009), with talk of staying positive and achieving success through tenacity:

I'd rather have my own business. If my line manager offered me a full time job I would have to say no. And it is mad because I feel insecure, I don't know where my next meal is coming from and .... But then I would be sitting in this place going, I could have my own training centre now (laughs) ..... there has been nothing specific other than sheer bloody mindedness and determination that has kept me going ... It is the resilience thing isn't it? I'm going to come back and be more determined! (Bruce, interview)

This dedication to normative heroic entrepreneurial values kept Bruce on this path, whereby his self-belief over-rides advice from Velocity. Bruce told how he 'tuned out' when receiving negative feedback and continued working on his business regardless of panel advice to cease trading. By encouraging entrepreneurial confidence and perseverance participants were inadvertently encouraged to resist Velocity advice to give up on their businesses. Participants were encouraged to be resilient and battle against the odds; the functionalist heroic version of the entrepreneur that Velocity teaches prevents Bruce from taking advice to give up.

## **Discussion**

The data illustrates how Velocity was founded on a 'bright' view of entrepreneurship that emphasizes the positive impacts on individuals and positions it as a key driver in addressing economic inequalities (Marti et al., 2020). Ideals of the heroic entrepreneur created the subtext for the organisation, and interactions involving staff and mentors reveal understandings of entrepreneurship that emphasise profit and growth, moulding participants into this particular idea of what an entrepreneur should be. This section examines how their focus on the heroic version of entrepreneurship influenced the construction of participant's entrepreneurial identity by inspiring passion and confidence, however the extent to which the emphasis on growth is relevant to self-employed and micro-business is questioned. It then considers how Velocity

staff and mentors' views of entrepreneurship were at odds with their views of the local entrepreneurial culture which influenced their perceptions of participant businesses. This reveals conflict between Velocity's aims and practices that stem from their views of entrepreneurship rooted in exceptionality and the everyday types of businesses supported.

*The 'positive' influence on legitimising entrepreneurial identity*

Both staff and mentors modelled entrepreneurial identities to enthuse participants through the different strands of Velocity's support by encouraging confidence, passion and risk-taking. They provided inspiration for identity construction and were an important influence in whether participants moved forward with their business idea (Bosma et al. 2012; Williams-Middleton, 2013). Velocity staff moulded themselves on the positive ideals of entrepreneurship to legitimise themselves as business support providers, cultivating their own entrepreneurial identities in their role as a start-up, and referring their own entrepreneurial credentials. Modelling a particular form of entrepreneurial identity in this way, encourages others to take their traits on board more effectively than teaching, as students consider entrepreneurial experience to be the most important qualification for a teacher of entrepreneurship (San-Martin et al., 2019). The activity of the Velocity CEO in workshops (page 12) and of the business panel members in encouraging Melissa to change direction (page 15) illustrate the affective labour in business support, as they sought to instigate the commitment to their vision of entrepreneurship, that aligns with the dominant view of the entrepreneur (Cockayne, 2016), and engenders a sense of hopefulness and possibility in the success of their business despite the difficulties involved (Anderson, 2006). This was evident in Briony's desire to please the Velocity CEO in her pitch, where her successful performance expressing passionate self-belief supported her embryonic entrepreneurial identity.

The translation of Velocity's heroic identity to participations was most evident in the pitching process. The emphasis on pitching reflected the focus on growth, as perfecting the entrepreneurial pitch is associated with securing investment through crafting a believable and compelling narrative that conveys business preparedness and legitimacy (Pollack et al., 2012). Although pitching practice influenced participant confidence, they had to conform to Velocity's conception of legitimate entrepreneurship in order to gain approval and acceptance – and win the competitions. In doing so participants justified their role in accordance with the stereotypical stories (Down & Warren, 2008) which reflecting the focus on growth was associated with crafting a believable and compelling narrative to convey business preparedness

that would secure investment (Navis and Glynn, 2011). This points to a specific script for entrepreneurship, rather than constructing legitimacy according to their own context (Williams-Middleton 2013). However, this emphasis on selling themselves and their business to investors may have been over-emphasised given their everyday nature.

It was evident that the strong positive role-modelling of Velocity staff may have undermined the identity construction of some participants, supporting the laboratory results suggested by Newberry et al's (2018) simulations. Some participants associated the pitch with the clichés of risk, bravery, ambition and growth (Down & Warren 2008), illustrating a divide between heroic rhetoric of entrepreneurship and reality for nascent entrepreneurs – Sally intimidated and discouraged by the scale of personal change required in order to fit in. This chimes with Mitchell (1997) who suggests that the 'mythic status and mystified behaviour' surrounding entrepreneurship is unhelpful as it separates the established from the nascent, whereby the extraordinary world of the heroic entrepreneur is beyond their reach. Sally dissociated herself from the role of entrepreneur as she sees a chasm between her own and the brave, superhuman, motivation and confidence of the heroic entrepreneurial identity legitimized by Velocity. This disrupted Sally's efforts in constructing her own identity, her position reflecting that identified by Down and Warren (2008, page 8), who in the "all conquering hero armed with the rhetoric of change, while easily recognizable, well understood and aspirational, may at the same time be somewhat daunting, or worse, irrelevant or unachievable when viewed from the cognitive comfort zone of the more tentative aspirant entrepreneur". This leads to questioning of whether confidence and clarity could have been developed in an alternative way that did not conform so much to the heroic view of the entrepreneur, but took more account of local context and participant characteristics.

