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The Role of Mentoring for Women Entrepreneurs in a Rural Context

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine whether mentoring is effective in supporting women in a rural context to engage in entrepreneurial activity. It seeks to contribute insights to the development of institutional support programmes, and thus bridge the gap between policy and practice as well as creating value, employment and community involvement.

There is no clear definition of what constitutes rural enterprise in the UK, a rural enterprise is simply a business registered at an address in an area defined as rural by the Department of Rural Affairs. A useful classification of rural entrepreneurship distinguishes “rural entrepreneurship” (RE) and “entrepreneurship in the rural” (EIR). The latter uses the rural context simply as a location. The former is embedded in the rural context.

An interpretivist approach was adopted using a qualitative research design. One-off in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 24 women who operate in some of the most common areas for women entrepreneurs and 6 of their mentors. Quota sampling was combined with a purposive approach to select those who had had experience of mentoring.

Upbringing was found to be a major influence on whether women engaged in entrepreneurship. Most stated that there had been no suggestion that this was a possibility from their schooling.

With regards to mentoring, most expressed the view that it was “vital”. Most were very pragmatic about seeking out practical advice. The most significant form of mentoring was found to be peer mentoring, from women’s business networks, professional associations and online networks.

Bearing in mind the small sample size, the findings indicate a more targeted approach to mentoring programmes should be taken. Peer mentoring has not been explored in depth. More could be done to support established businesses rather than a focus on start ups. In addition, the curriculum could be broadened to include recognition of entrepreneurship as a valid career path.

Keywords: mentoring; women entrepreneurs; gender; rural enterprise.

Introduction

Whilst the number of women-owned enterprises has been increasing substantially in recent decades, women still lag behind men in the creation of new enterprises. Mentoring is a form of support that is suggested as particularly relevant to women entrepreneurs as it is flexible and bespoke to the mentee, and provides a role model in the form of a successful women business owner (Laukhuf and Malone, 2015; McMullan and Price, 2012). It is suggested that this is especially important where societal stereotypes see the entrepreneur as typically male, and women have to manage this disconnect with their own desires and experience (Kobeissi, 2010; Wilson and Tagg, 2010). Further, women may tend to have other ambitions for their business than

purely growth, so success comes with different criteria (Baker and Welter, 2017; Horvoka and Dietrich, 2011; Sharafizad and Coetzer, 2015), and this has influence upon the mentoring relationship.

The role of mentoring for entrepreneurs in a rural economy has not been specifically addressed, which is surprising given that it is known that the entrepreneur is subject to the norms of the location in which they are based. (Deller, Kures and Conroy, 2019; Nelson, Santana and Wood, 2016; Webster, 2017).

This study seeks to understand the importance of mentoring for women entrepreneurs in a rural economy. It aims to contribute to the debate about the suitability of mentoring for women in particular by undertaking a qualitative study with women entrepreneurs living in Devon who have experienced mentoring. A sample of mentors was also interviewed in order to gain a complete view of the mentoring relationship.

The experience of mentoring and whether or how this links to business success for women entrepreneurs has not been examined by previous researchers, although claims are made for its importance (Overall and Wise, 2016; Sarri, 2011; Terjesen and Sullivan, 2011). Also, although studies have been conducted in a variety of settings, the experience of women who are in a rural economy has tended to focus on developing rather than developed countries. In addition, the exact components of successful mentoring have not been determined. This study will further the current debate, as well as contributing to the development of institutional support programmes to better serve those women who seek to become entrepreneurs.

Literature Review

Several studies have addressed how a rural environment may affect entrepreneurship but many of these have been situated in developing economies (Patridou and Glaveli, 2008; Stefan, 2014; Odoul et al., 2017; Namitse, Zhuang and Zhu, 2019). Enabling women's entrepreneurship has been suggested as a major element to increase economic activity in such areas. Indeed, policy in developed countries has also emphasised women's entrepreneurship as a solution to underdeveloped areas. This leads to questions of what is meant by "entrepreneurship" and what influence context has on women's experience of entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship theory has concentrated on what some refer to as "nexus" entrepreneurs, "externally financed non-family, profit-focused growth ventures in developed economies... run by... educationally and economically privileged men with their eyes on the prize of a lucrative 'exit' event" (Baker and Welter, 2017:170). Because the stereotypical picture of an entrepreneur is male, women have to deal with the contradiction between their feminine identity and being a business owner (Swail and Marlow, 2018).

