

The Importance of Fieldwork Research to Reveal Women Entrepreneurs Competence in Communication

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Abstract

This study reviews the main bases of interpersonal communication competence that determine women entrepreneurs' success: knowledge, motivation, and communication skills. The rising phenomenon of women becoming entrepreneurs could encourage the processes of socioeconomic development; however, many women face barriers when trying to become successful entrepreneurs. The literature suggests interpersonal communication is especially relevant in the construction of women's business networks, and that various communication acts showcase women entrepreneurs' knowledge, in terms of understanding social contexts, and motivation. Despite the literature's existing breadth, further studies are still needed to complete this topic because the research subjects do not always easily express their subjective consciousness. Accordingly, fieldwork research, which provides qualitative data, is an alternative way to gather findings.

Keywords: small business, communication, entrepreneur, fieldwork, women

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Introduction

Worldwide, entrepreneurs play an increasingly important role in economic development and Asian societies are no exception (Lingle, 2000). US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to this at the Women and Economy Forum of 2011 in San Francisco. Vega and Bolinger (2012) reported her speech in The Asia Foundation's news that small businesses in East Asia are increasing and growing at a fast rate.

In other countries, the number of small and medium-sized enterprises is similarly on the rise. For example, they have become the dominant economic agent and generate more than 70% of new employment opportunities in Iran (Hosamane and Alroaia, 2009). Similar developments can be ascertained for African countries like Kenya (Mwobobia, 2012) and Nigeria. Those countries view entrepreneurship as a way to improve the GDP growth rate (Ekpe, Mat, Razak, 2010).

The 13th Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) annual survey reported that about 388 million entrepreneurs were actively running new businesses in 2011. Within this number, it is also estimated that 163 million of these will be women – as early stage entrepreneurs (Kelley, Singer, and Herrington, 2012). However, women's participation in entrepreneurship for most of the sample countries is lower than that of men. Only 8 from 54 sample countries are showing equivalent rates among male and female early-stage entrepreneurship. Those countries are Panama, Venezuela, Jamaica, Guatemala, Brazil, Thailand, Switzerland, and Singapore (Kelley, Singer, and Herrington, 2012, p.16). Overall, the number of women entrepreneurs in almost every sample countries is increasing, although the growth rate is slow.

From a gender perspective, the rising phenomenon of women becoming entrepreneurs does not only encourage economical development but also empower women (Gill and Ganesh, 2007). In fact, some studies showed that the image of the entrepreneur is still male-oriented (Ahl, 2006; Mirchandani, 1999). People tend to believe that male entrepreneurs are more competent businessperson than female entrepreneurs. Fielden and Dawe (2004) also indicated that social circumstances could construct barriers against women entrepreneurs' progress. Within the male-dominated context, women continue to face many difficulties building their businesses (Sinha, 2005).

According to Teoh and Chong (2008), crucial barriers that hamper women entrepreneurs to gain success were lack of access to credit, lack of

management experience in terms of building formal business and social networks, and difficulties in balancing family responsibilities with business. Furthermore, researchers found that women entrepreneurs encountered obstacles in building patterns of networking, business performance, and finances (Fairlie & Robb, 2009; Coleman, 2007; Watson & Robinson, 2003; Bird, Sapp, & Lee, 2001; Cliff, 1998). There are also many unexplored dimensions of women entrepreneurship (beyond those listed here. To understand the nature of women's entrepreneurship in order to improve their conditions and chances of success, researchers need to expand their focus beyond mere economic perspectives and probe the subject using empirical research designs. In particular, we argue that the analysis of the communication skills women entrepreneurs use to lead or manage their businesses can help reveal new insights.

Only a few scholars have pointed out the role of communication competence in women's success in small business. In Werhane, Posig, Gundry, Ofstein, and Powell's (2007) study, women entrepreneurs emphasized communication acts as an important key for building successful relationships with employees and others. Likewise, Buttner (2001) found that women entrepreneurs used relational approaches when building networks, even with their own employees.

