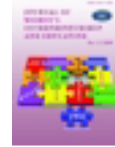


UDC: 005.961:005.914.3 ; 005.32:159.923.3.07-055.2 ; 005.411:334.722(73)

JEL: L26; B54 ID: 203433996

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

A Phenomenological Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Women Business Owners in Central Florida



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A B S T R A C T

Women have been starting businesses at twice the rate of men in the United States, yet women-owned businesses have had lower sales, profits, and survival rates. Although entrepreneurship centers and other institutions have developed training and developmental programs to support nascent entrepreneurs, there is a need for more resources to help established businesses survive and grow, especially women-owned businesses. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted using a purposive sample of 10 women business owners in Central Florida who were protégés in an entrepreneurial mentoring program. The purpose was to understand the aspects of mentoring that were perceived to foster successful business and personal experiences and outcomes. The study used Moustakas' phenomenological approach that included in-depth, open-ended interviews. According to study participants, the aspects of mentoring that were perceived to foster successful business and personal experiences and outcomes were: (a) access to an ad hoc mentoring team of subject matter experts, (b) opportunities to learn essential business skills, (c) psychosocial support from mentors, and (d) networking and relationship-building opportunities. The study contributes to the developmental networks knowledge base by describing how group mentoring provides career and psychosocial support to established women business owners. Future research should explore the mentoring experiences of early-stage women entrepreneurs, investigate gender differences within the entrepreneurial mentoring context, and examine how the developmental networks of women business owners grow and change over time.

KEY WORDS: *poverty reduction, gender empowerment, institutions, policy dialogue, informal sector*

Introduction

The focus of this research study was to explore the perceptions of women business owners who participated in an entrepreneurial mentoring program. The purpose was to understand the aspects of mentoring that were perceived by participants to foster successful business and personal experiences and outcomes. An entrepreneurial mentoring program brings together one or more business mentors and an entrepreneur for the purpose of helping the entrepreneur develop the skills, competencies, and relationships that are needed to become a successful business owner (Leonard Bisk, 2002; Etienne St-Jean & Josee Audet, 2009). Although organizational mentoring has been researched widely, there have been few studies on entrepreneurial mentoring and even fewer studies have provided a female perspective (Barbara Baderman, 2009; Jill Kickul et al., 2010).

Entrepreneurial mentoring is one of the newest forms of mentoring; however, it has received little scholarly attention (Baderman, 2009; John Cull, 2006; St-Jean and Audet, 2009; Siri Terjesen and Sherry Sullivan, 2011). This is not surprising, considering that scholars have been unable to agree on a unifying definition of entrepreneurship, which has led to conflicting research agendas and interests (Scott Shane, 2007). Government and private organizations have been developing and funding entrepreneurial mentoring programs without the benefit of empirical research to guide development, so scholars have called for more exploratory studies on entrepreneurial mentoring to move theoretical development forward (Eren Ozgen and Robert Baron, 2007; St-Jean & Audet, 2009; Terjesen & Sullivan, 2011; Lea Waters, et al., 2002). The study of women business owners who have been protégés in an entrepreneurial mentoring program could lay the groundwork for additional theoretical development and give practitioners usable information to guide program development.

Purpose

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of mentored women business owners to understand the aspects of mentoring that were perceived to foster successful business and personal experiences and outcomes. The study consisted of in-depth interviews with 10 women business owners in Central Florida who were protégés in an entrepreneurial mentoring program. Although studies exist on

entrepreneurial mentoring, only a few have focused on mentoring programs designed to help women business owners grow their businesses (Center for Women's Business Research, 2009). Therefore, information from the study provides new insights on entrepreneurial mentoring from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, contributes to theoretical and practical applications, and includes recommendations for future research on the phenomenon of entrepreneurial mentoring. The central research question that guided the study and fulfilled the research purpose included the following: What aspects of mentoring were perceived by women business owners in an entrepreneurial mentoring program to foster successful business and personal experiences and outcomes?

