Academic Paper

Does mentoring for women entrepreneurs lead to success?

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Abstract

Mentoring is recommended as particularly relevant to women entrepreneurs. This paper examines female entrepreneurs' experience of mentoring and how it contributed to success. It identifies the elements of successful mentoring for women entrepreneurs and evaluates its contribution to entrepreneurial success.

An interpretivist approach was adopted using a qualitative research design. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 women entrepreneurs. Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Most participants expressed the view that mentoring was "vital". The most significant form was found to be peer mentoring.

The paper contributes to knowledge by adding peer and online mentoring to the menu of mentoring techniques.

Keywords

gender, mentoring, entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurs

Introduction

Whilst the number of women-owned enterprises has been increasing in recent decades, women still only make up 35% of business owners (Correa, 2021). Mentoring is often suggested as a way to encouraging women into entrepreneurship as it is flexible, bespoke to the mentee, and provides a role model in the form of a successful woman business owner (Laukhuf and Malone, 2015; McMullan and Price, 2012). Societal stereotypes see the entrepreneur as typically male, and women have to manage this disconnect with their own experience (Kobeissi, 2010; Wilson & Tagg, 2010). Whilst women's businesses are often stated to be smaller and perform less well that those of their male counterparts, they may have different criteria for success for their business than the stereotypical concentration on growth, such as work/life balance or social contribution (Baker & Welter, 2017; Horvoka & Dietrich, 2011; Sharafizad & Coetzer, 2015).

Whilst there are several studies looking at mentoring for female entrepreneurs, little is known about how important it is for participants or what influence it may have on entrepreneurial practice. Factors that may contribute to successful mentoring relationships are not examined in terms of gender. This study seeks to find out how important mentoring actually is for women entrepreneurs. It contributes to the debate about the suitability of mentoring for women by undertaking a qualitative study with women entrepreneurs living in the South Hams in Devon, UK. All of them had had what they considered mentoring. A sample of mentors was also interviewed in order to gain a rounded view of the mentoring relationship.

Previous researchers have not examined how the experience of mentoring links to business success for women entrepreneurs, although claims are made for its importance (Overall &d Wise, 2016; Sarri, 2011; Terjesen & Sullivan, 2011). Thus this study will further the current debate.

The overarching research aim is to investigate women entrepreneurs' experiences of mentoring. This is supported by the following research objective: to evaluate whether the experience of mentoring contributes to business success. Supporting objectives are: to examine the nature of entrepreneurship practised by women entrepreneurs, to explore whether or not this follows the model put forward by extant entrepreneurship theory; to ascertain the definition of success for women entrepreneurs. This leads to a critical examination of the elements of a successful mentoring relationship for women entrepreneurs.

The paper contributes to knowledge by investigating women entrepreneurs' experience of mentoring and evaluating the contribution of that mentoring to entrepreneurial success.

Literature Review

Economic policy has often emphasised women's entrepreneurship as a solution to underdeveloped areas. This leads to questions of what is meant by "entrepreneurship" and what is women's experience of entrepreneurship (Marlow & McAdam, 2013).

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 & Welter, 2017:170).

As the stereotypical picture of an entrepreneur is male, women also have to deal with the contradiction between their feminine identity and being a business owner (Swail & Marlow, 2018).

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)(2016) examined how significant women's entrepreneurship was to the UK economy. They found that the main attraction for women to run their own business was flexibility which enabled them to undertake their caring responsibilities. They also found that women faced as additional barriers to male-led small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Mentoring was identified as something which women found contributed to the development of self-confidence in their own skills and abilities (FSB, 2016:15).

Institutional support has been suggested as beneficial to women entrepreneurs. Some even posit that this is vital to their success (Overall & Wise, 2016; Sarri, 2011; Terjesen &Sullivan, 2011). This is because institutions set out the "rules of the game" (Meyer & Scott,1983, in Kazumi & Kawai, 2017:347 Formal programmes to assist business start-ups would be more important to women, implying institutional approval that might counter the gender stereotype mentioned above (Kazumi & Kawai, 2017). Mentoring is often part of these programmes.