Context can provide particular opportunities but also set boundaries for those who wish to engage in entrepreneurship (Welter, 2011). Welter (ibid) defines dimensions of context as: business; social; spatial and institutional (ibid). Other types of context could be environmental and cultural. For women, entrepreneurship can imply "breaking out of the norms" (Berg, 1997:265 in ibid: 171). Often women start home-based

businesses, which may be viewed as leisure activities or “lifestyle” businesses. This does not take into account the spatial context which may restrict women’s ability to conduct business outside the home.

In 2016 the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in the UK conducted a survey to look at the importance of women’s entrepreneurship to the UK economy. The report found that women-led businesses were concentrated in several sectors: real estate (27%); health and social work (18%); community, social and personal services (18%). Wholesale and retail was another significant sector (16%). The flexibility of running one’s own business was a major draw for women, who could continue to be more involved in childcare and family life. The FSB found that whilst women entrepreneurs faced the same challenges as male-led SMEs, there were particular areas of concern. Mentoring was key in helping entrepreneurs to grow their business, and for women it was particularly important to develop self-confidence in their own skills and abilities (FSB, 2016:15).

There is no clear definition of what constitutes rural enterprise. In the UK, a rural enterprise is simply a business registered at an address in an area defined as rural by the Department of Rural Affairs (DEFRA) which is based on population density. A rural entrepreneur could be simply “an individual who manages a venture in a rural setting” (Henry and McElwee, 2014:5).

A useful classification of rural entrepreneurship is whether they are exhibiting “rural entrepreneurship” (RE) or “entrepreneurship in the rural” (EIR). The latter uses the rural context simply as a location and tends to be concerned with profit and mobility. The location of the enterprise is simply due to advantages for the business and the entrepreneur. This enterprise could take place anywhere and could be moved if the entrepreneur wished it. It does not involve engagement between the enterprise or its human actors and the location. The former on the other hand is embedded in the rural context and has a close relation with it. It could not be moved to another location without changing its nature completely. There may be other motivations for running the enterprise, not just financial returns, such as personal, societal or cultural aspirations. The entrepreneur may utilise local social networks to serve local development and may feel a sense of responsibility for their community. For both types of entrepreneur, spatial context is paramount (Korsgaard, Muller and Tanvig, 2015).

Nelson, Santana and Wood (2016) differentiated businesses into joia (jewel) or bijuteria (trinket) classifications. The joia or boutique model was more likely to be run by those characterised as ‘corporate refugees’ who had moved to the area, attracted by the cultural atmosphere and setting. They often saw their businesses as a way to pursue a rural lifestyle, seeking to preserve the historic nature of the town. Those with

an individualistic mindset were more likely to be native business owners who were focussed on profit and tended to run bijuteria enterprises, viewing their businesses as a way of maximising profit.

Some researchers have suggested that women entrepreneurs in particular benefit from institutional support and that this is vital to their success. Institutions set out the “rules of the game” that shape an individual’s behaviour and beliefs (Meyer and Scott, in Kazumi and Kawai, 2017:347) and it is “essential for female entrepreneurs to gain institutional approval” (ibid:349). Women who receive support in this way may feel more confident and be able to deal with any negative constraints attached to perceptions of women entrepreneurs.

Mentoring has been classified as “a formal learning relationship within an organisational context,” where “mentors support and challenge the mentees to recognise their career potential”, with the result that “both parties perceive they are learning and gaining from the relationship (Jones, 2012:59). Other research suggests that “the purpose of mentoring is to learn from the experience of others” and mentors have “been there and done that” (Pawson in Sarri, 2011:722). St Jean (2012:202) adds that the mentor is a person who is in a “position of authority”, who “kindly watches over a younger individual”.