Theoretical Framework

Kathy Kram (1985) published the seminal study on career mentoring, which provided empirical evidence that mentoring relationships facilitate a protégé's psychosocial development and career advancement. Mentoring was defined as a relationship between an older, more experienced individual who provides advice, sponsorship, protection, and friendship to a younger, less experienced protégé for the purpose of helping the protégé advance through the organizational hierarchy (Kram, 1985). However, today's changing business environment, which includes less job security, more career mobility, and a rise in self-employment, requires a new perspective on mentoring (Dawn Chandler, 2011; Jonathan Higgins & Kram, 2001; Terri Scandura & Ekin Pelligrini, 2007). The study's theoretical framework included mentoring and social network theories and extended the mentoring construct beyond its current scope by applying the developmental network perspective that was conceptualized by Higgins and Kram (2001). A developmental network is defined as "a group of people who take an interest in and action to advance a focal individual's career" (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 268). The developmental network typology includes four central concepts:

1. **Developmental Network.** A developmental network is defined as the individuals that a protégé has identified as taking an active interest in the protégé's career development by providing career support and psychosocial support (Higgins & Kram, 2001).
2. **Developmental Relationships.** A protégé's developmental relationships include anyone in the protégé's network who

provides developmental assistance and may include mentors, coaches, peers, advisors, and sponsors (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

3. **Developmental Network Diversity.** The concept of network diversity is drawn from social network theory and refers to the range of relationships in the protégé's network and the density of those relationships (Higgins & Kram, 2001).
4. **Relationship Strength.** The concept of relationship strength refers to the types of interpersonal bonds and ties within the developmental network. Strong ties refer to relationships with family, friends, and trusted acquaintances that are highly motivated to provide assistance (Mark Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties refer to relationships with less known individuals who may be able to offer access to essential information and resources (Granovetter, 1973).

Since many entrepreneurial mentoring programs offer traditional mentoring dyads as well as non-traditional schemes such as group mentoring, the developmental network construct was a useful framework for examining the variety of developmental experiences that the women business owners described during the study.

Research Methods and Design

A phenomenological research design encompasses three main steps: (a) identifying what and who will be studied, (b) collecting the data through interviews or observations, and (c) analyzing the data by identifying major themes that surface during the study (Patricia Sanders, 1982). As suggested by Clark Moustakas (1994), open-ended interviews were used to engage participants in a wide-ranging discussion and encouraged participants to provide an exhaustive description of their experience. Phenomenological interviews should be audio-recorded and transcribed using the exact spoken words (Sanders, 1982). Therefore, each interview was audio-recorded, with the participant's permission, and typed verbatim. The typed interview transcripts were entered into HyperRESEARCH qualitative research software, which facilitated data analysis by allowing the researcher to organize interview data and capture common themes that emerged during the study (Thomas Groenewald, 2004).

Participants

The study participants included 10 women business owners who had participated in a mentoring program for business owners. Participants were drawn from referrals and program alumni lists from the two mentoring programs in Central Florida that provide formal mentoring for business owners: The Advisory Board Council, which is located at the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Central Florida (SBDC, 2012), and the Athena PowerLink program located at the Center for Advanced Entrepreneurship at Rollins College (Athena PowerLink, 2012). Both programs utilize a group approach to mentoring by providing a diverse mix of volunteer subject matter experts to serve as mentors and advisors to the business owner for a minimum of one year (Athena PowerLink, 2012; SBDC, 2012).

Participants reported average length of business ownership was 16.9 years. The businesses averaged 11 employees and seven industry sectors were represented. All participants possessed a bachelor's degree or higher. Half of the participants said their undergraduate degree was in business. Of the two participants that earned a master's degree, one was a business degree.

Materials/Instruments

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the key instrument for collecting information (Catherine Marshall & Gretchen Rossman, 2011). Unlike quantitative researchers, who may use a questionnaire or instrument that has been developed by other researchers, qualitative researchers typically gather information using a protocol that may include several interview formats, ranging from unstructured interviews that follow no particular format to highly structured interviews that follow a specific list of questions (Turner, 2010). For a phenomenological study, Clark Moustakas (1994) suggested researchers conduct face-to-face interviews using an interview guide that includes open-ended questions designed to capture full, rich descriptions of each participant's experience.

The interview guide in Appendix A was used to make sure all study participants were asked the same questions during the interviews. As suggested by Moustakas (1994), less structured follow-up questions were used to probe for additional insights. A Sony MP3 digital audio recorder

was used to capture participants' answers to the interview questions, with their permission.

