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## **Problematizing start-up accelerator programmes: Accelerating ideals of entrepreneurship?**

CMS15, Critical Entrepreneurship Studies –sub-stream

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### **INTRODUCTION**

So-called start-up entrepreneurship is gaining more and more attention worldwide. Start-ups are considered as vital for the competitiveness and rejuvenation of national economies (Valtonen & Syväne, 2011). A start-up is commonly described as “*an organization formed to search for a repeatable and scalable business model*” (Blank, 2010). Start-up discourse emphasizes scalability, technology, fast market entry, growth, agility, and the importance of teams (e.g., Ries, 2011; Blank, 2013). Start-up “methodologies”, such as *lean start-up* (Ries, 2011), also play an important part. The dispersion of interest in start-ups has multiple by-products. One of these is the phenomenon of start-up accelerators and accelerator programme (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014). The phenomenon of start-up accelerators is fairly new, but the number of accelerators has grown rapidly internationally and accelerators have gained lots of media and policy maker attention (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014; Malek, Maine & McCarthy, 2014). The likes of Y Combinator, Techstars and Seedcamp have a tremendous amount of followers.

In this paper, I aim to question what start-up accelerator programmes are about. Previous research and practice has seen the phenomenon of accelerators as a model of assistance for entrepreneurs, designed to speed up market interactions in order to help nascent ventures adapt quickly and learn, and to allow entrepreneurial teams and their ventures to connect with and access resources from investors and other important stakeholders. (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014; Malek et al., 2014). I, in turn, look at the accelerator programmes as I site for producing (exclusive and problematic) ideals of entrepreneurship. By doing this, I continue the discussion on what is done under the “guise” of entrepreneurship training and

education (Komulainen, Korhonen & Rätty, 2009; Costa & Saraiva, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2012; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013; Berglund, 2013). This discussion acknowledges the gendered nature of entrepreneurship training and incubation, the narrow ‘entrepreneurial self’ and hegemonic discourses related to them and entrepreneurship’s relation to capitalism. I contribute to this discussion by showing how ideals of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs are constructed within the practices that constituted a particular accelerator programme. I ask: “How are would-be entrepreneurs being “moulded” into certain ideals of entrepreneurship?” Thus, I aim to shed light on the not-so-often discussed tensions, paradoxes, power relations, identity issues, compromises and so on that may be involved in the very early stages of the “entrepreneurship process”, especially in entrepreneurship training programmes, such as accelerator programmes.

I lean on practice-based perspective (Schatzki et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Steyaert, 2007; Johannisson, 2011) to examine the how ideals of entrepreneurship are produced. This enables looking at all the different actors the accelerator programme brings together, their actions and especially all the elements involved in different practices: forms of bodily and mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, understandings, know-how and so on (Reckwitz 2002, 249). Thus, practice-based approach also enables taking into account the body, which has been ignored and under-theorized in entrepreneurship research (Kašperová & Kitching, 2014), and materiality in general. This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork done before, during and after an eight week long accelerator programme organized by a Finnish entrepreneurship society (Pittaway et al., 2011), a student- and volunteer led community that aims to ‘boost’ start-up entrepreneurship.

I analyse the practices that constitute this programme and in particular, what ideals of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs emerge within these practices. I show that within an accelerator programme, the ideal entrepreneur is constructed as 1) able and willing to perform entrepreneurship; 2) thinking big and 3) becoming a start-up. I argue that within entrepreneurship training programmes, such as accelerator programmes, would-be or nascent entrepreneurs are being normalized into certain ideals of thinking of and doing entrepreneurship. Thus, entrepreneurship training plays an important role in either creating diverse, inclusive understandings of entrepreneurship and possibilities for doing entrepreneurship – or in narrowing the understandings and reproducing exclusive ideals of entrepreneurship and limiting potential ways of doing entrepreneurship.

## Questioning entrepreneurship training and education

Providing training, support, advice, office space, funding, networks, and so on for nascent entrepreneurs or start-ups is not a straightforward, unproblematic thing. Gstraunthaler (2010) questions whether business incubators (in the context of Lithuania) have been installed due to real economic demand to help promising start-ups to develop – or if they serve primarily political goals. He shows a complicated “which came first: the hen or the egg” –situation where it’s difficult to say whether public money is available because there is development potential in the region and private money cannot be attracted or whether business parks or incubators are established because of the availability of this public money. Marlow and McAdam (2012) point out that it is assumed that business incubators provide a gender-neutral backdrop to support, advice, and facilitate the growth of entrepreneurial firms. However, Marlow and McAdam (2012) show this isn’t the case: business incubation is a highly gendered, masculine arena. Business incubation is also an arena for nascent entrepreneurs to (aim to) gain legitimacy as an entrepreneur, as Williams Middleton (2013) shows. She shows how nascent entrepreneurs use pragmatic, moral and cognitive behaviour as they apply legitimation strategies of conforming, selecting and manipulating in the quest for gaining legitimacy in relation to others.