As McCreskey states, "the ability to communicate effectively is essential for success in many walks of life" (as cited in Hargie, 2006, p. 2). For example, in a research involving 50 senior managers in multinational corporations, Becerra and Gupta (2003) found that frequency of communication determined trustworthiness. Hunt, Tourish, and Hargie (2000) also concluded that interpersonal communication plays an important role in the training managers' daily activities.

Interpersonal communication competence is especially relevant in situations involving gender differences, for example in the workplace. Indeed, interpersonal communication in the workplace can ensure the harmony of mutual understanding (Sandwith, 1994). For instance, Kunkel and Burleson found that male and female employees show different emotions and behaviors in different working conditions (as cited in MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003). Likewise, women may require different methods, such as mentoring relationships, to support their professional development (Kalbfleisch & Keyton, 1995).

In *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, Hargie, citing Wilson and Sabees, defines competence as "knowledge, motivation, and skill" (as cited in Hargie, 2006, p. 14). Similarly, competence is the ability to

choose adequate strategies with awareness of the implications. In Hargie's definition, knowledge is related to the cognitive ability to understand a situation and context, and is necessary for one to be perceivably competent; motivation is one's desire to behave a certain way; and skill is the essential technical requirement needed to perform.

Focusing on the three qualities Hargie associated with competence, the research question guiding this literature review is the following: how is women entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication competence portrayed through the lens of knowledge, motivation, and communication skills? This study investigates the communication competencies of women entrepreneurs in relation with their success.

The analysis reviews numerous studies on women and entrepreneurship, mainly those conducted in United States, yet also in Israel, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Canada, Australia and other countries in the South Pacific, Latin America, and Europe. Those were selected based on availability and convenience. This analysis helps us identifying and highlighting research areas to study further using suitable conceptual frameworks.

Knowledge Skills

The crucial aspect of business performance is the entrepreneur's knowledge, although other aspects are equally important, such as good management skills, financial access, personal qualities, and satisfactory government support (Yusuf, 1995). This knowledge includes awareness of gender roles, as being an entrepreneur involves playing a gender role (Moult & Anderson, 2005).

Many studies found that gender differences affect education and business survival (Coleman, 2007; Watson & Robinson, 2003; Boden & Nucci, 2000; Lerner, Brush, & Hisrich, 1997). The education backgrounds of female entrepreneurs are generally weaker than male entrepreneurs. Limited education can affect women's ability to manage and grow their businesses. Beyond education, Ekpe, Mat and Razak (2011) also stressed on the importance of experience, attitude toward risk-taking, and business environment factors (such as credit loans) for women entrepreneurs. For instance, women entrepreneurs are often hesitant about applying for credit loans because of their lack of knowledge in managing business finances.

The research findings above provide a brief picture of women entrepreneurs' knowledge with respect to their businesses. Data is mostly gathered by distributing questionnaires and processing statistical data from

government surveys. From the quantitative data, it shows that women entrepreneurs continuously must improve their managerial knowledge. Besides that, it appears that women entrepreneurs have difficulties to adjust with external conditions, such as market conditions and government policies. Lack of knowledge also drives women entrepreneurs to fill areas that did not require specific or specialized knowledge. As a result, their businesses do not seem to perform as well as those of men.

Motivation

Motivation is a prerequisite to become an entrepreneur. McClelland explains that the need of achievement, affiliation, and power generates entrepreneurship (cited by Daft, 2005, p. 302-304). In a U.S.-based research, Gill and Ganesh (2007) found four starting points for women's entrepreneurship: (1) stimulation for self-fulfillment by combining responsibilities as both a housewife and entrepreneur, (2) self-determination to pursue a valuable life, (3) self-satisfaction from fighting for survival when facing challenges, and (4) support from friends and communities. Additionally, women also started businesses to escape daily office routines, accommodate creativity, and pursue a passion (Reaves, 2008).

Furthermore, socioeconomic and demographic differences could influence women entrepreneurs' motivation (Kalyani & Chandralekha, 2002). For instance, Orhan and Scott (2001) found that male domination and push factors, – such as family income, difficulty finding a suitable job, and the need for flexible time for domestic responsibilities – could motivate women to be an entrepreneur. Similarly, in a study of 150 women entrepreneurs in Sikkim, India, Joshi (2009) found that most of them became entrepreneurs because of family business, unemployment, or economic compulsion. With respect to the influence of family, Matthews and Moser (1996) also found that family background could be a determinant of women's interests in owning a business.