As suggested by Daniel Turner (2010), the participants in the pilot study were mentored female business owners who had similar interests and demographics as the individuals who participated in the main study. The pilot study was used to determine if there were any weaknesses with the interview guide (Steinar Kvale, 2007). Pilot study participants expressed confusion with the wording of some questions, so their feedback was used to modify the interview guide before the main study commenced.

Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis

The study used the transcendental approach to phenomenology described by Moustakas (1994), which focused on collecting rich, thick descriptions of the study participants' experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. During the study, data were collected during one-on-one interviews that explored what the participants experienced and the situations that influenced their experiences of entrepreneurial mentoring. Participants were scheduled for a 90-minute interview with the researcher. Interviews were audio-recorded, with the participant's permission, and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. Research participants in a phenomenological study are considered co-researchers and should have an opportunity to review the interview data to add further insights (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, study participants were given an opportunity to review the textural and structural statements.

A modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis presented by Moustakas (1994) was used and included the following steps:

1. The primary researcher's personal experiences, past associations, and biases related to the phenomenon were set aside using *epoché*. The researcher engaged in quiet reflection before each interview and set aside her own experiences as a mentee and mentor so she could listen attentively, without judgment, as study participants described their experiences.
2. After reviewing each interview transcript, a list of significant statements was developed that described how the participant experienced the phenomenon. Each statement was given equal worth, resulting in a list of non-repetitive statements that were categorized and coded.

3. The significant statements were grouped into larger units, or themes.
4. Textural descriptions that include specific examples of what the participants experienced were written. Structural descriptions that focused on how participants experienced the phenomenon and the context within which the experience occurred were also written.
5. A final composite description was written that described the essence of what the participants experienced and how they experienced it.

To aid in data analysis, the interview transcripts were entered into HyperRESEARCH qualitative research software, which facilitated the coding, organizing, and analysis of the large volume of data collected during the study

Results

The central research question that guided the study and fulfilled the research purpose included the following: What aspects of mentoring were perceived by women business owners in an entrepreneurial mentoring program to foster successful business and personal experiences and outcomes?

Textural analysis of the interview data revealed 58 significant, non-redundant statements from participants related to the research question. Examples of significant statements included in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Selected Significant Statements

- I would say the very best thing for me that happened in the mentor program was walking through the process and learning how to pitch investors.
- With the HR person mentor I worked with, I definitely learned a lot more about the interviewing process for employees.
- My mentors helped me turn some of those things around and refocus on product lines that were going to be profitable.
- Women are so focused on taking care of business and family that they don't spend time with each other to learn.
- If I didn't have the mentoring, I don't know if I'd still be here, to be honest with you.

- With the mentor program, everyone at the table was smarter than you were and at the top of their game.
- I would say the way I walk into a room now in terms of personal confidence is very different because of being lifted up to that level by these other people.
- I think it's like I'm getting my Ph.D. in being a CEO.
- Trusting my own judgment. The mentor program has allowed me to be much more confident in my decision-making.
- Being in the program forced me into some networking situations, so I got some business out of it from people I met and from others through that network.
- Well, definitely sales have grown. We've gotten a few nice referrals and projects from the mentors.

The next step in data analysis involved combining textural and structural statements to develop overarching themes that addressed the research question. As shown in Table 2 below, the study's findings revealed four major themes related to the participants' perceptions of entrepreneurial mentoring that resulted in successful business and personal experiences and outcomes: (a) team approach to mentoring, (b) learning opportunities, (c) psychosocial support, and (d) networking and relationship-building opportunities. Examples of significant statements related to each theme are also provided.

Table 2: Themes and Evidence

Themes	Evidence in Participants' Statements
Team Approach to Mentoring	<p>I was really blessed to have this core group of people around me that looked at my business in a totally different way than I did.</p> <p>I would say it's lonely running a business and it's lonely looking through your own eyes all the time. Seeing my business through the eyes of these professionals, men and women, when they would speak it back to me, it was amazing.</p> <p>I had people to engage with and think with, people who cared about me, cared about me being profitable.</p>
Learning Opportunities	<p>The accounting piece was a surprise because it was an area in which I didn't know what I didn't know.</p> <p>They helped me with some of my time management,</p>

	which helped me not only in business but helped me at home.
	You learn so much from each other on issues that come up and how to handle them.
Psychosocial Support	My mentors helped me get my confidence back because I had felt so beaten down and so scared. Many of the people who served on my panel are now my friends. Not only as a friend, she really responded and she really motivated me and boosted my confidence.
Networking and Relationship-Building Opportunities	Just building the relationships was incredible. I wouldn't have met these people on the street. The networking and the business referrals I got were definitely a great benefit that carried over. Most people don't know how to do relationships well, and mentoring is all about relationships.