Entrepreneurship training has traditionally emphasized idea development and start-up planning. From the individual perspective, it has focused on developing skills of potential entrepreneurs and on improving their knowledge of entrepreneurship related issues. (Henry, Hill & Leitch, 2005; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013.) Ojala and Heikkilä’s (2009) findings from a study of a Finnish new venture training program show that the training program provided its participants useful knowledge on how to develop a business further and how to make it understandable and attractive to a funder. However, Ojala and Heikkilä (2009) question the cultural fit of training programs: the studied program had a strong focus on risk-taking and raising funding from U.S. capital markets. They point out that this was in contrast with Finnish entrepreneurs’ strategies, who preferred to grow their business in a more controlled and profitable manner. Some studies have been critical of the venture level emphasis and suggested that entrepreneurship training and programmes could be viewed as an arena for (gendered) identity work (Hägg, 2011; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013). Hytti and Heinonen (2013) show how the construction of heroic prototype of an entrepreneur in a high-technology entrepreneurship training programme was appropriated by the male participants. Female participants in turn constructed an alternative identity of

the humane entrepreneur running a low-tech firm with modest business goals or acting as an intrapreneur in an existing organization.

For a long time, there has been a general debate over the question of whether entrepreneurship can be taught or not (Henry et al., 2005) and how it should be taught (Jack & Anderson, 1999). There have been some critical voices towards entrepreneurship education in general. For example, Hjorth (2011) has aimed to challenge the overtly economizing perspective entrepreneurship education often takes towards learning by approaching learning emphasizing its creative-relational nature. However, there are only a few studies that question what is done under the guise of entrepreneurship education or training, and what ideal subjectivities/selves, power- and gender relations and so on are produced within entrepreneurship education. Berglund (2013) likens entrepreneurship education to employability training and illustrates that under the guise of entrepreneurship education, schoolchildren are taught how to work on improving their selves. There also comes an expectation of the individual to “fight against all odds.” This work ethic reminds us that we can always improve ourselves, and that the enterprising self can never be fully acquired. (Berglund, 2013.)

Komulainen et al. (2009) in turn note an interesting surprise in the writings of an entrepreneurship writing competition for pupils in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade of comprehensive school. Within this competition the portrayals of possible selves that associate entrepreneurship with risk-taking and profit-seeking, locating it in the global markets, were not regarded as desirable. Instead, it was the (mostly the boys’) modest entrepreneurship with traditional virtues of the respectable citizen that were successful in the competition. Komulainen et al. (2009) suggest this finding is in conflict with the European Union’s educational policies calling for risk-taking, competition and growth. However, these writings are gendered and classed. Komulainen et al. (2009) note that entrepreneurship education offers boys and girls different and unequal subject positions to be tried on. They suggest that boys have a wider access to a range of powerful narratives of entrepreneurship to resource their self-making.

Entrepreneurship training and education have also provided opportunities for looking into hegemonic entrepreneurship discourses and questioning the relation between entrepreneurship and capitalism. (Costa & Saraiva, 2012). Costa and Saraiva (2012) analyse the educational context and problematize hegemonic discourses on entrepreneurship as ideological mechanisms. They look at Brazilian Junior

Enterprises – civil, non-for-profit organizations with educational goals, which are incorporated and managed by students at universities. They identify three orders of discourse that emerge within these Junior Enterprises: (1) a consensus regarding the centrality of companies in terms of thinking and acting of a given individual in the world; (2) the exemplarity of the neo-liberal capitalist entrepreneurial model and (3) the absence of feasible alternatives to the contemporary capitalist model. These lead them to suggest that higher education has become less about human enlightenment and more about the reproduction of capitalist ideology.

I wish to continue this discussion on what is done under the guise of entrepreneurship education – or entrepreneurship training, in particular. I turn to looking at start-up accelerator programs and questioning what they are about and what is going on in these programmes. Next, will elaborate how accelerators have been made sense of in previous studies.

### **Accelerating entrepreneurship**

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss accelerators per se or to look at their effects or effectiveness, but instead to look at the constructions of entrepreneurship within an accelerator program. However, I will give a brief overview of typical characteristics of accelerators and how they are perceived in literature. The phenomenon of start-up accelerators is fairly new, but the number of accelerators has grown rapidly internationally and accelerators have gained lots of media and policy maker attention (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014; Malek, Maine & McCarthy, 2014). The likes of Y Combinator, Techstars and Seedcamp have a tremendous amount of followers. However, there hasn't been much academic research on accelerators (Kim & Wagman, 2014; Malek et al., 2014). Accelerators bear resemblance to older phenomena of incubators, angel investors and co-working environments. (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014; Malek et al., 2014.) Malek et al. (2014:28) point out that accelerators originally focused on start-ups in the digital media sector, but now have expanded to support ventures in a range of industries, such as biotechnology, wireless and telecommunication, and internet. In general, accelerators are seen to assist nascent firms (Radojevich-Kelley & Hoffman, 2012). Cohen and Hochberg (2014) define the seed accelerator as "a fixed term, cohort-based program, including mentorship and educational components, that culminates in a public pitch event or demo-day" (p. 4). Thus, the key characteristics of accelerators have been postulated as (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014; Malek et al., 2014):

- 1) Limited duration (usually 3 months), rapid and intensive experience

- 2) Structured programs where ventures enter and exit in groups ("cohorts" or "batches")
- 3) Many accelerators take an equity stake in the ventures
- 4) Mentorship, education, network development
- 5) Networking between teams within a batch

In the few academic papers written about them, accelerator programs are made sense of in a limited way, mostly focusing on the economic side (Kim & Wagman) or outlining the features of certain industry accelerators (Malek et al., 2014). Kim and Wagman (2014) see start-up accelerators as a hybrid form of entrepreneurial nurturing and equity financing. They are seen as designed to speed up market interactions in order to help nascent ventures adapt quickly and learn, and to allow entrepreneurial teams and their ventures to connect with and access resources from investors and other important stakeholders. Further, speeding up the cycle of the venture has been seen as integral: the accelerator programme may lead to quicker growth or quicker failure. (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014; Malek et al., 2014). In this paper, I wish to problematize these rationalistic understandings of the phenomenon of accelerator programs. Instead, I look at the practices that constitute such programs and how these produce different ideals of entrepreneurship.

