THE ENIGMA OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Success has usually been seen through the lens of financial gains which is typically associated with the male version of success. However, in this study, the aim was to know the meanings of success through the minds of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. For this purpose, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with women entrepreneurs participating in this research and this paper presents the findings from the qualitative research study based on the Hermeneutic phenomenology strategy. This interpretive research paradigm was intended to investigate the women entrepreneurial success phenomenon. Due to Hermeneutic phenomenology strategy, it became possible to get to know the gist of women entrepreneurial success phenomenon. This research paradigm provided a means to get in touch with the success phenomenon even from the sub-consciousness of those women entrepreneurs. This paper explores seven broader themes which women entrepreneurs in Malaysia deem important for their entrepreneurial success. Interestingly, women consider financial gains secondarily and give non-financial gains their primary importance. The detailed description of findings thereby unfolds the enigmatic mystery of success phenomenon for women entrepreneurs. These findings may found to be very informative and beneficial for policy makers, governmental and non-governmental bodies, educationists, women entrepreneurs and all the related stake holders to mind their further steps on the way leading to SUCCESS.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Women Entrepreneurial Success.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous businesses are failed during their first five years (Aldrich 1999). However, at the other side of the mirror truth also lies that through entrepreneurship it is possible to overcome the obliteration of over 5 million jobs in big businesses (Kirchhoff 1997). Consequently, it is tremendously important to know what really substances in fortifying entrepreneurial success and thus success issue need to be investigated thoroughly in the field of entrepreneurship (Baron et al. 2011).

In this paper, the prime focus was kept on exploring the meanings of success phenomenon as considered by women entrepreneurs in Malaysia through hermeneutic phenomenology which is known for its credibility and rigor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The study followed the provided guidelines of Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) in order to investigate the in-depth meanings of success perceived by women entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

Interviews were conducted to know Success which is undeniably a very multifaceted phenomenon and invites researchers to study it closer. Moreover, the phenomenon is linked with many other factors. Therefore, sub-questions which all revolved around success were asked to know the phenomenon properly. Due to this adopted approach it
became possible to dig out the hidden truth laid in their sub consciousness and helped to interpret the real meanings of success as perceived by these women entrepreneurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Businesses aim to get success irrespective of any preset definition of success. Success could be seen as achievement of something being anticipated (Miller et al. 2006); as an achieved event, reached growth (Baum & Locke 2004) or an appreciated wish. This could be subjective or objective based on the person’s own set criterion. Furthermore, success can’t be only associated with objective measures (Schumpeter 2004). Thus, it is quite admissible to know how success is seen (Ahmad 2007).

‘Success’ may be considered and theorized differently by men and women. Men may appreciate success as attaining fame and respect (external criterions). However, for women it could be the accomplishment of their set targets or a matter of internal criterions (Burger 2008; Cliff 1998). Astonishingly, women owned businesses’ growth tendency is lower than males and it might not necessarily link with only financial gains (Aidis et al. 2008; Manolova et al. 2012). Additionally, women owned businesses choose to be smaller in size (Cooper et al. 1994; Cliff 1998).

Commonly used gauge of success i.e. attainment of wealth (McMullen et al. 2006) may not be the truly echoed success measure (Alstete 2008). It may have been the possibility that women may set their success targets based on their internal standards. Therefore, the success phenomenon is aimed to be explored for women in Malaysia as culture may likely to affect success perceptions. In this vein, their perceived meanings of success may be different from absolute objective measures, so it is commendable to explore the success phenomenon due to the diversity of perceptions and heterogeneity of possible indices of entrepreneurial success.

METHODOLOGY

In order to chase the reality, this study adopted ‘Hermeneutic Phenomenology’ to dig out the success phenomenon by utilizing face to face interviewing technique approaching through case study method as women are more aggressive in actions, feelings and thoughts than men (Suaibah et al. 2005).

Heidegger (1889-1976) described ‘human beings’ as ‘hermeneutic beings’ that are interpretative and find meanings in their lives (Draucker 1999). Heidegger gave ‘context’ the key importance and asserted that individuals are not free from their cultures and environments in which they live. Furthermore, their understanding remains incomplete in absenteeism of their socio-cultural context (Campbell 2001; Wojnar & Swanson 2007). He offered the notion of ‘Dasein’. It is the idea related with ‘being’ in the world who cannot segregate themselves from their contexts which affect choices and preferences. In this regard, contexts offer meanings to their lived experiences. This is the ‘situatedness of individual’s dasein’ with respect to contexts (Campbell 2001).