Discussion of Findings

With the rise in self-employment and greater job mobility, mentoring scholars have argued that the mentoring construct needs to be expanded to explain how individuals learn and grow through relationships with multiple mentors and developers throughout their careers, including their entrepreneurial careers (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Terjesen & Sullivan, 2011). The study was framed using a developmental network perspective, which draws from mentoring and social network theories and expands the mentoring construct to include other forms of mentoring such as group mentoring (Higgins & Kram, 2001). The developmental networks typology includes four central concepts: (a) the developmental network, which is a subset of a person's social network and is comprised of individuals that provide career and psychosocial support, (b) developmental relationships, which include anyone who provides developmental assistance and may include mentors, coaches, advisors, and peers; (c) developmental network diversity, which refers to the range of relationships in the network, the density of those relationships, and the non-redundant information provided by developers; and (d) relationship strength, which refers to the strong and weak interpersonal bonds within the developmental network (Higgins & Kram, 2001). The findings will be discussed below in light of theories related to mentoring, social networks, and entrepreneurship.

Team Approach to Mentoring

When describing successful business experiences and outcomes, study participants referred to their mentoring experience as a team effort. According to study participants, the group mentoring approach provided access to a diverse team of mentors with a wide array of business expertise and viewpoints. One participant described the mentoring group as a brain trust comprised of people who were experts in their field and provide beneficial support and ideas for business growth. Another participant said her mentoring group provided another set of eyes that looked at her business in a totally different way and challenged her to think more strategically about her business growth. The idea that protégés need to be able to obtain advice and knowledge from a diverse group of mentors is consistent with the concept of developmental network diversity, which describes how a wide network of developers provide a protégé with non-redundant information (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Several of the participants also reported that they met with their mentors one-on-one outside of group meetings, giving them the benefit of individual, focused attention. According to Vanessa, “It was about zeroing in on the people that had the expertise that I was looking for or those that just had a caring attitude. Those one-on-ones were tremendously important.” Susan added, “There were others who were absolutely excited about what we do and so committed that they met with me individually outside of our formal monthly meetings.” The findings lend support to Richard Cotton, Yan Shen, and Reut Livne-Tarandach (2011), who found that larger developmental networks are able to provide “timely support on demand” (p. 35), which may help individuals exhibit higher levels of achievement.

While most study participants described many positive experiences with mentoring, there were mixed feelings regarding the process of selecting mentors for the team. During the interviews, participants were asked if they had input into the matching process. Four participants said they did not have any input. Two participants described their frustration with mentors who did not have the qualifications or expertise the participants had asked for when applying for the program. Ava said, “They put an insurance person on my panel, but she didn’t have the background that I needed.” Donna said, “You need to make sure you get mentors on your panel with expertise that can help you because my panel didn’t understand my business.” A related study found that entrepreneurs who were paired with a mentor that understood the entrepreneur’s business tended to be more satisfied with the mentoring

experience (St-Jean & Audet, 2009). The findings are also consistent with Georgia Chao (2009), which found that the matching process is critical to the success of a facilitated mentoring program.

In a qualitative study that explored a structured approach to entrepreneurial mentoring, Cull (2006) found that an entrepreneur's involvement in a formal mentoring program could reduce business failure, but poor matches were found to be detrimental if the mentor and protégé were incompatible. It has also been suggested that program managers can increase the likelihood of successful matches by collecting information on protégé needs, recruiting a large and diverse pool of mentors to accommodate the different needs of protégés, and allowing the protégé to have input into the matching process (Chao, 2009). Considering the number of inactive or absentee mentors reported by study participants, the findings lend support to previous studies that suggest administrators of group mentoring programs need to recruit a large and diverse pool of mentors.