## **Practice-based approach and 'doing' entrepreneurship**

I lean on practice-based perspective (Schatzki et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Steyaert, 2007; Johannisson, 2011) to examine the how ideals of entrepreneurship are produced. There have been calls for a framework that acknowledges entrepreneurship as an (everyday) hands-on practice, an ongoing practice of creatively organizing people and resources (Johannisson 2011). Steyaert (2007) proposes that the practice-based perspectives are promising candidates for rethinking and radicalizing the processual understanding of entrepreneurship. Drawing on theories of practice in entrepreneurship research is particularly interesting and useful when one tries to associate entrepreneurship (or, *entrepreneuring*) with everyday life and not with intrinsic properties of individuals or heroic achievements (Johannisson 2011, De Clercq & Voronov 2009). Practice-based approach can be fruitful as it enables looking at all the different actors an entrepreneurial practice brings together, their actions and especially all the elements involved in different practices. It also allows acknowledging the whole range of social, material, human, non-human, corporeal and sensory aspects that are involved in the construction of entrepreneurial practices. (Reckwitz, 2002.) However, there have been only a limited number of

entrepreneurship studies that explicitly draw on the practice-based approach or practice theories (e.g. Bruni et al., 2004; De Clercq & Voronov, 2009).

Practice theory is a non-individualistic form of cultural theory that situates the basic unit of cultural analysis in practices (Reckwitz, 2002). The individual is seen to act as a carrier of practices, which includes patterns of bodily behavior, routinized ways of understanding and thinking, knowing how and desiring (Reckwitz, 2002: 249-50). Practices refer to embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding (Schatzki et al., 2001: 11). Practices may take several forms as they may be linguistic and non-representational, social and material, and corporeal and sensual, involving both human and non-human entities (Valtonen, 2013).

Following Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2004), I understand that entrepreneurship is ‘done’; I see it as a situated practice. Thus, entrepreneurship is not a substance, but a learnt and enacted practice(s). Entrepreneurship is culturally reproduced in social practices (Bruni et al., 2004). Following Valtonen (2013), who draws on critical practice scholarship to place emphasis on the generative character of practices, I am interested in what people do (socially, materially, sensorially) and how this doing shapes and constrains ideals of entrepreneurship. I see that through a regulatory process of repetition, what counts as proper entrepreneurship becomes “stabilized” (Valtonen, 2013).

## **Methodology**

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork done before, during and after an 8-week long start-up accelerator program called ‘Hammer accelerator program’ (pseudonym) organized in Finland in autumn 2014, in which I took both the position of a researcher and a member of the organizing team. The aim of the accelerator program was to help ambitious teams with an idea of a service/product to take their idea to the ‘next level’ with guidance and coaching. The accelerator program was organized by StartingUp, a volunteer- and student-led entrepreneurship society (Pittaway et al., 2011), aimed at “boosting” start-up entrepreneurship. It funded (from EU-money) by TechCo, a local innovation and technology centre. An ‘executive team’ planned and organized the program. I became a member of this team in August 2014 and my role was supposed to be helping look at the “big picture” of the program, but the two other members had mostly planned the program by then. Andy was the ‘head coach’ responsible for planning actual content of the program and Tim, the ‘business community developer’ of StartingUp, was



responsible for contacting speakers and in general the execution of plans. Tim had been hired by TechCo to establish StartingUp. Thus, StartingUp the entrepreneurship society started out as a project and the accelerator program was an integral part of this project. Further, at the time of the program I was also the board president of StartingUp, the association.

For the participants of the program, I was mostly seen as one of the organizers of the program. My researcher position became visible through my recorder and my small digital camera, both of which I used frequently, and me sitting in on some of the individual coaching sessions, taking notes. I acknowledge that as a field member, I have affected the program a lot. However, I don't see this as a weakness. I see it as an opportunity to be reflexive about my own actions and as an opportunity to include an autoethnographic element to this study. When organizing the programme, I didn't read or know that much about them. Instead, together with the others, I was focused on the practical organization of the program and making day-to-day tasks run smoothly. Being in the executive team and being the president of StartingUp gave me a true insider position. For example, I took part in going through the applications for the program and I listened to the judges of the Demo Day decide the winner of the program.

The program's eight weeks all had a theme (however, during the program these became blurry and vague), such as Customer, Value Proposition, Product-market fit, Minimum viable product and Pitching. Each week was structured as follows: on Monday morning there was mini-lecture held by the 'head coach', followed by each teams' individual coaching sessions with the head coach. On Wednesdays, there was a 'visiting coach' or a speaker. Some of them held individual coaching sessions with the teams and a public event, some just the coaching sessions. On Fridays, there was a 'demo and retrospective' session, the purpose of which was for each team to do a pitch and then go through what happened that week. The teams were expected to work independently throughout the week. The program was described as a training program, but it also involved competition element. The winner of the program was awarded at 'Demo Day', where each team pitched their idea to a jury who chose the winner. The winner received a travel voucher to go to Silicon Valley. A visit to a major start-up and technology conference was also included in the program. However, only two teams went there.