Definitions of mentoring include "a formal learning relationship" 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). The mentor "provides support by offering information, advice and assistance in a way that empowers the mentee", offering "wise counsel" (Starr, 2014). Mentoring provides the opportunity "to learn from the experience of others" and mentors have "been there and done that" (Pawson in Sarri, 2011:722). St Jean (2012:202) advises that the mentor is a person who is in a "position of authority", who "kindly watches over a younger individual".

St Jean (2012: 206) provides a conceptual framework consisting of 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. 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 and role model help the mentee to progress their career. The study used this framework to measure the most effective elements of the mentor function for women entrepreneurs.

Mentors can adopt a facilitative, collaborative or instructive style. St Jean & Audet (2013) suggested a maieutic or non directive approach, where the mentor adopts a facilitative and collaborative role is most effective. This involves open questioning to enable "individuals to become aware of the knowledge within them" (St Jean & Audet, 2013:101), so that the mentees retain their autonomy. This seems to go against St Jean's (2012) original assertion that the mentor is an older, experienced person who imparts information.

Literature suggests that women mentors provide the best role models for those women starting their businesses. The European Commission (2000 in McMullan & Price, 2012) states that mentoring programmes should use "successful women entrepreneurs as mentors" (McMullan & Price, 2012:199). This would correspond with the role model function above (St Jean, 2012).

Several studies suggest mentoring as particularly important for women and stress a collaborative approach (Neube & Wasburn, 2010, McMullan & Price, 2012, Stavropoulou & Protopapa, 2013, Laukhof & Malone, 2015). The role model function is advanced as a reason why this form of support could help address the gender imbalance in entrepreneurship (McMullan & Price, 2012).

The main motivations for starting a business are often quantitative, focusing on external, financial measures such as profit and turnover (Burns, 2016). On the other hand, qualitative measures such as recognition and personal development have also been mentioned (Cabrera & Mauricio, 2017). Whether the entrepreneur is focused on external financial measure or internal qualitative measures will impact on their own definition of success. Some researchers suggest that women may be less focused on profit because they have always been portrayed as nurturers. Societal stereotypes could reinforce this (Baker & Welter, 2017; Horvoka & Dietrich, 2011; Sharafizad & Coetzer, 2015). Some suggest that survival would be a better measure of success (Greer & Greene, 2003). Other measures could be work-life balance, employee satisfaction, social contribution, goal achievement and effectiveness (Brush in Wilson & Tagg, 2010:79). This suggests that motivation for engaging in entrepreneurship is not purely about profit.

Mentoring has been used in many programmes to encourage entrepreneurs. Sarri quotes Clark (2003, in Sarri, 2011) who stated that mentoring was "more important than hard work, talent and intelligence". Sarri's (2011) study reviewed the experience of women entrepreneur mentees, and asserts that "the ability to learn on a continuous basis is now viewed as a key determinant of competitive success," and concludes that "effective learning for female entrepreneurs is well served

through mentoring" (Sarri, 2011:734). Despite this bold statement, there was no examination of what effect the mentoring experience might have had on the business success of the mentees.

Most studies contain no evaluation of how mentoring might translate into long term success of the enterprise. Learning from mentors was a consistent factor in different models of mentoring examined by Overall & Wise (2016). They went so far as to suggest that mentoring could enable entrepreneurs to avoid failure. They did not provide evidence of this in their study, however.

In summary, the literature has suggested that women entrepreneurs experience additional barriers to their male contemporaries and that institutional support and mentoring could alleviate this. Several researchers claim that mentoring is linked to entrepreneurial success but provide limited evidence to support these statements. The conceptual framework derived from the literature used in this study is as follows:

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

In this simple linear framework, the entrepreneur starts their business. The experience of mentoring is indicated to be directly instrumental in the success of their enterprise. This reflects the literature's emphasis on the need for mentoring to achieve success (Sarri, 2011; McMullan & Price, 2012).

Methodology

Given that this study is examining lived experience, an interpretivist approach was adopted. This 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 & Welter, 2017). As this study investigates women entrepreneurs' experience of mentoring programmes, their lived experience is examined which has been under-reported in mainstream entrepreneurship theory. This research is mainly inductive, as it is intended to formulate theory that takes forward the literature on entrepreneurship.