Furthermore, Heidegger (1962) advised to have a pre-understanding (fore structure of understanding) to know and interpret reality. Following Heidegger (1962), hermeneutic phenomenology was deemed a suitable research methodology to explore the lived experiences of Malaysian women entrepreneurs with reference to their socio-environmental impact on their success phenomenon as these forces may shape their meanings of success. In order to chase the reality through the lived experiences, the circular nature of research (Heidegger 1962) known as hermeneutic circle (which takes loops goes backward and forward between researcher’s fore structure and the learning that comes from investigation) was considered important. Hermeneutic circle helps researcher in gaining full insight of participants’ meanings through researcher’s understanding of phenomenon and data obtained from other resources which comes as a result of ‘coconstitutionality’ (Koch 1995).

INTERVIEWS

Through the interpretation of interviews conducted with ten women entrepreneurs, the phenomenon was known closely from the women’ own narration of success experiences. In fact, interviews offer exploration of lived experiences’ own narrations and help creating and maintaining a bridge between the researcher and the participants which helps in the true comprehension of the phenomenon under study.
Furthermore, semi-structured interviews help researcher to probe the topic at hand and also allow comparing the data acquired from the cases under study (Morse & Field, 1995; Minichiello et al., 1999). In fact, the nature of questions to be asked is very important which improves the quality of the study and thus a special attention was given to the questions to be asked and a thorough drill was conducted before interviews.

Additionally, 2-3 interviews lasting for 40-60 minutes were conducted in which numerous questions regarding success were asked. It was given due consideration to keep gap between two interviews with the two interviewees. Furthermore, intentional gap was also maintained between the two interviews with the same interviewee to grasp the data well. Additionally researcher probed to know the essence of the topic at hand.

Detailed information along with the written and informed consents (the voluntary and revocable agreement of a competent individual) of the participants was acquired. During this research expedition, a good deal of attention was given to the research ethics and information sheets providing details on research (research objectives, research nature and the research procedure) were disseminated beforehand personally or through their assistants or secretaries. Moreover, verbal information on research was also delivered.

Additionally, they were assured of anonymity and also given full right to leave study at any time. Furthermore, they were given freedom to ask any questions at any time so that a friendly relationship can be established between the interviewer and the interviewee. In this respect no forceful methods were adopted for data collection and the participants were respected, esteemed and appreciated fully. Their time availability and place suitability were preferred for the conduction of interviews. In this regard, a good rapport was established in the relationship between the researcher and the participant.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to analyze the obtained data, Reflexive reliving of data (to see the participants again in the real life time through text) was produced by the researcher to retain sanctity of data (van Manen, 1997). Accordingly, text could be comprehended as data and as the research product (Smith, 1997). Hermeneutic alertness was given due consideration and even the situations were also taken care of (van Manen 1997). Reflexive mode was adopted to inaugurate and entertain any probable requirement, based on the situation and the relationship among research, participants and the researcher.

Additionally, Hermeneutic cyclic loops (‘a movement between parts and whole’) were taken up to analyze the research critically (Ajjawi and Higgs 2007). It is like a continuum between data and the evolution of phenomenon understanding process where understanding emerges from taking loops and moving iteratively in a circular motion through text. The text is the researcher’s creation based on the obtained data. A constant check back was maintained during the process of studying and developing the true understanding of the success phenomenon. This iterative consultation with the text helped in interpretation of the success phenomenon which is according to Bontekoe (1996), the ‘gradual convergence of insight’ (Bontekoe, 1996).

Three types of files i.e. transcript file, personal file and analytical file of field notes were organized during the research process (Minichiello et al.1995). In the transcript file all the raw data was kept. In Personal file the records on the full sequential details of participants, their settings and the persons relating to them present at the moment and reflective notes were kept. This assisted in the restoration of dialogues according to the context and did not only lie on the recorded data. Further, analytical file contained the complete critically evaluated investigation and reflections with respect to the emerging notions and themes.