The program included nine teams, two of which left the program during the first weeks, and altogether approximately 25 participants. Most of the program's participants were students from a local business school and a local university of applied sciences (mostly business and IT students). However, four of the

nine teams comprised mostly of people in the working life (two out of these dropped out during first weeks). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to roughly 40. I refer to the participants of the program as “would-be entrepreneurs.” I use this term to emphasize the very early stage these people are in the “venture creation process.” The teams’ ideas included mostly different applications (mobile and other), furniture design, and services and so on.

## Data and analysis

The data includes field notes (160 pages), audiotaped (76 hours) and videotaped (9 hours) recordings and photographs (approximately 600) from the coaching sessions, weekly mini-lessons and weekly demo- and retrospective sessions and the concluding pitching event where the winner of the accelerator program was decided. Tape-recorded interviews with teams who finished the program (7 interviews) and some of the coaches of the program (4 interviews) are also included. The empirical material also includes material before and after the actual program: some of the last planning sessions before the program begun and the planning sessions of the next year’s program. I have been a part of StartingUp since September 2013 and thus I’ve observed how the program was talked about and somewhat planned within the community since late 2013.

The main source of data was my field notes, which also included photographs. I started the first round of analysis by asking “What is going on over here, what is this about?” I aimed to get an overall understanding of the programme. I read what meanings were given to the programme itself, what tensions arose, what assumptions about entrepreneurship arose, what feelings were present, and what practices seemed to constitute the program. I also started looking at what transformations occurred. At started to seem to me that the accelerator program isn’t just a simple tool for developing new ventures quickly and bringing ideas into the market faster, as some papers would suggest (Cohen & Hochberg, 2014; Kim & Wagman, 2014; Malek et al., 2014). Based on my experiences in the program and my initial analysis, it started to seem that the program isn’t that much about training entrepreneurial competencies or skills or connecting start-ups and investors, but moulding the participants into certain kinds of actors who develop new ventures in certain ways. I started to see the disciplining nature of the program. I started to recognize the practices that constitute the program and focused on the interaction between the participants of the program and the coaches of the program within these practices. I recognized that the program mainly constitutes of practices such as coaching and pitching. Then I analysed what ideals were constructed in the practices and how this happened. I started to elucidate that

within these practices, the ideal entrepreneurial selves were constructed as able and willing to perform entrepreneurship; think big and become a start-up. Next, I will elaborate on these results.

## Results

### Performing entrepreneurship

The Hammer accelerator program places a strong emphasis on the practice of pitching – the practice of publicly telling your business idea and trying to convince others with it. Socializing the participants into the practice of pitching starts on the very first day of the program as Andy the head coach gives the first week’s assignment:

*THIS WEEK’S TASK: Talk with at least 10 potential customers; Verify your Value proposition canvas; Pitch with your canvas on Friday in 3 minutes (head coach’s slide)*

In Andy’s second Monday mini-lecture, he teaches the participants the basic content of a pitch:

*3 minutes elevator pitch: What problem are you solving? How you solve this problem? Who is your customer? How you make money? (head coach’s slide)*

Here the participants of the accelerator program are encouraged to start learning how to perform their business idea in a certain way. The ideal way here is very structured, efficient and rational: you start by presenting a problem you have identified, then proceed to tell your solution to this problem, then present that you already know who your customers will be and finally tell how you make money with your solution – and tell it in the form of a clear business model. This rational and efficient way of presenting your idea (and yourself) is done repeatedly during the program. Every Friday, the teams get together and pitch to each other. Further, a “pitching guru” comes to coach the teams in pitching.

John the “pitching guru” is sitting in his armchair, slouched. A team of very young people of around 18 to 20 years old is the next team to have their session. John instructs them that only one person will do the pitch. Ivana, a girl from Eastern Europe, takes the hit, although she was expecting she could do it with her teammate. Her teammates scatter around the space as she goes to stand in front of John. She starts her pitch. She’s holding her notes in her hands and you can see her hands trembling. John instructs her: “*put away your notes, NOW*”. Ivana looks confused, stops looking at her notes and goes on with the pitch. As she performs, she is standing still. Her voice trembles.

During the pitch, John takes some notes, rubs his bald head, squirms in his chair, takes deep breaths in and audibly breath out, exasperated. When the pitch ends, he shakes his head and says “*Oh boy. There’s a lot of problems with the pitch.*” Ivana sits down and so do her teammates. She is still shaking. John starts going through all the problems with the pitch: the pitcher was really unsure, mumbled something in beginning... Then he notices Ivana looks like she’s about to cry, and say’s “*it’s not that bad.*” They spend the next 30 minutes or so going through the team’s idea and all the problems that John sees in the idea and team.

This coaching session is highly gendered: there is a young, unsure woman performing to a middle-aged man, who sits comfortably in an armchair and whose gestures show he’s not impressed. It looks pornographic, like a casting session where a young woman is lured into the situation and given false hope she will get the good parts and that she’ll be a star. The woman is there for the man to look at, for the man to enjoy, evaluate and criticize. The woman is placing her body in a vulnerable situation: the rest of the people are standing (I am standing too in the corner with my camera), she is alone standing in the middle of the room at the centre of all our attentions.