Because of the focus on examining the participants' view of the mentoring relationship they have experienced a qualitative approach was necessary. Qualitative research "aims at understanding the phenomenon or event under study from the interior" (Flick, 2009:65). A positivist epistemology would be concerned with knowledge as 'truth', and investigated through a scientific method of studying real objects. On the other hand, an interpretivist epistemology holds that knowledge is provisional and can be investigated through studying subjective experiences (Crotty, 1998). Because this project is concerned with capturing the views of individuals and securing rich descriptions (Geertz, 1973), it fits qualitative models and does not follow an objective approach (Denzin &Lincoln, 2005).

In investigating the effect of mentoring on the success of an enterprise, this study was retrospective in nature, analysing a process which had taken place at a previous time (Flick, 2009). Whilst the current situation may have been influenced by the experience of mentoring in the past, this enabled the researcher to examine several narratives in order to explore what model of mentoring women entrepreneurs believe leads to success

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of women entrepreneurs. Participants were found through some of the local business networks that the researcher attends, which include the South West Women in Business (SWWIB) and Women in Southern Enterprises (WISE). Two pilot interviews with successful women entrepreneurs were conducted to check the research method.

In this study, the role of mentoring is considered in relation to business success. This required a definition of what is meant by 'success'. The definition drew on several studies which found that survival rates for small businesses vary: May (2019) states 60% fail within three years; McIntyre (2020) states 50% fail in first two years; Mansfield (2020) states 30% fail within three years; and the FSB (2020) reported that one third of small businesses may not reopen after the COVID19 lockdown. In order to identify participants, survival for more than three years was taken as the criterion for success. Participants were also asked to identify their own motivations and criteria for success.

Women entrepreneurs who were willing to be part of the study were identified through a quota approach, a non-probability sampling method in which researchers create a sample involving individuals that represent a population (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). This aimed to ensure that a representative from each of the five FSB (2016) categories mentioned above was included. In addition, as the major industries in the location studied are farming, food and drink production and tourism, women entrepreneurs were selected who operated in these areas. A purposive approach was adopted to select women entrepreneurs who had had experience of mentoring at some stage in their entrepreneurial journey to ascertain the impact of mentoring on their business success. There was also an element of convenience sampling in that participants were often known to the researcher as they operate in the field investigated. Interviews with a sample of mentors were also conducted, matched with their mentees from the wider sample. This relied on whether the participants were still in contact with their mentors and on the willingness of the latter to be involved, and was characteristic of snowball sampling. Here the snowballing was targeted at participants' own mentors.

Cresswell (2007) suggests interviewing should continue until the data are saturated and no further issues are identified with subsequent interviews. Guest *et al*. (2006) put forward a radical justification that 12 interviews should be enough to reach data saturation. They found that the majority of themes (73%) were identified in the first six interviews, with a further 21% identified from the next six. Twenty four women entrepreneurs and six mentors were interviewed.

It is also worth noting that many women who were approached to participate were adamant that they had never had mentoring, that they had just "made it up as I went along." All of these women otherwise fitted the criteria of the study, in that they were running successful businesses. These women do not form part of the current study. It was decided to narrow the study to those that had experienced mentoring to investigate the link with success. This also challenged the simple conceptual model in Figure 1.

Interviews allow the discovery of things not directly observable (Patton, 2002). The research approach led logically to the adoption of semi-structured interviews in that the researcher had a list of topics to be addressed, but varied these from interview to interview. Questions were designed to probe the different roles that a mentor may have performed, taken from the St. Jean (2012) model, as well as exploring the style adopted, to investigate whether the St. Jean and Audet's (2013) maieutic style was still relevant. A question matrix was drawn up, and additional questions were sometimes added to probe some of the areas addressed. The researcher utilised their training in facilitation to enable the participants to tell their story in their own words (Flick, 2009). Conducting pilot interviews helped clarify the extent of questioning needed and also started to elucidate the data. Due to the research being conducted during the pandemic, interviews were conducted over Zoom, and were recorded and transcribed.