Velocity judged participants progress through competitive process that reinforce the 'heroic' or positive notion of the entrepreneur as a 'winner'. Competitions created a grading of success and failure, which led to the 'successful' reinforcing legitimization of their emerging entrepreneurial identity through tangible rewards. The combination of attention and prizes attracted by 'winners' signaled their entrepreneurial authority to the group, who deferred to their judgements. In discussing group dynamics mentor Jill noted how two high performers had developed an arrogance, and become dismissive of other participant businesses, perhaps reflecting an emerging 'dark-side'. 'Losers' like Patsy were rejected. The influence on identity illustrates how Velocity's judgements impacted on peer legitimacy and identity construction.

Entrepreneurs need encouragement in the early stages in order to build their confidence (Ahsan et al., 2018), here a positive judgement created (over)confidence and a negative judgement became disempowering, keeping some businesses down.

A focus on the positive aspects meant that Velocity did not cater for failure, slow-growth or the more everyday businesses. Those who failed to secure investment and growth, or to make sufficient progress were criticised for ‘not listening’, being ‘overly-cautious’ and ‘risk averse’ or simply or not being ‘entrepreneurial enough’. Rather than boosting support for the struggling businesses, participants that did not conform to the Velocity view of ‘entrepreneurial’ were rejected, excluded from important aspects of support. Those considered illegitimate entrepreneurs, could either leave, or continue unaided by adopting their version of entrepreneurial resilience, battling against the odds (Berglund, 2013). Losing had a negative effect on confidence and motivation, exacerbated by the public nature of rejection, where Velocity made success or failure public through prizes, enhanced mentoring or exclusion from support. The experiences Melissa, Paul and Yasmin evidence how this legitimized or de-legitimized participant entrepreneurial identities, as encouragement or discouragement shaped the affective state of participants, whereby hopefulness shifted to hopelessness in response to their exclusion (Ahsan et al, 2008; Anderson, 2006).

Bruce illustrates how in supporting participants to construct passionate, resilient entrepreneurial identities, Velocity inadvertently created resistance to taking their advice to abandon a struggling business. Emphasizing the positivity of entrepreneurship, Velocity encouraged participants to become their best entrepreneurial selves, accompanied by a hopeful expectation of infinite self-improvement (Anderson, 2006; Berglund, 2013). Here the emphasis on extraordinary entrepreneurship meant that Bruce lost sight of the real. In a similar way that creatives hold an affective connection to the independence, passion and self-autonomy of being their own boss to rationalize continuing self-exploitation work in the gig-economy (Cockayne, 2016), Bruce used the arguments of independence, resilience and determination - positive entrepreneurial traits lauded by the Velocity CEO throughout the programme, to persevere with his struggling business (Katila et al., 2019). His certainty in his own entrepreneurial identity is in stark misalignment with Velocity staff and mentor judgements as he rejects their advice to quit (Audet and Coulteret, 2012). Integrating more real-life stories, and accounts of entrepreneurial failure into the entrepreneurial learning would help prepare participants to

accept a negative outcome, and enable them to recognize if and when they should give up (Raible and Williams-Middleton, 2021)

### *Conflict within Velocity's business support*

Velocity's hopes for regional economic development were in sharp contrast to their views of local entrepreneurial culture as risk-averse and lacking in ambition that were seen in complaints levelled at Velocity participants. As Velocity measured their success and legitimacy in terms of participant business growth translated into employment created and investment secured, at times they appeared to prioritise growth rather than the needs of individual entrepreneurs, encouraging them to scale businesses quickly and secure finance. Discussions between mentors bemoaned the level of caution and risk aversion that they saw in participants. Where a participant business failed it was attributed to lack of innate capacity for entrepreneurship, or because they had not listened to the advice rather than considering the structural factors contributing to weak economic growth and uncertainty. There was an expectation of resilience and the capacity of local people to 'bounce back' through entrepreneurship, despite the historic unemployment, and poverty that has influenced entrepreneurial culture and resources (Gherhes, et al. 2018). Blaming an individual for their inability to create and grow their business to justify withdrawal of support, scales up to blaming communities for not creating a buoyant local economy (Blake and Hanson, 2005), as people (and places) are labelled as unentrepreneurial, and therefore responsible for a weak local economy (Parkinson et al., 2017). This can be linked to withdrawal of or limiting support for low-income places.

