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Management styles and innovation in women-owned enterprises

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Studies suggest that management style affects organizational innovation. However, not much is known about innovation in women-owned enterprises, especially in a developing society such as Malaysia. The current study, therefore aims to examine how Malaysian women entrepreneurs perceive and manage innovation. Due to the exploratory nature of the analysis, a qualitative approach is adopted. 10 women entrepreneurs are interviewed regarding their perception and implementation of innovation, as well as the problems they face and their solutions to those problems, based on the responses, 4 distinct management styles are identified. The study has several theoretical and practical implications. In particular they provide direction on women's development issues to policy-makers and managers, as well as researchers in the areas of culture, gender and innovation.

Key words: Women entrepreneurs, management style, innovation, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The significance of women entrepreneurs has been increasingly felt over the past decade. In developed countries, women own 25% of total businesses and are starting up new ones at a faster rate than men (Woldie and Adersua, 2004). Apart from contributing to economic growth, female entrepreneurs add diversity and choices in the business environment (Verheul et al., 2006) and improve opportunities for gender equality (Eddleston and Powell, 2008). Studies in developing countries have shown that those with the highest economic growth such as China are also the ones where women are highly active in business (Tambunan, 2009). The importance of women entrepreneurs is especially noted in rural areas of Asia and Africa where women's economic participation is highly associated with poverty alleviation (Woldie and Adersua, 2004; Singh and Belwal, 2008).

Due to these contributions, there has been growing research interest on female entrepreneurship. In the Asian region, most of these studies have revolved around the characteristics of women entrepreneurs, the challenges they face and what motivate them. Compared to men, women entrepreneurs are said to be better at cultivating interpersonal relationships (Licuanan, 1992) but poorer at planning, organizing and controlling (Abdul-

Rashid, 1992). The findings indicate that women entrepreneurs face specific challenges in the form of family commitments and sex-role conflicts (Lee and Choo, 2001; Singh and Belwal, 2008). They are motivated by a combination of "push" factors e.g. poverty and unemployment and "pull" factors e.g. the need to be independent (Ismail and Joned, 1999; Jamali, 2009).

Tambunan's (2009) analysis of secondary data from 14 Asian countries makes some very important deductions regarding women in business. Women entrepreneurs appear to be constrained mainly by cultural values and social expectations which are manifested through a lack of educational and career opportunities. As a result Asian women are usually involved in small, low-technology businesses which do not require too much capital and skill.

While the above studies have indeed improved understanding of Asian women entrepreneurs, in general scholarly research on the subject is scarce and sporadic. There is still a wide range of strategic issues which has not received in-depth scrutiny such as how their styles of management affect specific aspects of organizational performance. In relation to the above study by Tambunan (2009), a deeper exploration of how female management style is affected by socio-culture also seems necessary.

Table 1. Distribution of Malaysian working population by sex and employment status, 2007.

Sex	Total population	Employer(%)	Employee(%)	Own-account worker (%)	Unpaid family worker (%)
Male	6,323,600	4.6	75.5	17.7	2.2
Female	3,546,100	1.2	77.5	11.7	9.6

Source: Labour force survey report, Malaysian department of statistics, 2008.

Given that innovation is one of the most important measures of business performance, an attempt is made in this study to examine female management style in the context of innovation in business organizations. The study was carried out in Peninsular Malaysia, where approximately 15% of businesses are owned by women (Department of Statistics, 2007). Although small in numbers, this segment of the Malaysian business population serves huge social and political purposes, as discussed in the following section.

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN MALAYSIA

Malaysian women's participation in the economy may exist in any of the 4 categories of employment status that is, as an employer, an employee, an own-account worker or an unpaid family worker. As shown in Table 1, the Malaysian labour force report (Department of Statistics, 2008) documents that out of the total working female population in 2007, 77.5% were paid employees, 11.7% were own-account workers and 9.6% were unpaid family workers. Only 1.2% were categorised as employers. For men, the percentages were higher for the employers and own-account workers categories but lower for employees. The fact that the number of unpaid female family workers is almost five times higher than the males' is particularly disturbing. It seems to suggest that some Malaysian women are being exploited and made to work for free by their own family members.