Identification of themes was undertaken to identify common elements and also to link findings to the mentoring models identified in the literature review. Braun & Clarke (2012) suggest breaking thematic analysis 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. Here the aim is to move beyond the data to develop insights. Their approach is linked to that of Gioia *et al*. (2012) who set out a method to bring what they term "qualitative rigor" to the presentation of qualitative, inductive research (Gioia *et al*., 2012:15). This is also a three step process, starting with informant-centric codes (1st order) and then progressing to researcher-centric concepts (2nd order). The final stage is the devising of aggregate dimensions. In Reay *et al*.'s, (2019) review of the methods of presenting qualitative research, the so called "Gioia approach" is suggested as the most suitable where data is collected by interviews.

An initial thematic analysis was undertaken. As each theme emerged, a rich picture developed. The three phase data structure discussed by Gioia *et al*., (2012) was then employed. Transcripts were transferred into word files to enable the identification of codes. Codes were then collated into themes, with data tables being drawn up to ensure that relevant data was identified.

Findings

Initial review of the data showed that participants' ages ranged from 35 to 68, with the majority (12) of women being in their 40s. 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 another who had run several businesses at the same time and also undertaken freelance work. The majority were sole traders (15), with three who were in partnership with their husbands and two who had employed their husbands in their business. Three were directors, one of several CICs (Community Interest Companies).

Table I: Study participants

Mentee	Age	Industry	Business status	Length of time with mentor
Anne	44	Footwear manufacturing	Employer	1 year
Barbara	40	Vodka production	Employer	1 year
Chloe	51	PR, video production	Sole trader	3 months
Diane	42	Cosmetics network marketing, Personal development	Sole trader	Ongoing
Elaine	55	Director, estate agency	Director	2 years
Fiona	51	Retail, children's wear, property, complementary therapy	Sole trader	3 years
Gina	35	Farming, livery, accommodation	Partnership with husband	Ongoing
Hannah	44	Hypnotherapy	Sole trader	1 year
Irene	43	Physiotherapy	Employer	3 years
Jackie	45	Holiday accommodation	Sole trader	6 months
Kay	68	Complementary therapy	Sole trader	1 year
Louise	63	Celebrant	Sole trader	Ongoing
Maggie	45	Nutritionist, charity founder	Sole trader	2 years
Nina	53	Coach, personal development	Sole trader	1 year
Olive	51	Social media strategy and marketing	Sole trader	1 year
Pam	44	Social care, nursing, leadership	CIC, employer	Ongoing
Rosie	44	Animal pain, outdoor expeditions	Sole trader	1 year
Susan	48	VA	Sole trader	1 year
Tanya	59	Food manufacturing	Employer	4 years
Ursula	63	Clothing, property	Sole trader	1 year
Val	43	Farming, accommodation	Partner with husband	2 years
Wendy	54	Food production	Partner with husband	1 year Peer support ongoing
Willa	47	Health, fitness	Sole trader	Ongoing
Yvonne	60	Coaching, mediation	Sole trader	1 year

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. One of these was the mentor from BIP who had provided services to three of the participants. In terms of gender, four of the mentors were women and two were men.

Initial thematic analysis was carried out. Six themes were identified: upbringing; motivation to become an entrepreneur; elements of mentoring; gender; rural context; success. Some of these are included in Table I.

Table II: Mentees: Thematic analysis

Theme	Sub themes
Motivation to be entrepreneur	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	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
Success	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

A Gioia *et al*. (2006) data structure was then drawn up (Table III, below).

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

1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
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	Early influences	Entrepreneurial enablers
Parents always ran their own business Dad was a manufacturer Family business Entrepreneurship as reaction to mother's domestic role Parent business – hard work	Parent occupation	Entrepreneurial enablers
Inspiration from successful female relative Image of independent business women	Role models	Entrepreneurial enablers
Living in rural area was motivational as surrounded by entrepreneurs Running business in rural area accepted	Environment	Entrepreneurial enablers
Driven by success Fantasised about own business Wanted to have product Risk taker	Inner qualities	Entrepreneurial motivation
Connection with people important Happiness Provide what is needed Get out of bed and be excited Inspire others	Definition of success	Entrepreneurial motivation
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	Qualities of mentor	Entrepreneurial support
Professional association specific mentoring Peer mentoring Mother encouragement vital NEA scheme mentoring	Sources of mentoring	Entrepreneurial support
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	Gender of mentor	Entrepreneurial support

From the original first order codes, second order concepts were devised: early influences, parent occupation, role models, environment, inner qualities, definitions of success, qualities of mentor, sources of mentor, gender of mentor. These were then condensed into aggregate dimensions: entrepreneurial enablers, entrepreneurial motivation and entrepreneurial support.