The program culminates in Demo Day, where each team does a public pitch in front of an audience of about 50 people and a jury. The jury will decide the winning team of the program (thus, the accelerator program is also a competition) who will receive a travel voucher for going to Silicon Valley. I co-host the Demo Day. As I’m on the side of the stage listening to the pitches and the jury’s comments, two things hit me. First, we have only (white) men in the jury: three local entrepreneurs in their 30s, a middle-aged man from a public funding agency and a middle-aged man from an innovation and technology centre. I realize we are reproducing the white male as the powerful and knowledgeable one, as the one that is able and should evaluate and validate would-be entrepreneurs and their ideas. Thus, when performing entrepreneurship within the practice of pitching, it is not the would-be or nascent entrepreneurs, who are the active actors.

Second, I realize how well the teams have mastered the ideal way of performing entrepreneurship. Out of the seven teams performing, only one team does a two-person pitch where they take turns telling each point of the pitch. Each individual who comes on the stage looks good: everyone has paid attention to the way they dress (one young man wears a suit, others wear neat, but informal clothing), they speak with a clear voice, their bodies look calm and composed, their pitches are clearly structured, well-

thought and practiced. Everyone is able to answer the jury's questions. The program seems to have succeeded in making would-be entrepreneurs who are willing and able to perform entrepreneurship publicly. They seem to have learned to control their bodies, to portray confidence and to present their ideas using a format where they start by stating the problem they are trying to solve, then their solution and then moving on to their business model, team, execution and so on.

After the program, one of the participants looks back into her performance during DemoDay:

*On Demo Day, I felt amazing. Before I did the pitch I imagined myself on the stage, what I should do. On the stage I lost myself in the moment, it was amazing. (Interview with member of team 4)*

For her, performing entrepreneurship after all the practice she had during the program was an exhilarating moment. She had prepared for the performance mentally and even visualized herself on the stage. Thus, the would-be entrepreneurs taking part in the accelerator program spend considerable time and energy preparing for an intensive 5-minute performance, where the judges and the audience evaluate themselves. However, succeeding in this gives them energy. Another participant recalls too how he was nervous before the pitch, but as he stepped on the stage, he too was "lost in the moment" and gained self-confidence from the experience:

*Pitching on the stage on Demo Day was super cool. Before it, I was shaking, I forgot everything I was supposed to say. When I stepped there on the stage, I just started to pitch, I was shaking a bit, but it was much easier. I just told people. Seeing people's eye contact was good, I saw people reacted positively. Microphone was the only problem. After these stage-experiences I feel much more confident. (Interview with member of team 5)*

Sergei goes on to explain how based what he learned during the program, he went to a technology- and start-up conference and pitched to random people in there:

*I just randomly tried to give people my contact. If somebody came, I started to pitch to them, explain clearly the idea, how we can compete with people. It didn't take long time for people to understand me. I was just like I gave first introduction, gave the tagline, tagline was important in giving my contact info, then I gave information about the problem we're solving, then business model, why we're there. Pitch was essential info on what we try to do in the problem. We were thinking so much about what sentences we put in the pitch, it was important. (Interview with member of team 5)*

This extract shows how some of the participants of the program started to internalize and embody the ideal way of performing entrepreneurship. In this ideal performance, Sergei performs entrepreneurship in an efficient and rational way: he has a clear formula for explaining their idea and convincing the

listener. Sergei's experience of going to conference and pitching to whoever is willing to listen is telling of what is expected of nascent entrepreneurs: they need to practice and prepare a good pitch and then keep on performing entrepreneurship constantly.

However, in the interviews done after the program, some participants question the practice of pitching and the need to perform entrepreneurship publicly:

*Marc: I think pitching is overrated; you do it way too fucking much. It's not the point that start-up entrepreneurs are rock stars on a stage. This is about business, not jumping on stage. The idea of pitching is that you tell someone what you are doing. Although, John [the pitching coach] seemed to think that pitching is the way to happiness. I disagree. Investors are not stupid, they can give you money even if you don't know how to perform. [-] Too much of America has been brought here [into Finland]. In some Silicon Valley getting an audience with an investor might be that difficult that you have to stalk in the investor firm's lobby and go to an elevator with them. In Finland you don't have to do it, here you can just call and go and talk to people. (Interview with member of team 3.)*

Here the participants criticized the practice of pitching and saw "stage pitching" as a form of entertainment where start-up entrepreneurs are rock stars jumping on stage. Further, the practice of pitching (especially in the form of pitching competitions where multiple ventures pitch on a stage), is seen as "too American" and not suitable for the context of Finland. For them, start-up entrepreneurship doesn't seem to be about fancy performances, but doing business. What is peculiar over here is that although they partly refute the practice of pitching, they still reproduce investors as the ones whose attention start-ups are trying to get and the ones that are seen as important actors and validators of ideas (and of course the givers of resources).

## Thinking big

The Hammer accelerator program is mainly based on the practice of coaching. Every Monday the head coach holds a mini-lecture at the home base of StartingUp and then spends the day holding individual coaching sessions with the teams. There are also visiting coaches and visiting speakers. Some of the coaches are entrepreneurs from the local town, one is a famous middle-aged serial entrepreneur and one is a pitching coach who's done coaching in another accelerator. There are also speakers coming to talk about legal issues and funding. Within these coaching sessions, the team – or mostly only one or two members of the team – sits next to or in front of a coach and they spend 20 to 45 minutes discussing the team's idea, problems and future plans and the coach often gives normative advice on what the team should do.