Learning Opportunities

The study's findings revealed what participants learned from their mentors and how they used what they learned to improve sales, profitability, and business survival. Three participants said they learned how to read and understand profit and loss (P & L) statements and conduct profit margin analyses, which resulted in higher profit margins. Tara said, "My mentors helped me turn things around and refocus on product lines that were going to be profitable." Tara also credited her mentoring experience with saving her business: "If I didn't have the mentoring, I don't know if I'd still be here, to be honest with you." Vanessa described having the worst year in 15 years and being close to insolvency, but with the help of the CPA in her group she was able to return to profitability. Serena credited the help she received from the attorney in her group to a significant increase in sales: "The attorney was able to help and assist in terms of understanding the legal issues. Because of this project, sales have gone up significantly. The sales piece, and my decision-making related to the project, was huge." The findings lend support to previous studies that found that training, advisory, and mentoring programs can improve the performance and experiences of women business owners (Sara Carter, 2000; Rolanda Pollard, 2006; Margaret Tynan et al., 2009).

Women business owners have been starting businesses with less business education and experience than their male counterparts, which may

explain why women-owned businesses have had lower sales, profits, employment, and survival rates than male-owned businesses (Robert Fairlie, 2009). Previous studies have suggested that this education gap is a function of social and environmental factors. The construct of motherhood, which represents family and household contexts, and the construct of the macro-meso environment, which includes societal expectations and cultural norms, may explain why women business owners enter entrepreneurship with less education and resources than men (Candida Brush, Anne de Bruin, and Friederike Welter, 2009). The unequal division of labor at home, which puts the onus of childcare and household management on the female, has been shown to constrain a woman business owner's choices (Brush, de Bruin, and Welter, 2009; Jennifer Jennings and Megan McDougal, 2007; Nan Langowitz and Maria Minniti, 2007).

Several participants described their time-strapped, busy lives and how difficult it was for them to find the time to learn. Donna said, "Women are so focused on taking care of business and family that they don't spend time with each other to learn." Tara described how her mentors helped her with time management and how it affected her business and home life: "Just as far as taking more time for myself so I could be more effective in the workplace, that ultimately helped me in my home life, if that makes sense." Ava said that becoming a mother made her appreciate how difficult motherhood can be for women business owners:

Many times when you say you're a mom and business owner, those two words don't go together. Because I'm an older mom, I perceived working moms as not being that into work compared to women who don't have kids. It's because women with kids have to leave work early or call in sick because their child is sick. Now going through it, obviously I have much more appreciation of it.

Ashley described the challenges of being a business owner, wife, and mother:

I was stepping outside of the box, after having my head in the grindstone, guiding a business, building a family, building a home, and not venturing out from these four corners of my office space and the clients I deal with, to really meet and share and exchange information.

Coaching is an aspect of mentoring that involves goal-setting and holding protégés accountable for results (Kram, 1985). For the study participants, the benefits of personal coaching became apparent during

individual and group coaching sessions with their mentors. Three participants described how their mentors held them accountable, which helped the participants learn how to manage their time, follow through on commitments, and complete tasks. Serena said, "They really helped me get focused on the tasks at hand." Tara added, "They provided support on things I needed to do, holding me accountable, helping me plan for upcoming meetings, etc." As a business owner, Vanessa found that being accountable to her mentors helped her get things done: "I left those meetings with a to-do list, things I needed to do and then come back and report what I did to the group. This is a problem with being a business owner. Who is holding you accountable?" When individuals leave organizations and start their own businesses, they also leave behind an organizational structure that provides access to suitable mentors and coaches (Terjesen & Sullivan, 2011). Therefore, the structured group mentoring programs described by study participants provided a ready-made developmental network of mentors who held them accountable and coached them to higher levels of performance.

Negative outcomes from mentoring were also reported during the study. Ava described a situation where one of her mentors gave her advice that cost the company several thousands of dollars and did not produce any results. Ava said she went along with the advice but wished she had trusted her initial instincts and not invested in the project. Bisk (2002) found that if the entrepreneur did not trust the advice given by the mentor, or found the advice to be ineffective, the mentee saw no point in continuing the relationship. A related study suggested that individuals who rely on multiple mentors for learning and advice are less likely to be impacted by an absentee or inexperienced mentor (Suzanne de Janasz, Sherry Sullivan, and Vicki Whiting, 2003). This may explain why there were so few complaints about ineffective mentoring from the study participants.

Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support is a function of mentoring that includes behaviors that enhance a protégé's professional and personal growth, self-confidence, and self-worth (Kram, 1985). Mentors provide psychosocial support through friendship, counseling, and role modeling (Kram, 1985). Three participants described overcoming self-esteem issues during their mentoring experiences. Karen said she had a low self-image when she started the mentoring program, but that her mentors' support and belief in her helped lift her self-esteem. Malia described how her mentors'

confidence in her made her feel empowered and confident. Susan said that it is “lonely running a business,” but added that she grew as a person because of the support she received from her mentors: “I would say the best personal growth was seeing the kind of people that had confidence in me, that were excited about what we were doing, and that empowered me even more.” In the seminal study on entrepreneurial mentoring, Lea Waters et al. (2002) found that the psychosocial aspects of mentoring made a significant contribution to the self-esteem of entrepreneurs.

When asked to describe situations or experiences in the mentoring program that contributed to personal growth and development, Serena and Vanessa described experiences with their mentors that boosted their self-confidence. Serena said she became much more confident in her ability to make decisions and added, “I think that’s very important in terms of running my company because I have to believe in myself.” Vanessa said she lost her self-confidence when she almost lost her business, however she regained her confidence with the help of her mentors: “My mentors helped me get my confidence back because I had felt so beaten down and so scared.”

Support for the study’s findings that mentoring can enhance a woman business owner’s self-confidence was found in two related studies on women business owners. Barbara Baderman’s (2009) examination of self-efficacy and mentoring among women business owners found a strong correlation between high self-efficacy and the use of a business mentor. Efficacious behavior includes a strong belief in one’s abilities to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Albert Bandura, 1997). Since efficacious behavior can be learned, women business owners can increase self-efficacy through activities that involve friendship, counseling, coaching, and mentoring (Baderman, 2009). A qualitative study of 50 entrepreneurs (25 men and 25 women) in New Zealand revealed a lack of self-confidence among many of the women participants, however female entrepreneurs reported that their confidence levels increased over time (Jodyanne Kirkwood, 2009). Despite the limited number of studies on mentoring for entrepreneurs, previous research found that mentoring helped build an entrepreneur’s self-confidence (Carter, 2000; Cull, 2006; Tynan et al., 2009).

Another aspect of psychosocial support is friendship (Kram, 1985). Ava said she developed a close friendship with one of her mentors, who “really motivated me and boosted my confidence.” Tara described a friendship with one of her mentors that continued after the program ended, and that “ongoing mentoring continues to this day.” When asked to describe

the aspects of mentoring that were most meaningful to her, Emily said, “The aspects that included forming friendships. Many of the people who served on my team are now my friends, so it’s definitely the relationships that have carried on after the program.” A longitudinal study on developmental networks found that a person’s developmental network may change over time, however an inner core of developers who provided high levels of psychosocial support were found in each time period (Cummings & Higgins, 2006).

Networking and Relationship Building Opportunities

During the study, participants described how their participation in a mentoring program provided opportunities to build new relationships and expand their networks. Susan said, “Both our attorneys and accountants came out of those relationships.” Ashley added that networking was a valuable component of her experiences with mentoring: “I realized how valuable the networking was and I want to get back into it.” Social network theory has been used by entrepreneurship scholars to explain how new and established business owners have used networking to gain access to knowledge, advice, and essential resources for business growth and survival (Tina Bratkovic, Bostjan Antoncic, and Mitja Ruzzier, 2009). Entrepreneurs who have strong social networks have more diverse sources of information and therefore more access to resources that build social capital (Michael Fortunato and Theodore Alter, 2011).

The networking and relationship-building opportunities described by study participants started with their mentoring team, which was comprised of individuals with diverse business expertise, social networks, and social capital. Malia expressed appreciation for the opportunities she had to build relationships and network with her mentors: “I wouldn’t have met these people on the street.” Emily described her mentoring group as a source of business referrals: “One of my mentors referred a couple of people to me. The networking and business referrals I got were definitely a great benefit that carried over.” The experiences described by study participants are consistent with John Watson (2007), which found that business owners who were involved in diverse networks comprised of accountants, lawyers, business advisors, and informal acquaintances were able to build stronger social capital than owners who relied on informal networks comprised of close friends and family.