A separate analysis was undertaken for mentors (Table IV). This shows themes that were identified: success criteria, mentoring and peer mentoring. Mentors were also asked to reflect on whether mentoring had contributed to the success of their mentees.

Table IV: Mentors: thematic analysis

Themes	Codes
Success criteria	Define their own success criteria
	A lot want something beyond profit
	Don't have to make loads of money or burnout
	In America, not considered success unless had a few failures
Mentoring	Working with an individual
	Guidance
	Use own experience
	See what they can't see
	Signpost to others
	Help them do their best
	Information and advice, listening, empathy
BUT	Some can't help people grow outside existing paradigm
Peer mentoring	Women good at supporting each other
	Peer support is the most valuable element
	Group insights
Contribution of mentoring to success	25% of success is mentoring
	Some clients' shifts are negligible, some are incredibly successful.
	Mentoring can be really impactful and accelerate success.
	More sustained success with mentoring

In terms of entrepreneurial enablers, the influence of upbringing was clear. Nearly half of the participants had parent entrepreneurs. Other early influences included the childhood environment; "I was surrounded by very successful people …I saw myself as somebody who would do quite well," (Hannah). Others found this a negative experience: "At school, the expectations were very low for everyone…I would never have thought I was going to run my own business one day," (Olive). "School probably put me off it," (Nina). Role models were both positive and negative. "I saw entrepreneurship as a reaction to my mother's role (as a housewife)" (Anne). "My aunt was an incredible businesswoman, my motivation to succeed came from her" (Elaine). Some were reluctant to class themselves as an entrepreneur due to their conceptions of what the term might mean. "I have negative connotations around entrepreneurship which is maybe why I might be hesitant to think of myself as an entrepreneur." (Gina). This suggests that current models of entrepreneurship experienced when growing up formed the foundations of how this is viewed as an adult, and that they did not fit lived experience.

When considering entrepreneurial motivation, many referred to inner qualities such as self confidence (Elaine), wanting to inspire others (Diane), self awareness (Rosie), being driven by success (Elaine), being a natural leader (Chloe) and being adventurous (Nina).

Several had started a business due to personal circumstances: "I needed to go freelance to sustain an income" (Maggie).Sometimes, previous work experience provided the push. "I didn't really want to sit there doing the same thing day in, day out" (Susan).

Life events were significant:

"I was caught in a Catch-22 situation of not being able to work and not being able to afford childcare. I became an entrepreneur because of necessity, I had no alternative really." (Chloe)

"It became clear very early on it wasn't going to work having a full time career and wanting to be there for my daughter." (Olive)

This adds the concept of external life events to the simple model developed from the literature.

Participants had various definitions of success. Whilst profit was mentioned by several of them, the main focus was on enabling the entrepreneur to have a balanced lifestyle. Definitions of success included: being able to spend time with the family, making a connection with people through their

work, inspiring others and ultimately being happy in what they did, getting out of bed and feeling excited. Monetary success was not a major motivator.

The final aggregate dimension was entrepreneurial support. The majority of women had found their experience of mentoring positive, with one declaring it was "100% vital" (Pam). Several referred to "golden nuggets" of advice. One felt that the mentoring had been instrumental in setting up her business. "An advisor said to me, you can do it. I never expected to be an entrepreneur."(Chloe).

Investigating the qualities of mentors, St Jean's (2012) roles were used to identify the various functions of the mentoring relationship. These were mentioned by both entrepreneurs and mentors. No other functions arose when talking about mentors (see Table IV).

Table V: St Jean (2012) mentor roles

Mentor roles	Illustrative quotes from study participants
reflector	They helped me look at things with different eyes (Pam)
	A mentor can help you understand what you have done so you can repeat it (Katy)
reassurance	I remember saying 'I can't do this', and he said, 'yes, you can' (Chloe)
	Nurturing (Liz)
	Hand holding (Martha)
motivator	It gave me boundaries and frameworks…someone who would push back on me (Yvonne)
confidant	They can give you confidential advice (Anne)
contacts	I was encouraged to network (Yvonne)
	Signposting people to each other (Debbie),
Information support	The right person gives good advice with no judgement (Anne)
	Giving information (Liz)
challenging	It stretched me and made me look at things I wouldn't have looked at (Tanya)
guide	It gave me confidence I was going in the right direction (Wendy)
	Sounding board (Liz)
role model	He just knew how to run a business (Ursula)
	I've been there, this is how you do it (Ben) Sharing your experience of what worked and what didn't (Martha).