Within the practice of coaching, there is a tension between starting a venture as a low-scale hobby-like venture and doing “proper business.” In the coaching session between a team consisting of two programmers who are already in the working life and the “pitching guru”, John, this tension becomes particularly visible. Sergei has just done a two-minute pitch on their team’s idea. Now he, his teammate Vasily and John are all sitting down in the grungy StartingUp HQ, a 20m<sup>2</sup> space separated from craft entrepreneurs’ working spaces by low walls in an old industrial building. Sergei explains how they’re going first get the content, and then focus on getting customers and business. John immediately refutes this: *“It’s fine for a hobby, but not a business.”* Sergei suggests they sell to small businesses, John shakes his head immediately. John asks the men when they want to make a living out of this business. *“In a couple of years”*, they answer. John shakes his head and says:

*“Wrong, you’re not going to make it. Everything is too slow. Your goal is too low. You better have something more significant, specific targets, now your targets are too vague. Your thing is a hobby. I see a lot of these and they usually don’t go anywhere. What you’re building now is a hackathon hobby project, which doesn’t go anywhere. (John’s coaching session.)*

Here John seems to be saying that what the boys want to do is the wrong way to do it. He criticizes the team for being too slow and having too low goals. The word hobby is used to undermine the team’s efforts as something that’s not serious, as something that you doodle on for a bit and then let go. John also uses the journey metaphor (Cornelissen et al., 2012) (*hobbies don’t go anywhere*). It’s used to weed out the men’s hobby intentions/hobby-like goals: a hobby is stagnant, there’s no movement, there’s no wind taking you on the journey. Thus, “proper” business is constructed here as aiming high and doing it fast, with clear, big targets. Whilst John talks, the team mostly sits still, sometimes laughing nervously. Sergei does most talking, answering “maybe” and laughing a bit. He tries to defend their business idea. Thus, he doesn’t just sit and take in John’s criticism. However, in the end Sergei thanks John for giving them valuable information that their background in programming hasn’t provided them:

*Sergei: This kind of information is really helpful for us, because we’re coders.*

*John: It may sound I’m cruel to you, I want you to know these things now rather than later.*

John justifies his harsh critique by putting it so that he’s making the guys a favour by telling these things now so they don’t have to find them out later on.

In and through the practice of coaching the ideal entrepreneur and the entrepreneurial team are constructed as one who is ambitious and “thinks big.” Their ambitions must reach beyond just starting a small business and instead they need to aim for finding scalable business models that enable fast growth.

Further, the ideal entrepreneur is business savvy: having a team with a technological competence is not enough; the team must have strong understanding on the principles of business. The ideal entrepreneur as ambitious is constructed already in the description of Hammer program on it's website as Hammer is described as programme that *“helps ambitious teams take the next step with their business idea.”* The requirements for the team include that *“you are an ambitious and motivated team; you have a promising idea for a new product or a service; your idea is scalable and internationally focused; and you have a will to turn your idea into profitable business.”* Further, in the head coach's first presentation he expresses the wanted ambition level: *“Ambition level: world class, scalable, game-changing.”* In these, the ambitions of a start-up team are constructed as needing to be directed towards doing international, constantly growing business with a ground-breaking service or product. The main goal seems to be doing profitable business, not for example solving societal problems.

Although the ideal entrepreneur is constructed as ambitious, there is quite a lot of “tardiness” going on during the program. Participants don't show up in the meetings, they don't do their “homework” assigned by the head coach and not all teams progress well as hoped. In my field notes, I point my perceived lack of excitement and enthusiasm within the accelerator programme participants. Through my quest for excitement, I as a programme organizer construct the ideal entrepreneur as enthusiastic and excited, and as one who shows it verbally and visually. I interpret the lack of initiative and “tardiness” of the participants as a sign of not being entrepreneurial, as rather taking part in school work than “proper” entrepreneurship training.

## **Becoming a start-up**

Through various practices, the participants of Hammer accelerator program are taught (and expected) to become a start-up. This doesn't mean a start-up in the sense of just any new business, but a start-up in the sense of what is currently “hyped” in Finland and elsewhere: a technology-centred new business aiming for high and fast growth, working as a team and following methods such as the Lean Startup (Ries, 2011). Normalizing the teams to think and follow the start-up way of thinking begins in the head coach's first presentation. Andy tells some *“basics of start-ups”*:

- *Ideas are nothing. Execution is everything*
- *There are no facts inside the building, so get out*
- *No business plan survives first contact with customers*
- *Failure is part of the process*
- *Making continuous iteration and pivoting is vital*



- *Fast tempo and decisions are key*
- *There are no titles in start-ups (head coach's first lecture)*

Here the ideal way of working on a new venture is constructed as having a strong customer focus, fast speed in decision making and market entry, short development cycles, and willingness to constantly work on one's idea (and even on oneself). The business idea *per se* loses its value: the one who can execute the idea deserves the idea. In and through this practice of iterative development, the ideal entrepreneur emerges as team of individuals who follows the "start-up way" of doing things: do a first version of your service/product as soon as possible, get it on the market, and then iteratively develop it. Iterative development is embodied in the idea of a "*minimum viable product (MVP)*", a rough first version of the product that shows the ideas basic functionality. During the first weeks of the program, Andy the head coach instructs the teams on how to make their MVP and says the teams are expected to do one by the end of the programme and showcase it in the Demo Day.

