Exploring the Nature of Psychological Empowerment of Women Entrepreneurs in a Rural Setting in Greater Accra, Ghana

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Abstract The authors explored the four dimensions (meaning, competence, choice, impact) of psychological empowerment in a sample of six rural entrepreneurial women at Amrahia-Otinibi, a village in rural Greater Accra Region, Ghana. The findings indicate that these rural women engaged in entrepreneurial activities find their job more important and meaningful. The women were also reported to have an appreciable level of competence to manage their business. In addition, the findings showed that the women had a greater level of autonomy, independence, and freedom to manage their business. Furthermore, these women are reported to having control and significant influence over what happens in their business. The findings offer preliminary evidence that rural women engaged in entrepreneurial activities feel much empowered. These outcomes provide valuable insight to using entrepreneurship as a strategic tool to empower women in rural communities.

Keywords: psychological empowerment, entrepreneurial activity, entrepreneurial women, rural women, rural setting, Ghana

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1. Introduction

Psychological empowerment continues to receive growing attention in the positive psychology and organisational studies literature making it an exciting area of inquiry. Despite the growing attention of the concept little is known about its relevance to women entrepreneurship. It is also important to state that extant literature does not capture sole experiences of rural entrepreneurial women in terms of how they perceive themselves; assess their businesses and their capacity to run them [2,10]. Studies conducted on women empowerment have solely focused on investigating factors that restrain the acquisition of skills for running businesses [8,11] but have not explored how people in entrepreneurial businesses assess themselves in terms of the four constructs of psychological empowerment namely: meaning, competence, choice and impact. Since this study has psychological and social implications, the findings will be beneficial in further enhancing our understanding of the psychological empowerment concept in the context of women entrepreneurship. It also offers some value to policy makers and activists who work tirelessly to improve the welfare of women.

In this regard, the objectives of the study are formulated as follows:

1. To explore the extent to which rural entrepreneurial women find it important and meaningful when engaged in an entrepreneurial activity.
2. To examine the extent to which rural entrepreneurial women are self confident and self assured in their capability to perform their entrepreneurial activity?
3. To examine the extent to which rural entrepreneurial women have autonomy, independence and freedom to perform their entrepreneurial activity.
4. To examine the degree to which rural entrepreneurial women have control and significant influence in what happens in their business.

1.1. Psychological Empowerment

Thomas and Velthouse [20] and Spreitzer (1995) define psychological empowerment as increased task motivation manifested in employees' cognitions about their work role. These cognitions are said to encompass meaning or the fit between an individual's values and his/her work role; competence, or belief in one's ability to perform the job; self-determination, or a sense of autonomy on the job; and impact, or a sense of having an influence over job outcomes. Together, these perceptions should result in an active rather than passive orientation to a work role (Spreitzer, 1995). In addition, Oladipo [18] defined psychological empowerment as "an individual's cognitive state characterized by a sense of perceived control,

competence, and goal internalization. Generally, psychological empowerment has been noted as a driving force behind people's attitudes especially towards their entrepreneurial activity. Bhatnagar and Sandhu [6] observed that Studies by Thomas and Velthouse [20] resulted in a cognitive model of empowerment. Empowerment was conceptualized in terms of changes in cognitive variables (task assessments), which determine the motivation of individuals. They state that an individual's assessment of how high his or her feelings are concerning these assessments is positively related to feelings of empowerment. Psychological empowerment has four sub' variables of Meaning, Competence, Self determination/ choice, and Impact.

1.1.1. Meaning

Meaning is the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards [20]. Meaning involves a fit between the requirements of a work role and beliefs, values, and behaviors [7,14].

1.1.2. Competence

Competence, or self-efficacy, is an individual's belief in his or her capability to perform activities with skill [12]. Competence is analogous to agency beliefs, personal mastery, or effort-performance expectancy [4]. This dimension is labeled competence here rather than self-esteem because I focused on efficacy specific to a work role rather than on global efficacy.

1.1.3. Self –determination/Choice

Where competence is a mastery of behavior, self-determination is an individual's sense of having choice in initiating and regulating actions [9]. Self-determination reflects autonomy in the initiation and continuation of work behaviors and processes; examples are making decisions about work methods, pace, and effort [5,19].