Only one participant declared that mentoring had not been successful for her. Despite having had several mentors, she felt that most of it had been a "waste of time".

> *"I don't remember with any of my mentors thinking afterwards you have just opened up my life or opened up the door. I've never really had a Eureka moment. It was not life-changing."* (Fiona).

This indicates that the relationship between mentoring and success may be affected by the personality of the mentee and the mentor. With regard to sources of mentoring, many had accessed a variety of free services. These included government funded schemes, trade associations, specialist networks and family members. Others had decided to pay for mentoring services, normally at a mature stage of their business.

In addition, several participants mentioned getting what they considered mentoring by following influencers online (Diane, Irene, Pam, Willa). Another referred to learning from her clients who were successful businesspeople (Elaine) but that these mentors would not be aware of any mentoring relationship.

Many participants cited peer mentoring as especially important. This had not been mentioned to any great degree by the literature.

> *"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."* (Chloe)

> *"There would be (other business owners) 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. "*(ELouise)

"The value that I get from that is remarkable because it is specific to my business."(Irene) This experience had inspired one of the participants to set up her own network.

> *"We launched this crazy idea that people could meet up once a month and talk about their challenges in business and also their personal and emotional challenges, of trying to keep the show on the road facing different challenges from somebody who is going into the office 9 to 5."* (Chloe)

Mentors also rated peer mentoring as important. "A critical friend is really useful." (Ben). Peers "provide role models for each other..and can offer insights" (Peter).

In terms of qualities, mentors had varying opinions on their mentoring style. Several referred to asking questions or making a "gentle enquiry" (Ben). Some felt it important to allow mentees to develop their own answers. One raised the proviso that not all mentoring might be successful. "Some can't help people grow outside the existing paradigm because they don't know anything else."(Katy) She went on to explain that many mentors were restricted by their experience and needed to be more open to other ways of doing business.

When speaking about the gender of mentor, both mentees and mentors disagreed about whether it was imperative for women to be mentored by other women: "I have had mentoring from my father in law and my female friends" (Gina); "I have mostly had mentoring from men, gender wasn't important" (Barbara); "Successful women are happy to give back" (Debbie2); "Women initially feel happier talking to other women" (Martha); but "Not all women want another woman to succeed" (Katy). With regard to peer and online mentoring, gender was not found to be significant.

Discussion

Investigating women entrepreneurs' experience of how mentoring contributed to the success of their business, themes were developed from the data which fell into three aggregate dimensions.

Entrepreneurial enablers included early influences, parent occupation, role models and the environment where they had been brought up. Entrepreneurial motivation consisted of both inner qualities and the definition of success. Entrepreneurial support covered the qualities, source and gender of mentors.

The nature of entrepreneurship practised by women and how they defined success were explored. Few had followed the "nexus" route identified by Baker &Welter (2017:170) which emphasises the need to scale up and exit. The vast majority were sole traders, with only five having expanded in order to employ people. "I wanted to get out of bed and be excited" (Barbara).

Just as the FSB (2016) study found that female role models were important, some participants referred to these. There were also role models from mothers who were housewives which led to participants seeking other careers. "Images of independent career women on TV" (Anne); "I wanted to be something other than a mother" (Fiona).

The study sought to evaluate whether mentoring contributed to success. One of the mentors (Liz) stated that she estimated mentoring contributed about 25% to success of the business, which was interesting that she was able to quantify this. Another mentor stated that mentoring could be "really impactful" and accelerate success (Katy). Several mentees agreed with this view, referring to mentoring as vital, with some stating that they would not have started their business without

mentoring input (Chloe, Rosie) or would not have been successful without it (Ursula). As one interviewee stated, "It was critical in giving me the confidence to keep going." (Rosie).