There was conflict between Velocity's aims and practices stemming from their views of entrepreneurship that opposed their perception of local entrepreneurial culture. To achieve participant numbers they recruited many whose goals of self-employment or micro-business clashed with Velocity's views of entrepreneurship. These practices conflict with staff and mentors' view of 'born entrepreneurs' based upon notions of inherent entrepreneurial personality traits (Rauch and Frese, 2007; Shane, 2010), and their expressed desire to focus support on 'real entrepreneurs' (sic) to grow more quickly. While they considered these businesses (and people) unentrepreneurial, recruitment practices were rationalised as Velocity helping them to fail fast, quickly and painlessly (page 16). This contrasted with how recruitment and support was delivered to the participant groups, that implied all could learn skills to succeed in their business, particularly given they had been 'chosen' in a competitive process. Moreover, this practical departure from the view that entrepreneurial skills are learned

(Gartner, 1989) is incongruent with Velocity's concept of business support. Given CEO and mentors view that 'real entrepreneurs' do not require business support to create high growth businesses, there are internal inconsistencies over who Velocity's support was targeted at.

The discrepancies between the type of business recruited to the Velocity programme and Velocity's expectations of entrepreneurs, can be linked back to how the dominance of positive views of entrepreneurship and the understanding that entrepreneurship will drive economic growth does not reflect reality. This is particularly important for those areas – like Liverpool – where structural transformations have led to economic decline, and resultant high unemployment, low-incomes, and uncertainty create risk-aversion, particularly when set against an eroded social welfare safety-net. Whilst the Velocity programme illustrated that there was no shortage of potential entrepreneurs with ideas and willingness to give their business a chance - each cohort attracted around 40 participants. These did not fit the mainstream notion of the entrepreneur, but the everyday reality of small business and entrepreneurship. Velocity's promotion of a particular entrepreneurial personality went hand in hand with an emphasis on growth that marginalised other forms of entrepreneurship, particularly consultancy, self-employment and business that would remain small. Thus Velocity guided an enactment of entrepreneurship that reproduces the dominant understanding, 'othering' alternative forms of entrepreneurship (Law, 2004).

Rather than defining places or people as un-entrepreneurial based on normative views, this analysis points to address the ways that entrepreneurship is understood. During reflective interviews Velocity staff considered the programme's failure to drive local economic regeneration – the only business of the two cohorts studied that achieved significant growth moved outside the area to expand. Firstly, in keeping with their positive views of entrepreneurship they suggested that more stringent recruitment processes should target already growing businesses, removing self-employment and micro-business from consideration/entitlement to support. But discussing it further, they questioned the high dropout rate and, recognised that withholding support had been damaging, discussing pre-incubation support that signaled conflict over the dominant entrepreneurial personality ideology (Kerr et al., 2017). Mentor Jill recognised how the type of entrepreneurship was about self-sustaining, through everyday and part-time entrepreneurship that required flexible support, when discussing Yasmin's decision to return to full-time employment;

Facilitator 2: I don't personally think that she has what it takes to start a business.



Mentor (Jill): This is all this hybrid entrepreneurship – they really want a job, a stable income and to be able to explore ideas on the side. But I think that is healthy. It is probably the new model of entrepreneurship.

Later in the discussion they reverted to the view ‘that it is a lot more nature than nurture’, illustrating again the strength of the normative view.

## **Conclusions**

This research demonstrates how positive views of entrepreneurship translate into practice; how the implicit understanding that all entrepreneurship is positive and that the focus for entrepreneurs should be profit and growth enacted within business support both legitimated and de-legitimated entrepreneurial identities. Whilst Velocity’s role models inspired passion, confidence and enthusiasm, the extent to which traditional narratives of entrepreneurship resonated to the mainly self-employed and micro-business participants can be questioned. Velocity sought to increase aspiration and build an entrepreneurial culture, but for some every-day and small-scale businesses, their participation in the programme actively dissuaded them from continuing with their viable businesses, whilst others took on board the passion and resilience to persist in failing ventures. This leads to suggestions that support could have been delivered in an alternative way - that did not conform so much to the heroic view of the entrepreneur, but took more account of context.

Rather than addressing economic decline in left-behind places this research suggests that business support provision may at times compounding the issue, identifying a challenge for research, policy and practice to address the negative discursive cycle to support a positive future for businesses in these areas (Parkinson et al 2017). There are further implications here for place, given that Velocity is located within an historically deprived city with limited markets and no legacy of high-growth entrepreneurship, which can contribute to low aspiration. Yet the reality of everyday entrepreneurs surrounding them was not presented as aspirational, and marginalised by the media it escaped their attention. Most new businesses are everyday self-employed or micro-businesses that despite low growth potential will provide a living for their founder and contribute to the local economy (Welter et al., 2016), rather than the dominant view of the entrepreneurial hero. Building on work that seeks to present inclusive forms of entrepreneurship, policy could expand understanding of the term to encompass the wide range of entrepreneurship to include social business and everyday enterprise (Schuman, 2013).

Whilst Raible and Williams-Middleton (2021) suggest that entrepreneurship education within universities should involve identity work that provides students with relatable examples of entrepreneurs, alongside raising awareness of the pervasive heroic stereotypes, this research suggests that these initiatives would also be beneficial to business support initiatives more generally.

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