St Jean (2012: 206) devised a conceptual framework which sets out nine roles for the mentor. The reflector gives the mentee feedback, reflecting the image they portray to others enabling the mentee to identify strengths and weaknesses. The second role of reassurance gives the mentee the ability to put things into perspective and relieve stress. The motivator encourages and helps the mentee to build self-confidence. The fourth role is that of confidant, which may develop over time. These four roles are classed as psychosocial functions. The mentor also helps the mentee to be integrated in the business community by introducing them to contacts. Another role is that of information support, passing on knowledge of management, legal and industry considerations. The mentor may also confront the mentee’s ideas, encouraging deeper reflection and improved problem solving. The role of guide is the fourth function which is included in the career-related category of mentor roles. Finally, the mentor may act as a role model. This framework provides a useful tool to measure the most effective elements of the mentor function in the proposed study with women entrepreneurs.

Women mentors can provide essential role models for those women who are starting their businesses. The European Commission (2000 in McMullan and Price, 2012)) states that “mentoring programmes would be beneficial for women entrepreneurs”, and should use “successful women entrepreneurs as mentors” (ibid:199). Mentors were able to challenge them, discover their strengths and use them, helping women align their personal and business goals (Laukhof and Malone, 2015).

Methodology

Given that this study is examining the experience of women entrepreneurs, the identification of objective entities would not be possible. The interpretivist approach seeks to understand how people construct their world and is concerned with symbolic interactions as a “continuous process of interpreting the social world around us” (Saunders et al. 2007:107). Much of the previous research has adopted the need to justify findings by taking an objective stance, but this has also resulted in a concentration on the “nexus” view of entrepreneurship (Baker and Welter, 2017). This study, in aiming to explore the role of mentoring in female entrepreneurs working in a rural context, will do this through examining the lived experience of women entrepreneurs which has been under-reported in mainstream entrepreneurship theory. As, “Knowledge is...linked to experience” (Caine et al, 2020:3), the participants’ view of the mentoring relationship they have experienced leads onto a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research “aims at understanding the phenomenon or event under study from the interior” (Flick:2009:65). It has been criticised as “fiction, not science” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:8) with the inference that it exhibits soft scholarship rather than hard science. However, because this project is concerned with capturing the views of individuals and securing rich descriptions, it fits qualitative models and does not follow an objective, scientific approach (ibid:10).

Narrative research begins with the lived experience of individuals and focuses on collecting participants’ stories. It presumes that worlds are constructed through stories, and that by identifying these in research, one can understand how a social world is constituted. It is best for capturing detailed life experiences of a small number of individuals. “A narrative... requires three elements: an original state of affairs, an action... and the consequent state of affairs,” (Czarniawska, 2011:12). An analysis of these narratives could create a description of themes that are common to all stories. The experiences are also set within the personal, social and historical context of culture, occupation and gender.

The geographical area for the participants is the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the area covered by the South Hams District Council. These two areas are situated in the southern part of Devon, UK. They fall into the classification of ‘rural’ as being outside settlements with less than 10,000 households (DEFRA, 2011). The areas contain both mixed farming developments, sparse but clustered settlements and dramatic coastlines which attract a high number of tourists and incomer residents (AONB, 2020).

One-off in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of women who operate in some of the most common areas for women entrepreneurs identified by the FSB research (2016). Quota sampling was combined with a purposive approach to select women entrepreneurs who had had experience of mentoring at some stage in their entrepreneurial journey. There was also an element of convenience sampling in that several

participants were known to the researcher. In addition, snowball sampling identified a sample of mentors, matched with their mentees from the wider sample.

Cresswell (2007) suggests interviewing should continue until the data are saturated and no further issues are identified with subsequent interviews. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) put forward a radical justification that 12 interviews should be enough to reach data saturation. They found that the majority of themes in their research (73%) were identified in the first six interviews, with a further 21% identified from the next six. Twelve women who are native to the rural context and twelve who are incomers were interviewed, with a further six interviews with mentors. It is recognised that this is a small sample.