1.1.4. Impact

Impact is the degree, to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work [3]. Impact is the converse of learned helplessness [17]. Further, impact is different from locus of control; whereas impact is influenced by the work context, internal locus of control is a global personality.

The four dimensions are argued to combine additively to create an overall construct of psychological empowerment. In other words, the lack of any single dimension will deflate, though not completely eliminate, the overall degree of felt empowerment. Thus the four dimensions specify "a nearly complete or sufficient set of cognitions" for understanding psychological empowerment [20]. General assumptions of this definition of empowerment should be made explicit (Spreitzer, 1995).

1.2. Women Entrepreneurship and Psychological Empowerment

Previous studies [10,15,16] have confirmed that entrepreneurship is related with self efficacy which is synonymous to competency. For instance, Kirkwood [16] examined the self efficacy of women in entrepreneurial businesses. Fifty (50) entrepreneurs comprising 25 men and 25 women were interviewed for the study. The study operationalized self efficacy as self confidence. Kirkwood [16] reported that for the women their confidence levels grew over time in their business as compared to the men who were comfortable at calling themselves as entrepreneurs. Thus the women entrepreneurs assess themselves as competent overtime. Corroborating this stance, [10] examined gender and entrepreneurial self efficacy amongst young students. The findings showed that the young women had a lower entrepreneurial self efficacy because they had little or no prior entrepreneurial experience compared to the young men. Jevan, Sharma & Kumari [15] investigated the factors that affect the orientation and satisfaction of rural women in India. The study examined three categories of factors; Social, Psychological and Financial factors. Amongst the psychological factors they assessed the self esteem of the rural women who were entrepreneurs. Jevan et al. [15] reported that the respondents showed a high self esteem to the extent that they had the urge to learn newer businesses. The study further showed that the women entrepreneurs were not afraid of failures in their businesses.

In strengthening this position, Lee (1997) examined the motivation of entrepreneurial women in Singapore. The study focused on motivational factors which influence women's choices to be owners of business (entrepreneurial women) instead of being employees of other businesses. Psychological factors such as achievement, affiliation, autonomy, and dominance were examined. A total of 53 entrepreneurs and 57 employees were sampled for the study. The findings of Lee's study showed that women who choose to be entrepreneurs were highly motivated by the need for achievement, followed by the need for dominance and lastly they have moderate needs for affiliation and autonomy. There were differences found between the two groups in the need for affiliation, autonomy, dominance and achievement. For instance, the women who were entrepreneurs showed an extremely high need for achievement and dominance. However, there were significant differences in their needs for affiliation and autonomy.

Furthermore, Abbasian and Bildt [1] investigated some factors which influence empowerment amongst immigrant women who were entrepreneurs. Sixteen female entrepreneurs from Chile, Iran and Turkey were interviewed in Sweden to ascertain whether entrepreneurship is associated with integration in working life. Study reported that the immigrant women set up their businesses for reasons such as unemployment, lack of suitable jobs and career possibilities, discrimination and forced privatization, desire for personal development, independence and freedom, or work within one's own field of interest. This implied that empowerment was related to entrepreneurship. Finally, Gill and Ganesh [13] examined empowerment, constraint, and the entrepreneurial self. Using snowball sampling, 23 female entrepreneurs from Northwestern state in United States were interviewed. The results showed that there were several reasons why people engage in entrepreneurial businesses. Some of those reasons were: autonomy, opportunity, confidence, and self-expression. This finding implies that reasons stated play a key role in enhancing the entrepreneurial self.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 6 women engaged in an entrepreneurial activity were selected from the Amhrahia-Otinibi village in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. We selected 1 hairdresser, 2 fishmongers, 1 seamstress, 1 vegetables vendor, and 1 locally-made beverage vendor. Participants have only primary level education. Four of the women were married and two were single and aged between 35 years to 42 years.

