**Understanding the Experience of Growth-Oriented Women Entrepreneurs: A Portraiture Study**

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### Abstract

While women entrepreneurs have significantly contributed to the U.S. economy, their enterprises have been depicted as being smaller, having less profits, concentrating in low-profit sectors, and generating fewer jobs than their male counterparts (Marlow, 2014). Thus, the portrayal of women and their ventures as disadvantageous is prevalent in the women entrepreneurship literature and there is a need for research that presents a perspective that does not perpetuate this discourse (Marlow, 2014).

**Purpose:** To understand the essence of U.S.-based, growth-oriented women entrepreneurs’ experiences in growing their businesses by centering women’s ways of knowing in the male normative environment of entrepreneurship.

**Research Question/Sub-Questions:** How do growth-oriented women entrepreneurs understand their experiences in growing their businesses within a male normative environment of entrepreneurship? How do women entrepreneurs identify and use facilitators to grow their businesses? How do women entrepreneurs describe the experience of acquiring knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) needed to grow their businesses?

**Methodology:** Portraiture methodology, which is a blending of art and science (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), guided the examination of growth-oriented women entrepreneurs’ experiences in this study. Rather than looking for the deficiency in the women entrepreneurs’ experiences, this perspective allowed a search for the ‘good’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**Ontology/epistemology:** The ontology that guided this study was social constructivism (Creswell, 2013) and the epistemology was based on women's ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Golbert, & Tarale, 1986; 1998).

### Methods

- Two participants were selected from two third-party sources that honor top-performing women entrepreneurs, and one was obtained from snowball sampling.
- The data were collected from in-depth interviews, observations, and artifacts.
- Data analysis was done using Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s (1997) recommendations for systematically and iteratively allowing the themes to emerge.
- Ethical considerations attended to confidentiality and protection of the study participants.

### Women Entrepreneurs and Industry

According to American Express (2017), women entrepreneurs participate in all sectors of the U.S. economy. However, they primarily operated in four sectors: other services (22%/2.5M), health care and social assistance (15%/1.7M), professional, scientific, and technical services (13%/1.4M) and administrative support, and waste management services (11%/1.3M).

### Findings

Relevant statements were organized under the following six themes and related sub-themes:

1. **Women’s Entrepreneurial Experiences:** Journey, growth, and leadership
2. **Women’s Perception of Their Entrepreneurial Characteristics:** Belief system, learning to be innovative and risk-tolerance
3. **Women’s Entrepreneurial Learning (see sample below):** Role models and mentors
4. **Women’s Entrepreneurial Reflections on Gender:** Industry, bank financing, socio-cultural norms
5. **Women’s Entrepreneurial Knowing:** Silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge
6. **Women’s Entrepreneurial Self as Knower:** Confirmation as a thinker and membership in a community of thinkers.

### Women Entrepreneurial Learning (Theme 3)

**Sub-Themes**

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<th></th>
<th>Kathy</th>
<th>Ronni</th>
<th>Jaye</th>
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<td>Role models</td>
<td><em>When I say she’s brilliant, I watched her reinvent herself...I only aspire to be a fourth of what she is...what she does, it’s a gift.</em></td>
<td><em>...in the beginning...there were not a lot of role models.</em></td>
<td><em>I haven’t really been into anybody...I’m very unique.</em></td>
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<td>Mentors</td>
<td><em>...the person that you may be looking for guidance may not guide you...</em></td>
<td><em>...every time that I would sit with someone, they were training me...whether or not it was explicitly asked.</em></td>
<td><em>So, I won’t really say it’s like a mentor, but it’s definitely assistance...I like to stay to myself for the most part.</em></td>
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### References