Based on that scenario, it is believed that many women become entrepreneurs to secure financial independence. But financial independence alone cannot explain women's decision to set up their own business, after all 77.5% of Malaysian working women find financial independence by being employed. So what are the real motives for entrepreneurial intention among these women? Although previous research shows that the most common appear to be intrinsic such as self-satisfaction and interest in business (Seen et al., 1991; Abdul-Rashid, 1995; Ismail and Joned, 1999), a deeper analysis suggests that there are social and political factors too.

As voters, Malaysian women compose about half of the total eligible population (Department of Statistics, 2007). In the elections, it is no secret that women both in the ruling party and the opposition play the biggest role in house-to-house campaigns and getting right down to the

grassroots. For the government, empowering women with opportunities in education and career is thus critical to ensure their political support. Since career opportunities in the government and corporate sectors are limited, women are encouraged to become business players. They are given training, funding and counseling as incentives and business networks are provided through affiliation with political parties. In addition, business equity has been used as a measure of social justice since the era of the new economic policy.

Official statistics on Malaysian women entrepreneurs are very limited. The Malaysian labour force survey report (2008) states that there are 1.87 million female business-owners in the country. Out of that, 17.8% are employers and 82.2% are own-account workers, suggesting that a huge majority of women-owned businesses are micro enterprises. In terms of age, the largest segment is in the 30 - 39 years category, followed by those in their 40 s. Approximately a quarter of them are located in the central-western region of Peninsular Malaysia, where most commercial and industrial activities are concentrated. The report also suggests that on average, women entrepreneurs in Malaysia commit fewer hours to their businesses (46 h per week) than their male counterparts (51 h per week). Unfortunately the report does not provide statistics on other important characteristics of female entrepreneurs in the country such as level of education, types of industries, duration of business, etc.

In other studies (Ariffin, 1994; Ong and Sieh, 2003), it is established that Malaysian women entrepreneurs are most likely to be in the service industries, have prior working experience and are small operators that is, with fewer than 20 full-time employees and earning less than RM100,000 per annum. Their businesses are mainly funded by personal savings and most are either sole proprietorships or partnerships. They also tend to concentrate on local markets, with less than 10% going international. The above findings appear to affirm several widespread and long-term trends in female entrepreneurship. Research in other parts of the world also shows that since the early 1990 s female entrepreneurs have been in small, service-oriented sectors, have some previous work experience and are more likely than men to depend on personal sources of capital (Brush, 1992; O'Brien, 1994; Ufuk and Ozgen, 2001; Heilbrunn, 2004).

More recently, Ndubisi and Kahraman (2005) find that the majority (62%) of Malaysian women entrepreneurs

have received tertiary education but only a fraction have explored traditionally male-dominated areas such as transportation and communication. The data indicate a high survival rate (78.4% have been operational for more than 5 years), however, only 48% display innovative characteristics such as adopting advanced technology in their business operations. The lack of innovativeness appears to be related to typical characteristics of women-owned enterprises, namely their small size and high service-orientation.

The above findings by Ndubisi and Kahraman (2005) suggest that further studies on innovation among Malaysian women entrepreneurs are timely. In particular, it should be determined whether there are additional contributing factors to the women's innovativeness or lack thereof besides firm characteristics. Early literature suggests that one probable factor is the entrepreneur's own personal traits including the propensity for "creative destruction", that is, the ability to reap profits by destroying the current social equilibrium (Schumpeter, 1934; March and Simon, 1958; Rogers, 1962). Later these traits are described in terms of leadership or management styles such as openness, risk-propensity, and ambitiousness (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Nam and Tatum, 1997). Most of these discussions, however, are rooted in western and male-dominated values. Therefore they are revisited here in the context of female entrepreneurship and cross-culturalism.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION

The notion of the entrepreneur as an innovator is believed to have been conceived by Schumpeter (1934) who argues that the function of an entrepreneur is to reform or revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting new or untried technology and processes. In line with the definitions submitted by Schumpeter (1934), Zaltman et al. (1973) and Damanpour (1991), Johannessen et al. (2001) propose that innovation is measurable by the degree of "newness" adopted with respect to product, service, process, market, supply and administrative functions. Innovative skills have generally been accepted as one of the critical attributes of successful entrepreneurs (Drucker, 1985; Chell, 2001; Johnson, 2001). Some of the most profitable companies in the world have associated their growth with innovation, which they perceive as the ability to change and reinvent themselves as a way to exploit opportunities.

In recent literature, studies have been focused on 2 major areas, to examine how exactly entrepreneurs use innovations to increase organizational performance and to determine the organizational cultures which stimulate innovation. In the first area, Zhao (2005) discovers that entrepreneurs use innovations to expand business scope and boost organizational growth. Innovation is also a critical factor in the implementation of other sound management practices including total quality management

(Ehigie and Akpan, 2004). These findings support earlier hypotheses by Kanungo (1999) and Sundbo (1998) that entrepreneurs exploit the innovative culture as an opportunity for developing new products or services and penetrating new markets; thus innovation and growth make up a never-ending cycle.

The second area deals with the basic values and beliefs of an organization such as tolerance towards mistakes and conflicts (Martin and Terblanche, 2003) which promote creativity and innovation among its members. In general the literature suggests that those values and beliefs flourish under certain management styles, implying a relationship between management style and innovation (Roberts et al., 1989; Damanpour, 1991; Zhao, 2005; De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007). This relationship is discussed further as follows.

Management style and innovation

As described earlier, the traits theory posits that entrepreneurs are the ones primarily responsible for initiating changes and novelties in the society. The explanation offered is that entrepreneurs possess certain traits such as risk-propensity and ambitiousness that induce them to strive for better and greater things. Entrepreneurs are held responsible too for educating the society on the need for new ways of life and solutions to life's problems.

Although this individualist perspective of innovation has been criticized as overly narrow and simplistic (Van de Ven et al., 1989), the notion of entrepreneurs as agents of change has received wide acceptance among scholars (Kanter, 1984; Drucker, 1985). The entrepreneur's styles of leadership and management have often been linked to specific organizational practices such as innovation. Roberts et al. (1989) demonstrate that a long-term view towards new ideas and ventures supports the innovative culture. A centralized approach, on the other hand, has been shown to have a negative effect on innovation (Damanpour, 1991). According to Zhao (2005), innovation will flourish under an open style which encourages and rewards idea development. De Jong and Den Hartog (2007) summarize that transformational, participative and employee-oriented managers are more likely to encourage employee innovativeness.

These studies, however, do not examine differences between male and female entrepreneurs. Therefore readers are left to assume that both groups employ the same approaches in innovation management. Such studies are considered flawed as men and women – mainly as a result of socio-culture - tend to adopt different management styles (Helgesen, 1990; Davidson and Burke, 2000). Roffey (2002) finds that women managers are seen by their subordinates as less ego-centric and less competitive than male managers. Chow's (2005) review of literature reveals that male leaders may be more inclined to use coercive power whereas women prefer personal interaction.

From a cross-cultural perspective, too, no studies have been attempted to generalise the above findings within the Malaysian context. Due to cultural differences, in particular along the value dimensions identified by Hofstede (1980), it is quite likely that Malaysian women entrepreneurs use different styles to promote organisational innovations than those of their counterparts from other societies. Based on Hofstede's (1980) deductions, Malaysian female entrepreneurs are expected to be less assertive than women in high masculine societies. They are likely to place greater importance on feminine values such as family welfare, as well as a calm and peaceful life. Malaysian women are also expected to demonstrate the intricacies of social networking in a collective society.