Braun and Clarke (2012) suggest breaking data down into three steps: searching for and identifying themes to develop broad topics; reviewing themes in relation to the complete set of data and referring to the research questions; and defining and naming themes to provide a coherent story. Their approach is linked to that of Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012) who set out a method to bring what they term “qualitative rigor” to the presentation of qualitative, inductive research (ibid:15). An initial thematic analysis was conducted, and the Gioia et al.(ibid) template applied.

Findings

Initial review of the data showed that there were many similarities and differences between the experiences of the participants. Ages ranged from 35 to 68, with the majority (12) of women being in their 40s. Success criteria had stipulated only that women had been in business for more than 3 years. Several participants (7) had been in business for 3-4 years, a similar number had been in business 5-10 years, and a few (3) had been in business for more than 20 years. The latter category included a serial entrepreneur who had run 4 businesses during this time, one who had taken over a family business and run that consistently and another who had run several businesses at the same time and also undertaken freelance work.

Businesses included both products and services. Only 5 of the participants actually made products, and these covered food and drink, and clothing and footwear. Four were in property related businesses, including holiday accommodation and estate agency. The majority delivered a variety of services, from physiotherapy and other health related businesses (hypnotherapy, nutrition, hypnotherapy, kinesiology, fitness training, personal development) to business services (video production and public relations, social media strategy, coaching). One participant was a celebrant, another was an independent vet, and another ran a variety of social care businesses. A quarter of participants ran several businesses.

Mentoring had been accessed in several ways. Some had taken advantage of funded programmes at start up stage, In fact, three of the participants had had the same mentor from a local programme run by Business Information Services (BIP). Another had accessed mentoring through the FSB, which was also free. Several had

accessed advice through their professional associations. A few had taken the step of paying for professional coaching and mentoring. This tended to happen at a mature stage of business. Peer mentoring was accessed by the majority of participants.

Snowball sampling accessed six mentors, who were aged between 44 and 73. Half of these had participated in free to deliver programmes, half carried out these services professionally. In terms of gender, 4 of the mentors were women and 2 were men.

Initial thematic analysis was carried out according to the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were transferred into word files to enable the identification of codes. Codes were then collated into themes, with data tables being drawn up for each participant to ensure that relevant data was identified. Six themes were identified: upbringing; motivation to become an entrepreneur; elements of mentoring; gender; rural context; success (Table 1).

▪ Theme	▪ Codes
▪ Upbringing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expectations to be a housewife ▪ Parent entrepreneur ▪ Entrepreneurship as reaction to mother's domestic role ▪ No expectations to have business at school
▪ Motivation to be entrepreneur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Never wanted to work for anyone else again ▪ Business meant - Something other than a mother ▪ Time with family ▪ Living in rural area was motivational as surrounded by entrepreneurs ▪ Relative showed what could be done in business
▪ Elements of mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mentors don't tell, help to find out ▪ Professional association specific mentoring ▪ Mentoring vital at start up ▪ Right person gives good advice with no judgement ▪ Look with different eyes ▪ Mentors as guides ▪ Bounce ideas off ▪ Ask questions ▪ Look up to ▪ Golden nuggets ▪ someone who has been there and done it ▪ somebody to be accountable to ▪ Building confidence ▪ Challenging ▪ Looking at things differently ▪ Giving confidence to take the next step ▪ Empowered

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gender 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gender not important ▪ Complex male female mentor relationship ▪ Right mentor for right person ▪ Value from both male and female mentors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rural context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Choose to be rural ▪ Living in rural area was motivational ▪ Rural area hard to find connections ▪ Online everything more possible ▪ Rural location but have to be city minded ▪ Customers prefer local provider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Time with family ▪ What is important ▪ Success criteria changed ▪ Connection with people important ▪ Be happy, love what you do ▪ Teach others what you know ▪ Driven by success ▪ Success get out of bed and be excited

Table 1: Thematic analysis

A Gioia et al (2006) data structure was then drawn up (Table 2).