Participants also described opportunities to meet and build relationships with other business owners in the program as well as individuals within their mentors' networks. Donna said she attended networking events that included her mentors and other business owners who had participated in the program. She emphasized that as a woman business owner, networking "is not a luxury, it's a necessity." Ashley described how networking with her mentors opened doors to new relationships that led to business referrals: "Being in the program forced me into some networking situations, so I got some business out of it from people I met and from others through that network." Another participant described how her mentors introduced her to investors and helped her raise venture capital. The findings are consistent with Bisk's (2002) redefinition of the career support function of mentoring conceptualized by Kram (1985). Within the entrepreneurial mentoring context, Bisk (2002) characterized the career function of mentoring as a protégé's access to the mentor's network.

Four participants said they stayed in touch with their mentors and received ongoing developmental support after the formal mentoring ended. Susan said she invited one of her mentors to join her board of directors. Tara said, "As I'm refining my business, I still have support from my mentors. The program is really ongoing. It doesn't stop when the program ends." Emily added that she continued to maintain contact with some of her mentors: "Many of the people who served on my panel are now my friends, so it's just definitely the relationships that have carried on after the program." Serena concurred: "I'm still in contact with my mentors. If I have any questions related to the business I can still call them." The findings lend support to the developmental networks perspective of mentoring, which describes how the changing business environment, which includes greater job mobility and a rise in self-employment, requires individuals to draw career support from multiple mentors and developers throughout their careers (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Essence of Participants' Experiences with Mentoring

The essence of the participants' experience was the personal and professional growth and development that occurred as a result of mentoring. The team approach to mentoring provided opportunities for the women to interact with a diverse group of experts and learn new skills and competencies, which facilitated positive business experiences and outcomes

that included increased revenue, profitability, and business survival. Participants described how their mentors' friendship, encouragement, and emotional support boosted their self-confidence and created a sense of connectedness and belonging. The networking and relationship-building aspects of the group mentoring context provided opportunities for participants to network with their mentors, gain access to new business and personal relationships, and build social capital. The mentoring program provided the women with developmental support at a time when many of them were concerned about their company's revenue, profitability, or survival.

The study of 10 women business owners who participated in an entrepreneurial mentoring program found that group mentoring contributed to successful business and personal experiences and outcomes by providing access to (a) a diverse team of subject matter experts, (b) learning and skill-development opportunities, (c), emotional support and friendship, and (d) new business relationships and networks. The team approach to mentoring gave the participants access to a custom-made developmental network comprised of subject matter experts in accounting, finance, law, human resources, marketing, and other disciplines. By drawing from the knowledge and experience of these experts, the participants learned new skills and competencies that helped them improve business performance and enhance their personal and professional development.

In addition to the learning that occurred as the result of mentoring, participants described how their mentors' emotional support contributed to greater self-esteem and self-confidence. For some participants, the mentoring was ongoing and extended past the end of the program. The findings also revealed that the networking aspects of the participants' mentoring experiences led to business referrals, investor introductions, and new social bonds that expanded their networks and increased their social capital.

Limitations of Current Findings and Need for Further Research

The limitations associated with the study were (a) a small and purposeful sample, which was inherent in the phenomenological design; (b) participants were limited to women business owners who volunteered for the study; (c) participants were limited to women business owners in Central Florida; (d) men were excluded since the study was designed to explore the experiences of women business owners; and (e) the participants' data is

based on their personal reflections and experiences and may not be generalizable to all mentored women business owners in Central Florida or to mentored women business owners in general. The limitations were mitigated through the use of epoché, participant validation of the study's findings, and a peer researcher skilled in qualitative research that reviewed the study's methods and interpretations.

Finally, more research is needed in the area of women entrepreneurial mentoring impacts from an international perspective. Can entrepreneurial mentoring programs have positive impacts on the *unequal treatment* of women in India and Africa as described by Meenaskhi Bharatnoor (2013) and Chiloane-Tsoka G. E. (2013)? Can entrepreneurial mentoring programs impact women's recognition of their *entrepreneurial self* as discussed by Rebecca Gill and Shiv Ganesh (2007)? Can entrepreneurial mentoring programs impact women's *financial literacy* which Glenrose Jiyane and Britta Zawada (2013) explains is vital to women entrepreneurship?