After the program ends, I interview the participants. I ask the teams what was the biggest lesson during the program. One young girl answers me "*The main lesson to a beginner like me was minimum viable product. I'm more into market research, what works best. With the idea of MVP, I got a new way of thinking.*" A young man from another team answer the same thing: "*MVP was the biggest lesson. I have never thought we could do a trial. I learned that when you have an idea, think if you can do something with it right away.*" Another young man says that after discussing with one of the visiting coaches, his team they realized they should start selling the first MVP even though it has a bug. Here the MVP and the start-up way of working represent new ideas to the participants, new models for thinking and doing. They seem to accept that this is a good way of working on a venture.

One of the practices Hammer enforces on its participants into is the practice of teamwork. Us, the organizers of the program, already start constructing the ideal way to start your venture as a team in the program's description on its website:

*Hammer Accelerator Programme helps ambitious teams take the next step with their business idea. The program brings experienced entrepreneurs, coaches and experts in various fields to help the teams with their business model validation, product development, and raising funding (programme website)*

Here the meaning of the accelerator programme is constructed as helping teams develop businesses. In this description, the focus is on developing the idea and the venture, not the individuals or the team doing it. What is assumed is that once you have an ambitious team, you don't need help developing the

team itself. Further, in this description and throughout the program, it seems to be assumed that people are capable of teamwork and only need help with start-up tools, methods, funding and networking. Thus, the description is reproducing the prevalent understanding that entrepreneurship training programmes are more about developing business ideas than about developing individuals or their identities (Hägg, 2011). In deciding the teams that are going to be accepted to the program, we (the “executive team”) leave out people who seem to be alone and who we don’t know. We discuss the application of the vice president of StartingUp. One of the executive team members comments: *“I’d rather take him that some weird [team that applied] who we don’t know who and where they are.”* I send the vice president a message asking if he’s already found a team member. He hasn’t found one yet, but is trying to. In the end, he doesn’t find one and we leave him out. Thus, teamwork becomes an exclusive practice: if you can’t find suitable people to work with you (that fit into preferred roles, such as a coder, a designer or a business person), you are unable to take part in entrepreneurship training.

However, at the end of the program, the head coach reflects on the program:

*For most teams, this program has been a crash course on what it means to start a business. We’ve facilitated first pitfalls as soon as possible. The goal is not that teams would be completely ready after the program. It’s about what happens to the people, what kind of learning process they go through. I’ve tried to guide them to situations where the teams could outdo themselves, do things that are not nice. The meaning of the program is to create pressure, to expect things from them that they wouldn’t do by themselves. (interview with head coach on the last day of the programme.)*

Here the head coach emphasizes that the programme is about developing the individuals who are taking part in the programme. The meaning of the programme becomes constructed as stepping outside one’s comfort zone, and the head coach’s role is to guide the individuals to these situations where they are supposed to learn and grow. Thus, individual development here becomes more important than the development of a venture.

At the Demo Day, where teams must do a public pitch, their success in becoming a start-up is put to test. I am listening to the judges of Demo Day deciding the winner of the programme. The five men are sitting in a meeting room around a large table whilst a gaming entrepreneur is entertaining the audience and the participants of the accelerator are nervously waiting to hear who gets to go to Silicon Valley. When negotiating how they will proceed with the negotiation, they step into the role of an investor:

*Judge 1: I will think that I'm putting my own money on the line. I say that in our starting point evaluation everyone puts money on the line, that we take that perspective.*

*Judge 2: Everyone imagines they're putting 1000 euros of their own money*

*Judge 1: That's not enough, let's put 10 000 euros*

*Judge 3: That's way too much in this context*

*Judge 2: So we'll take 5000 euros of our own money and 25 % equity in the company in this stage, isn't that a good starting point? (Jury negotiating during Demo Day)*

The men are leaning back on their chairs, crossing their arms, finding comfortable sitting positions as they negotiate which team they are going to drop out next. Everyone has a piece of paper in front of them where they've evaluated each team. We had advised them to evaluate each team based on “*Drive and passion (of the team), Credibility (of the company) and Market potential (of the idea).*” The judges have scribbled notes on the paper, such as “*Need to go big asap.*” As they reach the point where they have only two best teams left, a tension between valuing a good team and growth potential emerges. The jury praises team 1 for presenting their team really well and they got the impression that this is a well-working, experienced team. With team 2, they evaluated that they lack business knowledge and just have three IT-developers. A few minutes before they need to make their decision, one judge comments: “*I'm leaning on team 2, to give my money to them, although team 1 has a better team.*” In the end, the jury goes for team 2, because they see that team has better opportunities for scaling and growing their business. This is a clear tension and contradiction, since within the start-up “scene” and way of working, the team is said to be more valuable than the idea. However, here the jury chooses the poorer team because they see more growth-potential for them, since team 1 is planning to manufacture a physical product and team 2 instead is working on a mobile application. Here we can see that the ideal start-up entrepreneurs must work as a team and convince they have a working team, but that in the end, it's the growth potential that matters to investors.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This study has problematized the phenomenon of start-up accelerator programmes and critically looked at what is done under the “guise” of entrepreneurship training. In particular, leaning on the practice-based approach, it has looked at the practices constituting a particular accelerator programme and analysed the ideals of entrepreneurship that emerge within the practices and that are “imposed” on would-be or nascent entrepreneurs. The practices that constitute the programme include pitching,

coaching, team work and incremental development. The results of this study point out that in and through these various ideal emerge: the ability and willingness to perform entrepreneurship publicly; ambitious individuals and teams who think big and becoming a start-up by following the start-up way of working.