1 st order concepts	2 nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Brought up in 80s ▪ Women in business on TV ▪ Mum homemaker, rebelling against that ▪ School not very motivational ▪ Working class background ▪ Couldn't be unemployed ▪ Raised to be a wife ▪ No expectations to have business at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Early influences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Entrepreneurial enablers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents always ran their own business ▪ Dad was a manufacturer ▪ Family business ▪ Entrepreneurship as reaction to mother's domestic role ▪ Parent business – hard work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parent occupation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inspiration from successful female relative ▪ Image of independent business women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Role models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Living in rural area was motivational as surrounded by entrepreneurs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Running business in rural area accepted 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Driven by success ▪ Fantasised about own business ▪ Wanted to have product ▪ Risk taker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inner qualities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Motivation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Connection with people important ▪ Happiness ▪ Provide what is needed ▪ Get out of bed and be excited ▪ Inspire others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Definition of success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Look with different eyes ▪ Confidential advice ▪ Knowledge and experience ▪ Mentors don't tell, help to find out ▪ Bounce ideas off ▪ Ask questions ▪ Learn from mistakes ▪ Look up to ▪ Mentors as guides ▪ Information, observation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Qualities of mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mentoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professional association specific mentoring ▪ Peer mentoring ▪ Mother encouragement vital ▪ NEA scheme mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sources of mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gender unimportant ▪ Value from both male and female mentors ▪ Right person gives good advice with no judgement ▪ Men think big ▪ Like mentoring from woman ▪ Complex male female mentor relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gender of mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪

Table 2: Data structure using Gioia et al. (2006) method

Discussion

The influence of upbringing was clear. Nearly half of the participants had parent entrepreneurs. This was both an enabler – “I've grown up with my parents always having run their own business and my friends' parents so I guess it's always part of how I saw things being done” - and a discourager – “My dad was a builder. We struggled for money when I was younger and I had seen him working really hard.” Some rebelled against what they saw as a domestic role – “I wanted to be something other than a mother, that can't be my only role.” Other role models were important also – “My aunt, she was senior vice president of Nestlé and was voted top woman in a man's world in 1973. My motivation to succeed in business came from her”; “Shoulder pads were big when I looked at the women on TV who were in business. When I was about 14, I bought a blouse with massive shoulder pads and wore it when I was on work experience. The women always looked independent

and I really liked that.” At the same time, expectations of starting a business were not present at school. “When I was at school it was very much you went to school, you'd get your grades then you get your A-levels, some people go to university and then go and get a job and get paid it was just that cycle. Maybe meet a partner and get a property and get married and that's how it was.”

The majority of women had found their experience of mentoring positive, with one declaring it was “100% vital”. Several referred to “golden nuggets” of advice. All nine of St Jean’s (2012) role were mentioned: looking at things differently (reflector); giving confidence to take the next step (reassurance); somebody to be accountable to (motivator); confidential advice (confidant); specific advice from professional associations (contacts); good advice and process mentoring (information support);challenging; guide; someone who has been there and done it (role model). Many participants cited peer mentoring as especially important. “A leading women UK conference... they were talking about how peer to peer to peer support was so important and how women support women and build them up and how helpful that can be.” “There would be (other businesses) asking things like, did you realise you could do this or call me if you want to do this. That was absolutely fantastic and I felt supported.” “The value that I get from that is remarkable because it is specific to my business.”

In terms of context, only 6 participants practiced any form of RE, with the majority delivering EIR (Korsgaard et al, 2015). The rural context was both a negative (harder to find connections, still have to be city minded) and a positive (choose to be rural). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many had changed their business model to deliver services online and this “made everything more possible”. This also seemed to remove the differentiation between incomers and natives (Nelson et al.,2016) although one hospitality participant felt that customers preferred a local provider.

Conclusion

The study suggests the importance of a parent entrepreneur role model may counter the “nexus” (Baker and Welter, 2017) view of entrepreneurship. Whilst supporting the main elements of the St Jean (2012) mentoring model, the importance of peer mentoring was suggested as an additional consideration. Both of these findings could benefit from further research. As the sample of entrepreneurs was small, a broader study could develop these findings.

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