Some studies disclosed that female entrepreneurs chose specific businesses based on their motivation. Bardasi, Sabarwal, and Terrell (2011) explored the possibility of gender-based gaps in financial access to bank financing in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. They concluded that there was no evidence of gender discrimination and that female entrepreneurs were significantly different from their male counterparts in their pursuit of financial loans. Similarly, in his study, Cliff (1998) found that female entrepreneurs in North America

did not see the urgency of expanding their businesses; instead, they carefully considered limiting resources, the time, and energy necessary to balance the business with personal life and domestic responsibilities.

Many studies explored the motivation of women entrepreneurs applying quantitative and qualitative research methods. Some of them gathered data by distributing questionnaires and processing statistical data from government surveys. These motivation studies indicated that women entrepreneurs have their own desires to pursue a business, and most women still prioritize domestic responsibilities.

Communication Skills

There are gender differences in entrepreneurs' communication styles and methods of building relationships. These differences determine the construction of men's and women's business networks. Women's businesses were typically smaller than those of men and more active locally than nationally (Andre, 1992); thus, women's networks typically involved people which they have known before for a long time. Similarly, Renzulli, Aldrich, and Moody (2000) found that women tend to respect their kinship when building business networks. Such close-knit social networks tended to have positive effects on both self-efficacy and risk-taking in entrepreneurial activity (Wang, 2010).

Women entrepreneurs tended to see communication as essential for managing relationships with employees, governments, or social networks (Buttner, 2001; Werhane et al., 2007). Accordingly, women entrepreneurs may construct their own communication styles to build relationships with employees or others. For instance, women leaders seek to construct a communication style that reflects an ethic of care (Fine & Simmons, 2009; Reaves, 2008; Sudarmanti, 2008). With respect to gender differences in communication styles, Tannen identifies that, "women uses the language of relationship, whereas men use the language of status and hierarchy" (as cited in Pearson & Cooks, 1995, p. 317). However, Edley (2000) also found that women could use hierarchy in their culture of control. Edley argued that cultural practices in women owned business are showing elements of power and resistance. Within this particular context, women create supportive, flexible, and loyal environments within their workplace but simultaneously suppress and strategically subordinate the employees' for the owner's achievement.

Many of the studies addressed in this section apply qualitative research methods rather than quantitative methods to analyze women

entrepreneurs' communication skills. Researchers gather qualitative data from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and fieldwork, so they could study the communication skills of women entrepreneurs.

Discussion and Conclusion

Research design is an essential element to conduct and explore a phenomenon study (Silverman, 2000; Cresswell, 1998; Walsh, 1998). Based on this literature review, we argue that entrepreneurship researchers need to reconsider the suitability of their research designs, especially those who are interested in women's entrepreneurial activities.

The literature suggests women entrepreneurs have less experience, managerial knowledge, and skills than male entrepreneurs do. For example, many women entrepreneurs in Ekpe, Mat, and Razak's (2010) established themselves in fields that did not require particular or specific skills. However, women can still obtain business knowledge through educational pathways, courses, or training, and discover logical frameworks that facilitate alternative strategic decisions for the growth and success of their businesses. Furthermore, Mangunsong (2009) found that education did not significantly determine the effectiveness of Bali, Java, Minang, and Batak women entrepreneurs' leadership in Indonesia. Instead, their business performance depended on family supportiveness.

Also, limited managerial skills do not equate to negative business intentions. Having different motivation starting points, women represented multiple realities when managing their businesses (Leitch & Hill, 2006). Different experiences shaped their varied approaches to or strategic choices in managing their businesses (Hunter & Boyd, 2004). This is most apparent in the size of a women entrepreneur's business, which will grow only insofar as she is comfortable managing it. Similarly, women entrepreneurs in Cliff (1998) emphasized the importance of quality over quantity and were more reluctant to take on the financial loans and administrative requirements associated with business growth. Women entrepreneurs in these studies developed their businesses according to their own motives.