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Before we begin today, I would like to review the purpose of the study and your rights as a participant. Once I have received your consent, I will turn on the digital recording device so we can get started. Is that all right with you?

[Read the Informed Consent Form, which includes the purpose of the study.]

Do you consent to participate in the study? [If yes, obtain the participant’s signature and proceed with the interview. If no, thank the person for her time and end the conversation.]

The interview questions are intended to fully explore your perspective and experiences pertaining to mentoring. I would like to begin by asking you a few questions about your business.

1. What type of business do you own?
2. How long have you owned the business?
3. Please describe your previous business experience.
4. Describe any degrees you earned and field(s) of study.
5. How many employees do you have, including yourself?
6. What services does your business provide?
7. What types of clients or customers do you serve?
8. Where are your clients or customers located geographically?

The next group of questions will address your mentoring experiences:

9. How and why did you become involved in the mentoring program?
10. How many mentors did you have and what was their expertise?
11. How were your mentors selected? What kind of input did you have in the selection process?
12. Describe any situations or experiences you had in the mentoring program that contributed to your business expertise.

13. Describe any situations or experiences you had in the mentoring program that contributed to your personal growth and development.
14. Describe any business partnerships or relationships that have resulted from your participation in the program.
15. Describe how these new social bonds may have contributed to your sales, profits, or business survival.
16. What aspects of the mentoring experiences were most meaningful to you?
17. What aspects of the mentoring experiences had little or no meaning for you?
18. What advice would you give a woman business owner who may be considering a mentoring program?
19. Outside of the individuals you met and worked with during the mentoring program, please describe any other individuals in your life that you've come to rely on for business support, advice, or mentoring.
20. Is there any other information you would like to share that would help me understand your experiences pertaining to mentoring?

The next step in my research process is to transcribe this interview. When that is done, I would like to have you review a summary of our conversation that will include the key themes from our conversation and your viewpoints. Would you be willing to review the summary of our conversation?

Thank you for your time. I will follow up with you in a few weeks.

Fenomenološko istraživanje mentorskih iskustava žena preduzetnica u Centralnoj Floridi

A P S T R A K T

Žene osnivaju firme dva puta više nego muškarci u Sjedinjenim Američkim državama, ali firme koje poseduju žene imaju nižu prodaju, profit i procenat opstanka na tržištu. Iako su centri za preduzetništvo i druge institucije razvile treninge i razvojne programe u cilju podrške novim preduzetnicima, postoji potreba za više sredstava da bi se pomoglo postojećim preduzećima da opstanu i

da se razvijaju, pogotovu preduzećima koje poseduju žene. Stoga smo sproveli kvalitativno fenomenološko istraživanje koristeći uzorak od 10 preduzetnica u centralnoj Floridi koje su bile štićenice u preduzetničkom mentorskom programu. Cilj je da se razumeju aspekti mentorstva za koje se primetilo da pospešuju uspešna preduzeća i lično iskustvo kao i ishode. U istraživanju smo koristili Moustakasov fenomenološki pristup koji uključuje detaljne i otvorene intervjue. Prema učesnicima istraživanja, aspekti mentorstva za koje se primetilo da pospešuju uspešna preduzeća, lična iskustva i ishode su: (a) pristup ad hoc mentorskom timu eksperata iz određenih oblasti, (b) prilika da se nauče osnovne poslovne veštine, (c) psihološka podrška od strane mentora, i (d) umrežavanje i prilike gradjenja odnosa. Ova studija doprinosi razvojnim mrežama baza podataka kroz opisivanje načina na koji grupno mentorstvo pruža karijernu i psihološku podršku već postojećim preduzetnicama. Buduća istraživanja bi trebalo da ispitaju kakva su iskustva vezana za mentorstvo preduzetnica koje se nalaze u ranoj fazi biznisa, da ispita rodne razlike u okviru preduzetničkog mentorstva, i kako se razvojne mreže preduzetnica razvijaju i menjaju tokom vremena.

KLJUČNE REČI: *preduzetnice, preduzetništvo, preduzetnici u nastajanju*

Article history: Received: 3 August, 2013

Accepted: 13 August, 2013