Some had a less definite view, feeling that mentoring had been useful but that they would have made it without (Anne), whilst one (Fiona) felt that none of the mentoring she had had was valuable. "Mentoring didn't create the business, it just got it off the ground quicker" (Anne); "Mentoring was not successful. It simplified the process, it was not realistic" (Fiona). Thus the assertions by Kazumi &Kawai (2017) and Neube & Wasburn (2010) about the importance of mentoring for women entrepreneurs were not entirely supported by the findings. It suggests that far from being the main element which causes business success, it is just one of a menu of influences.

Despite St Jean & Audet's (2013) findings that a non-directive maiuetic style was the most effective, entrepreneurs often stressed the more directive advice as the most valuable aspect of mentoring: "It's about practical help" (Barbara); "I wanted practical things to do" (Louise).

With regards to gender, the literature suggested that female mentor would be most appropriate for women entrepreneurs (McMullan & Price, 2012). The FSB (2016) also referred to the importance of female role models. Women mentors would fulfil the role model function advocated by St Jean (2012). However, the question of gender was not felt to be important to the participants, with most expressing the view that "Gender was not important " (Barbara).

In addition, the importance of peer mentoring was stressed, which had not been suggested as being significant by the literature. Participants felt that this kind of specific support and advice from someone who was in the same situation was the most important. "The value that I get from that is remarkable because it is specific to my business" (Irene). Thus role models can be helpful, but a mentor who is in the same business and who may just be slightly ahead in their business journey appears to be more impactful than an expert who may be too far removed from the current situation of the mentee. This supports Kuhn & Galloway (2015) who found that artisan entrepreneurs trading on Etsy (an American e-commerce company focused on handmade or vintage items and craft supplies) valued peer support from others in the same industry as extremely valuable. Peer mentoring is also mainly informal.

Additionally, the definition of mentor by the participants was broader than that proposed by the literature, which emphasised the nature of the mentoring relationship which has to be agreed explicitly by both parties (Jones, 2012; Starr, 2014; Sarri, 2011; St Jean 2012). The use of online mentoring agrees somewhat with Kuhn *et al.* (2016) who found that artisan entrepreneurs had received online advice from a peer that they had never met. However, online sources used by the participants were more aspirational than simply being peers. The online sources used were those who had achieved great success in their business. Regarding successful people who were clients almost as 'stealth' mentors was not mentioned at all in the literature.

Unsurprisingly, mentors were positive about the importance of mentoring for women entrepreneurs. They referred to their satisfaction at being able to help others ("it lights me up, working with small businesses" (Katy)) and that a "critical friend" was useful (Katy4). They suggested that "women prefer to be mentored" (Martha) as they were less confident than men and they needed "someone who has been there…helping them get the best out of themselves" (Martha3). Giving women confidence was also mentioned (Liz). The mentoring relationship was clearly associated with giving advice by all mentors. This corresponds with the literature (Jones, 2012; Starr, 2014; Sarri, 2011; St Jean 2012.)