First order constructs were initially prepared which were then covered with the second order constructs (Edwards & Titchen, 2003; Titchen & McIntyre, 1993). Analytical procedure involved the stages of immersion, comprehension, abstraction, synthesizing themes, phenomenon illustration, critical evaluation and integration. Immersion involved converging data into texts and its iterative reading and its organization which helped in the coding process. Participants’ interview transcription and field notes helped in the preparation of text. Iterative reading helps getting familiarity with the participants’ nodes. Furthermore, the themes emerged through reflection and continually seeking answers regarding women entrepreneurial success phenomenon.
Comprehension involved knowing ‘first order constructs’ presented by the participants which are in participants’ own language and their own reflections of their worldviews and tells what participants are saying (Titchen & McIntyre, 1993). A constant check back was maintained with the participants and it allowed for necessary probing and confirmation of the participants’ previously described notions. Abstraction involved distinguishing second order constructs (through the researcher’s personal reflection) and arranging these constructs into sub-themes. Additionally these ‘Abstracted Themes’ of the first order constructs were obtained from the participants’ data.

Synthesizing themes involved grouping sub-themes into themes, explanation of themes and comparing the emerged themes across number of cases participating in the study. All these stages helped in the emergent of themes regarding success phenomenon. Now it was the time to move further and explain and link the identified themes with the existing literature and restructuring the interpretations. This stage is called as Phenomenon Illustration where the Success Phenomenon was reconstructed on theoretical ground through the interrelationships among themes and sub themes.

The themes were then critically evaluated internally and externally with experts, a stage known as Critical evaluation. It helped in assessing the building themes through the unbiased lens which improved the sanctity of the phenomenon and truly enriched the research. Finally, the integration involved refining themes and the reporting of those themes in the final interpretation. Research objective, question and prior research assumption were several times looked back to know the full insight of phenomenon under study i.e. ‘Women Entrepreneurial Success.

Data and findings obtained through the process were compared for any probable prejudices. In depth analysis of the participants’ data of the transcript file and its constant rechecking with the interpretation assisted in understanding the success phenomenon for women entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

FINDINGS

Seven broader themes emerged that explain women entrepreneurial success phenomenon:

1. AUTONOMY

A main finding was that of autonomy. Women prefer adopting this entrepreneurial line of action as they need freedom of their own time and destiny. This is also discussed in the previous literature that entrepreneurs yearn for autonomy (Kolvereid & Isaksen 2006; Gauzente 2003) and this has also been found in this study as according to one of the respondent: [“mm… I always needed ‘freedom of time’, you know… if I am in my own business….I would cater more time to my kids and would spend my time with my family…. allow them to be at my own work place…..I can utilize my time… according to my own set conditions”]. Another respondent expressed this sense of autonomy as: [“Well… I don’t want to work anywhere else. I just wanted my own work and my position as being a LEADER….and this I have achieved”].

2. INTERNAL SATISFACTION

Internal satisfaction was another finding which was common to all participating women entrepreneurs. This particular theme was elaborated differently by them in their own peculiar ways. An illustration taken from the text obtained from data is: [“I don’t actually need a fancy car or a big house but just I am a simple person. What I want to say is…actually...mmm…I don’t really wish to work 24/7…. for me it’s more the matter of internal satisfaction”]. Another participant stated: [“My own internal satisfaction and my love to my work is what I acknowledge most”].

3. CUSTOMER BASE

Another interesting finding from the women entrepreneurs’ data was their concerns for their customers and society. An excerpt example is given as [“… ‘creating value’ for my customers which for sure bring my customers back to me even if the competitor is selling the same”]. She also expounded in a way: [“By then, for me, creating value for my customers…to make them come back…maintaining customers, satisfying customers is what my success measure is. Important is to maintain customer line…..Build their trust on the brand. Business rapport really counts. So, although...”].
they may get the same thing from others and several different outlets, yet they seek to come back is what the actual measure of success is. We maintain and improve the customer service that is what I call my competitive edge on my rivals”). Another respondent narrated: [“Well, indeed my services to the people…. and my work delivery to my customers…. is more important for me. I understand that money is also important as I have to pay the rent. But first is my relationship with customer, how I pay them how they think of me and thus they come back (retention)”). Another respondent described: [“…I am playing better than my competitors by providing better services to my customers and thus retaining and increasing my existing customer base. So, I am more successful as compared to them”]. Another respondent mentioned in a way as: [“Success is about giving your customers the best possible services…. satisfaction comes if u provide what u claim to provide like if I am in health services then improving health would bring me satisfaction and it will be my success”. Another respondent revealed concern for the society as: [“I really want to improve people’s health and reduce the problems linked with obesity…. you see these obesity cases are increasing in Malaysia day by day….I really feel sad about that and I…wish to eradicate this and its hazards from my society. If I make people happy then only I will be successful”].