2.2. Instrument

Psychological empowerment was measured using Spreitzer (1995) 12 items Likert scale. The items were converted into 9 open-ended questions for the interview. The first dimension, meaning had 2 open-ended questions. The questions read, "How important is the business to you?" How meaningful is the business to you?" The second dimension, competence had 3 open-ended questions. The questions read, "How sure are you that you are capable enough to perform your business activities? "How well have you mastered the skills necessary for your business?" "How sure are you that you have enough confidence in your ability to do your business?" The third dimension, choice or self-determination had 2 open – ended questions. The questions were phrased as follows: "How sure are you that you have autonomy in determining how you operate your business?" How would you describe your independence and freedom in managing your business?" The fourth dimension, impact was measured with two open-ended questions. These read as follows, "How well do you have control over what happens in your business?" "How significantly do you influence what happens in your business?" The 9 open-ended were translated into Akan (Twi) language for the interview. This was considered because of the low level of education of research participants. Participants had only completed primary school. The questions were translated by an expert of the Twi language.

2.3. Procedure

The interviews were conducted at home with all research participants. This was so because the businesses were home-based. Three were Akans, two were Ewes and two Gas', however they all spoke Akan (Twi).The interview was largely conducted in Akan (Twi) and sparingly in English, at times using both to explain the questions. The participants were first told they were going to be recorded for transcription purposes which they readily agreed. The interview took 5 hours for two days. A period of 3 hours was spent on the first day and 2 hours for the second day. The recorded interviews were transcribed over a period of 2 days from Akan (Twi) into English for analysis.

3. Results

Interview data was analysed in line with the study objectives. By so doing four themes were generated. The four themes are importance and meaningfulness, competence, choice or self-determination, and impact.

3.1. Importance and Meaningfulness

The authors found that the women saw their business as an important part of their lives. Setting up the business brought considerable progress in their standard of living and helped them manage the home as it contributed to the family's income and provided their daily needs. It also brought a sense of happiness as they were actively engaged in something that gave them their livihoods. For instance, one woman stated that:

"The business is important and meaningful to me since am able to take care of the home and the children. At least am taking care of four children with my business"

3.2. Competence

There were mixed reactions on self belief among the women with their capability to deliver on the job. While some indicated that they had mastered the skills and capable to deliver some reported that their self belief was something they were working on and believed there will be improvement as time went by. However, the women were unanimous in saying that in as much as they had knowledge and were competent with their business operations they believed in seeking direction from God in whatever they did.

3.3. Choice/ Self Determination

We also found that these women had setup the business themselves and were responsible in managing them. Planning and decisions relating to the business were taken solely by them without interference from their husbands and relatives. They planned and took decisions, maintained equipment, and purchase raw materials for the business. For instance, one woman retorted that:

"It is my business. If I have money I will buy what I need for the job. I know what I need for my job. You don't have to be told by anyone to get what you need for the job"

3.4. Impact

On the issue of control, we found that the women had control and significant influence over their business. However, it came up that religion and the "God factor" played a role in influencing their ability to impact their business. This is captured in the words of two of these women.

"You are the one who goes out there to buy the fish hence you just must determine how much to sell it and make a profit margin"

"Prayer is important without it it's difficult. Quite a number of dressmakers are here, however, customers bypass my competitors and come to me for business"

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which rural entrepreneurial women are psychologically

empowered. The findings showed that these women attached meaning to their business and had a clear purpose for setting up the business. They also demonstrated competence in doing their business, and they further showed a high level of autonomy, independence, and freedom. In addition, the women demonstrated control and significant influence in managing and growing their business. These findings resonate with [10,15,16] study that entrepreneurship is related with self efficacy. Jevan et al. [15] also point out that women entrepreneurs showed a high self esteem to the extent that they had the urge to learn newer businesses. Lee (1997) study firms this up as he demonstrates that women who choose to be entrepreneurs were highly motivated by the need for achievement, followed by the need for dominance and lastly they have moderate needs for affiliation and autonomy. These findings offer preliminary evidence that rural women engaged in entrepreneurial activities feel much empowered. These outcomes provide valuable insight to using entrepreneurship as a strategic tool to empower women in rural communities.

5. Conclusion

In the present study, we have attempted to understand the nature of psychological empowerment experienced by rural women who engaged in some entrepreneurial activity. The positive news is that indeed such women have what it takes psychologically to set up and operate these businesses. Research efforts directed at further exploring these issues are sorely needed. Consideration should be given to a comparison of unemployed women with self employed women. In addition, studies should consider exploring the possibility of comparing rural women and women in self employment in the urban context.

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