Figure II: Revised conceptual framework
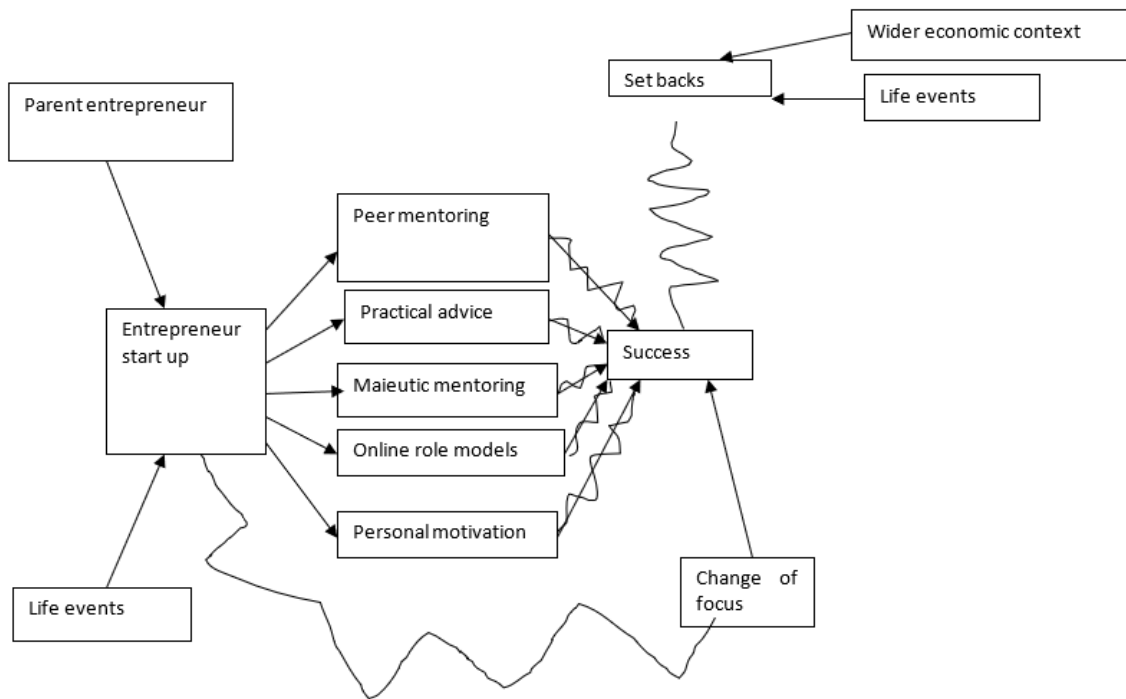
This has led to a revised conceptual framework. Mentoring has been divided into maieutic mentoring and practical advice, with peer mentoring being added and given more prominence. Online role models have also been added, as well as personal motivation. All these elements were believed by the participants to contribute to business success.

In addition, the simplistic linear nature of the previous model has been developed to show that things do not always go smoothly. Setbacks, whether from the wider economic context or from personal experience, can affect success, and a change of focus can lead to a reassessment of business performance. Even with the benefit of mentoring and advice, this does not always lead directly to success. Thus the simple linear model does not work. This is indicated by the wavy lines.

Limitations

Qualitative research is by its nature concerned with smaller numbers than larger scale quantitative studies. Whilst it was applicable to the nature of the research aim and questions being investigated that a subjective approach was undertaken, this is an account of a relatively small number of participants. The Gioia *et al*. (2012) approach was adopted to analyse the data and investigate women entrepreneurs' experience of mentoring . Future research may test the revised model on a wider sample of participants to examine the experience of women entrepreneurs in more depth.

As a woman entrepreneur and mentor living in the location which was investigated, the researcher is an actor in the environment studied. This may be regarded as having the potential to affect the findings with bias. On the other hand, this can be an advantage in gaining access to research participants as Oakley (1981 in Harding, 2020:xx) argued that personal involvement is "the condition under which people come to know each other," and thus interviews could be more collaborative. A reflexive route was following, "mindfully distancing (oneself) from embedded circumstances" (Maclean *et al*., 2012:387). This "promoted reliability and sincerity" from participants (Maclean *et al*., 2012:391). In Vuorinen's work (2020:1) on researching friends and family, she suggests that the researcher "benefits from knowing her co-participants well and being able to rely on shared experience". This leads to mutual trust, and empathy.

Future research could use a sample of successful women entrepreneurs who had not been mentored to differentiate between their experience and those who did receive mentoring. Women who had mentoring yet did not create a successful business could also add to the picture.

The research was carried out in a small area of the UK and this may have produced results that are not widely applicable elsewhere. However, it is envisaged that it will help to understand the issue more generally.

Conclusion

Whilst supporting the main elements of the St Jean (2012) mentoring model, the importance of peer mentoring was revealed as an additional, significant consideration. This element of mentoring should be examined in more detail. In addition, the use of online role models and others who were not engaged in a formal mentoring relationship shows that the concept of mentoring is broadening to include mentors who are not aware of their influence.

Mentoring was not the singular element that led to business success, although a successful mentoring relationship supported women in their business development. The current content of entrepreneurial start up and support programmes needs to take the value of peer mentoring into account. The most significant contribution to knowledge was the identification of peer mentoring as a vital part of business support to encourage women to engage in entrepreneurship.

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Appendix I: Mentor research participants

Mentor	Age	M/F	Paid/free
Liz	64	F	free
Debbie	51	F	free
Martha	56	F	paid
Katy	44	F	paid
Ben	59	M	paid
Peter	73	M	free