4. BUSINESS GROWTH

Business growth is also one of the findings exposed by the women entrepreneurs. As one of the respondent elucidated: [“You know soon….we are opening a new branch in Pusat Damansara…. so it’s like adding on into our ambitions. As far as achieving aims is concerned….well….I believe…..not yet as I wanna open a new branch….and off course some more branches”]. Another respondent discussed: [“Success is like you have more branches and more employees to help you”]. According to one of the respondents, “My own satisfaction would be if I occupy many branches”. According to another respondent, “For me Success is extending business, adding branches, adding workers, and buying more equipment for your business.”

5. FAMILY

Family was the most buzzing theme and the participating women entrepreneurs highlighted it extensively. Women are suggested to be known as “NURTURERS” and their own family concerns were presented as: According to one respondent, “Family was my first and foremost motive to be in my own business”. According to another entrepreneur, “If I am in my own business….I may cater more time for my kids and would spend my time with my family, allow them to be at my own workplace. As such I would not ignore my family”. According to another respondent, “I came to the business to help my family, my husband and to give better future to my children”. According to one another women entrepreneur, “For women it is about nurturing family and for men is about gaining power. This is how women and men are programmed as. Success is about nurturing and giving back”.

6. NETWORKING

Networking theme among women entrepreneurs showed that they prefer to work in “togetherness”. Networking skill to become successful in the market was highlighted by many participating women entrepreneurs. It was described by one of the respondents as: [“Women prefer to work ‘together’ so their affiliation with togetherness is more than in men”]. According to another respondent, “Through business one can remain engaged with friends and social network…you can get friends’ cooperation and move further”.

7. BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

Business Performance was also recognized by women entrepreneurs. Business Performance theme showed that they choose to improve their work performance through quality. Better Business Performance was highlighted by almost all the entrepreneurs to become successful in the market. Their concerns were described as one of the respondents stated in a way as, “Money….my satisfaction is not money rather my workmanship. Money is also important. …yeah…. also as I have to pay the rent”. Another respondent cited in a way as: [“If I have enough money…… no debt….. If I have no worries of money….so I don’t actually need a fancy car or a big house but just I am a simple person”]. Another respondent revealed in a way as: [“money …I know is important but comes secondary, If you are meeting cost, getting a little more than that which is enough for your requirements than ok lah”]. Another respondent mentioned in a way as: [“I believe that it is good to have money but how much u can eat how much u can travel. At certain point u get sick of that. U cannot eat money nor u should eat so much… else u may have diseases and may get into health problems so
more important for me is success internally, nurturing my children and see them thriving. Similarly seeing my customers improving their health condition through the services provided to them by me is my success measure”].

IMPLICATIONS

These findings may found to be very informative and beneficial for policy makers, governmental and non-governmental bodies, educationists, women entrepreneurs and all the related stake holders to mind their further steps on the way leading to success. Through these findings better plans and policies for the welfare of women entrepreneurs and their businesses‘ thriving and success could be devised in future. Their success requirements could thereby be put on front and they would no longer be judged through the spectacles of male based rather universal based success measures. As it is also not wise to see all beings through the same lens whereas the motives and preferences for business conduction are found different.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some limitations may include the involvement of women participants only from Malaysia, so the findings cannot be generalized worldwide. However, it would also be interesting to know the perceptions of success from women belonging to the other parts of the world. Secondly, this study was conducted at one shot of time so the variation in the longer run with respect to the women entrepreneurial perceptions of success could not have been accounted for as also it was beyond the scope of the study. Furthermore, it is also suggested to consider it investigating over a longer period of time.

CONCLUSION

However, this study truly provides rich insights into the phenomenon under study i.e. women entrepreneurial success which is indeed an interesting and a very multifaceted phenomenon. Success has usually been seen through the lens of financial gains which is typically associated with the male version of success However; this study explores seven broader themes (i.e. Autonomy, internal satisfaction, customer base, family, networking, business growth and business performance) which women entrepreneurs in Malaysia deem important for their entrepreneurial success. Interestingly, women consider financial gains secondarily and give non-financial gains their primary importance. The detailed description of findings thereby unfolds the enigmatic mystery of success phenomenon for women entrepreneurs. These findings have practical implications for policy makers and stake holders.

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