Within the accelerator programme, especially in and through the practice of pitching, the ideal entrepreneur is constructed as willing and able to perform entrepreneurship publicly. I argue that the accelerator program socializes would-be entrepreneurs into performing entrepreneurship in a certain way: through constant repetition and practicing pitching, the would-be entrepreneurs are expected to adopt a rational, efficient and confident way of performing entrepreneurship. This ideal way includes showing one's high ambition through the performance, but also sound business knowledge. Further, this performance must also represent the whole team's passion towards what they're doing. What counts as proper entrepreneurship and a proper way of performing it becomes "stabilized" through the process of repetition within the accelerator programme. The whole practice of pitching is gendered, not least when would-be entrepreneurs are practicing pitching. Within pitching, it is the white man (middle-aged or in his 30s) that the would-be entrepreneurs must convince with their performance.

Within the accelerator programme, would-be entrepreneurs are taught to think big. The constructed ideal venture aims big: trying to find a scalable and repeatable business model with which one can generate lots of money and increasing profits. When constructing this ideal, would-be entrepreneurs are being weeded out of their ideas of doing something as a "hobby" or low-scale, moderate growth project. The downside of imposing high ambitions on nascent entrepreneurs is the devaluation of small-scale business and local solutions. Micro-entrepreneurship or small businesses that aim to solve local problems (and not scale elsewhere) become non-entrepreneurship, not valuable or worth financing – or the entrepreneur's time. Also, the focus on solely for-profit action might be problematic. Newcomers are taught to think about how they make money and how they can make more money. It would be interesting to see if within some other training programme high ambition levels are imposed with alternative goals, such as environmental or social, in mind. Further, the highly ambitious entrepreneur becomes the ideal within this, and thus the masculinity of entrepreneurship is reproduced (Ogbor, 2000).

Within the accelerator program, the would-be entrepreneurs are encouraged to become a start-up. This involves idealizing working on a venture as a team and following the practice of iterative development. Here the ideal entrepreneur becomes a team who works with a high speed and reacts promptly to cues

from potential customers or the market. This is also an exclusionary practice: those wanting to become a start-up, but lack a team with valued roles filled, are excluded from entrepreneurial training. The would-be entrepreneurs taking part in the programme meet conflicting ideals: in the start-up rhetoric, the team is valued higher than the idea, but eventually when it comes to evaluating the ideas and teams, growth-potential and scalability become more valued than the team, as in the case of Hammer accelerator program.

This study contributes to the discussion on what is done under the “guise” of entrepreneurship training and education (Berglund, 2013; Costa & Saraiva, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2012; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013). I argue that within entrepreneurship training programmes, such as accelerator programmes, would-be or nascent entrepreneurs are being normalized into certain ideals of thinking of and doing entrepreneurship. The ideal entrepreneur constructed within the accelerator programme is able and willing to perform entrepreneurship publicly, outspoken, extrovert, ambitious, hard worker, team player, customer-oriented, investor-oriented and so on. This is no news, since previous research has shown how entrepreneurship is reconstructed as masculine, heroic, individualistic, white, ambitious, risk-taking and so on (Ogbor, 2000; Bruni et al., 2004; Dodd & Anderson, 2007). What this emphasis on publicly performing entrepreneurship, thinking big and following the start-up way of working can bring along is certain demands from individuals and certain subjectivities we are supposed to fill. We are expected to perform entrepreneurship constantly and coherently. No matter where you go, you are supposed to be able to pitch your idea, and thus validate yourself as well. As Berglund (2013) notes in regard to entrepreneurship education, the participants of entrepreneurship training programme seem to be too invited to engage in this kind of “shadow boxing” and taught never to be satisfied with what you have – or what you are.

Acknowledging that accelerator programmes can reproduce dominant understandings is of high importance. There are more and more accelerators and other entrepreneurial training programmes popping up, organized by private, public and non-profit organizations as well as universities and these attract large numbers of young people hoping to have their own venture. I argue that these programmes not only teach tools and methods for venture creation and enable the creation of networks and possibly finding funding, but they also construct ideals of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs and “mold” would-be entrepreneurs into certain kinds of entrepreneurs. Thus, these programmes have an important role in either enabling diverse ways of doing entrepreneurship or limiting the possibilities of doing

entrepreneurship and who can be an entrepreneur. I argue that entrepreneurship training needs more critical scrutiny, since it seems to be largely upholding and reproducing problematic aspects of entrepreneurship. I also see that there is hope and potential in entrepreneurship training: the training doesn't have to reproduce the dominant understandings and ways of doing things, but instead we can strive towards making entrepreneurship training more inclusive, reflexive and emancipatory.

Further research could look at the relation between accelerator and other entrepreneurship training programmes and the reproduction of the capitalist system. Research could also look at different kinds of accelerators: do they all aim to produce for-profit, scalable and repeatable business models. Is there room for social, cultural or environmental aims and values in accelerating entrepreneurship? Further, longitudinal research is needed: what happens when (or if) the accelerated teams establish a start-up company? Do the practices and ideals from the accelerator follow them – do they “carry” certain practices with them that translate into organizational practices? Moreover, it would be interesting to pay more attention to the process of organizing training programs and the different actors involved in planning and executing them.

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