ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PROSPECT: USING METAPHORS TO IDENTIFY CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS AMONGST YOUNG EUROPEANS (SUMMARY)

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SUMMARY

ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PROSPECT: USING METAPHORS TO IDENTIFY CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS AMONGST YOUNG EUROPEANS

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Principal Topic

If entrepreneurship is to continue to deliver its promise of future prosperity (Finkle and Deeds, 2001) it is essential to maintain or grow the supply of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship education takes many forms and is a major and growing academic discipline worldwide (Katz, 2003). Whether directly instrumental, role modeling or simply raising entrepreneurial awareness, cognition theory and the social construction of entrepreneurship explain the decision to become entrepreneurial is contingent upon perceptions of the attractiveness of being entrepreneurial. One recent study found 78% of young people saw business as “cool” (JA-YE, 2006), but did not tap into what meanings they attributed to entrepreneurship. Understanding meaning seems vital if we are to know how and why enterprise is attractive or repugnant. Through analysis of metaphors young people used to describe entrepreneurship this paper addresses this issue, posing the question how do young people perceive entrepreneurship?

Method

Data were collected in a 5 country study (Cyprus, Eire, Greece, Italy, and Poland) employing a metaphorical method to investigate, compare and contrast perceptions of entrepreneurs held by high school pupils and teachers. 374 respondents provided five metaphors, completing the sentence “an entrepreneur is like…”, resulting in a sample of 876 usable metaphors. Metaphors were classified based on underlying meaning, so “the wolves who want to eat the sheep”, “big fishes who eat the small ones”, “lions hungry for prey”, and “sharks” were all classified as predators. 28 codes were generated from the data, creating 28 narrow semantic groups. The most prevalent being entrepreneur as predator (133 times), work machine (67 metaphors), exploiter (55 times), victim (51 times) and engine of economic growth (48 times).

Results and Implications

Our research demonstrates a tri-partite social construction of the entrepreneur. The dominant image is as a predatory, aggressive, exploitative, war-like leader. Paradoxically, the entrepreneur is also understood as a very hard-working, rather child-like, victim of risk, big business and competition; an engine of economic growth and admired “winner” whose support of others extends beyond job and wealth creation. Findings also show strong but significant differences across cultures and have implications for understanding how entrepreneurs are perceived and also in recognizing barriers to the promotion of entrepreneurship.

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