With respect to leadership, Flauto (1999) emphasized that a good leader needs good communication competence; consequently, women entrepreneurs should have good communication competence to effectively lead and manage their businesses. However, unlike males, female leaders were unlikely to use power as a persuasive strategy with their subordinates (Harper & Hirokawa, 1998). Instead, women entrepreneurs are more likely

to change their strategies to accommodate the given situation. Women entrepreneurs also employ various communication styles and patterns. Their communication acts reflected their subjective knowledge and motivation (Wang, 2010; Fine & Simmons, 2009; Reaves, 2008; Sudarmanti, 2008; Werhane, Posig, Gundry, Ofstein, and Powell, 2007; Buttner, 2001; Edley, 2000).

The concept of female entrepreneurship invariably concerns gender roles, which reflect women's social and cultural expectations. We argue that quantitative methods, which assume homogeneity and representative samples, cannot adequately assess this kind of phenomenon. For instance, surveys could not explore an individual's perspective of women entrepreneurs (Moult & Anderson, 2005). Accordingly, feminist researchers have encouraged social researchers to use qualitative methods instead of quantitative methods, on the basis that men and women are not homogenous (Brunskell, 1998). Moreover, feminist standpoint theory argues that women's common experiences are different among different groups of women, as women have multiple identities based on race, class, gender, and sexuality (Littlejohn, 2002). Women's different experiences can create various interpretations and social construction standpoints.

One such qualitative research design is fieldwork research. Qualitative research designs allow researchers to derive data from holistic natural conditions. Although several studies related to small business and entrepreneurship have applied qualitative methods (Perren & Ram, 2004), few use fieldwork research to gather data. A synonym for fieldwork research is ethnography (Fortier, 1998). Fieldwork research does not use a variable measurement research design; rather, fieldwork research attempts to explore how and why something occurs. Fieldwork study requires researchers to stay longer and get involved with the subject's context so that the researcher can carry out in-depth interviews and participant observations without making informants feel uncomfortable.

In addition, according to our own experiences while conducting fieldwork research on women entrepreneurs, we would like to suggest the following three points. *First*, researchers should consider the boundaries when gaining access and the informants' willingness to be the subject of the research and articulate their thoughts. It is easier to become familiar with a woman when you know her expectations and desires. This requires time.

Second, researchers should be aware that informants cannot always easily express their subjective consciousness: their deeper thoughts and

feelings. In many societies, the informants are more sensitive and feel uncomfortable saying something contrary to their community's expectations. Their social culture has already shaped them. For example, patriarchal culture often silences women's voices. Listening to women does not mean simply making documentations and reporting spoken words: it also means catching the non-verbal layers of meaning. Sometimes the informants do not realize what they are feeling. This fieldwork research can provide valuable insights. This technique will assist to portray the area of knowledge and motivation which are hidden in the area of female subjectivity that could not easily be found empirically as reflected on the communication acts that appear in everyday life.

Third, researchers should also close the gap by showing empathy, knowing daily routines, and using the same language. Once a subject feels exploited, cheated, or betrayed, she will terminate the relationship. Failure to build a rapport will also affect the authenticity of the research's findings. Research skills are thus necessary to access women's worldviews.

This study identifies some research areas and research designs that researchers need to explore further regarding women entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication, especially in terms of leading and building relationships in business networks. The literature shows that communication acts can reflect women entrepreneurs' motivations and knowledge of social contexts; however, there are still various aspects of interpersonal communication that require further study, such as gestures, language, distance/space, or other symbols which are used in the process of building relationship.

Finally, this literature review suggests researchers should approach the topic of women entrepreneurs through the lens of knowledge, motivation, and communication skills: the main bases of interpersonal communication competence that determine women entrepreneurs' success. One cannot discuss these factors separately while adequately portraying the entrepreneurial process. For future research, we encourage researchers to explore mediating factors that bridging women entrepreneurs' internal processes with external factors, such as organizational climate, economics, and environmental contexts. Its insights could bring us to the closer portrayal of women entrepreneurs' perception and their social construction.

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