Thus, the current paper contends that a fresh analysis of female management styles is needed which may help address some existing gaps in the literature. The final output of the study is a typology of styles which will highlight: firstly, the female perspective in entrepreneurial innovation, and secondly, the cross-cultural perspective in female management styles and innovation issues.

STUDY FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study was to develop an initial understanding of how Malaysian women entrepreneurs perceive and manage organizational innovation. For current purposes the following definition of innovation is used, which concurs with those offered in major studies (Johannessen et al., 2001)

"The level of novelty implemented by an entrepreneur with regards to the products, services, processes, technologies, ideas or strategies in various functions of the business which may facilitate the realization of its objectives. The degree of novelty or newness is as perceived by the individual entrepreneur."

Based on Damanpour's (1991) discussions, in the current study innovation is operationalised as follows:

- i.) Product/service - introducing new products/services, improving quality of existing products/services, repackaging existing products/services, etc.
- ii.) Process - adopting new production methods, using new technology in the production process, acquiring new production skill, etc.
- iii.) Supply - using new raw materials/supplies, changing suppliers, etc.
- iv.) Market - changing price structures, penetrating new market segments, relocating, developing new promotional strategies, etc.
- v.) Administrative - restructuring departments or functions, using flexible operating hours, adopting new communication methods, etc.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative method - via personal interviews - was considered more suitable. A personal interview, as a research method, has the following advantages (Burns, 2000), it enables the researcher to obtain the respondent's subjective experiences when a life event is being narrated, it presents the respondent's perspective instead of the researcher's own views, it gives respondent and researcher equal status in the dialogue and it is especially useful in qualitative research when ethnography is not possible. Ethnography, which includes observation and real-life participation by the researcher, has the same advantages (Fetterman, 1998). However, due to time and cost constraints, personal interviews were preferable in this study.

The analysis was interpretive (Gephart, 2004), with the intention of exploring female perspectives of entrepreneurship and innovation in Malaysia. Interpretive research seeks to discover construed realities that guide the recognition of meaning and help explain how respondents create, enact or interpret their experiences (Patton, 2002). 10 women entrepreneurs were identified through personal references and interviewed based on a series of open-ended questions. Although the sample size was small, it was considered acceptable for exploratory studies (Burns, 2000; Dechant and Al-Lamky, 2004; Jamali, 2009). The women were purposefully chosen from all over Peninsular Malaysia, and represented various industries and personal backgrounds, to provide different perspectives in female entrepreneurship. According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling is required to select information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues critical to the research objective.

Each interview took place at the respondent's business premise and lasted for approximately an hour. In some cases, a brief tour of the premise was also provided which gave the author a first hand opportunity to observe some of the innovations implemented by the entrepreneurs. The women were asked to describe the types of innovation carried out in their organizations and how they were implemented, the challenges faced in the process, and how these challenges were overcome. Apart from general topics including company history, family and previous career, the major issues explored were:

- i.) Types of innovation implemented throughout the duration of the business.
- ii.) Problems encountered in the implementation of the innovations.
- iii.) How innovation was perceived and managed, as well as how certain problems were overcome.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Consistent with the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the analysis here focused on detecting prevalence, that is the emergence of pattern in the responses. Within any given topic or issue, patterns emerged when certain points were repeated or emphasized by respondents (Jamali, 2009). These emerging patterns or themes are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Personal and business characteristics

The profiles of the respondents are summarized in Table 2. The respondents were aged between late twenties and early fifties. The majority of them had received at least higher secondary education. 8 of them were married and had children one was single and the other a single-mother. 7 were in service-oriented businesses, 4 of whom were in traditionally female sectors namely beauty, pre-school, food and beverage and direct-selling. Except for 3, the rest had previously been employed although not necessarily in a related industry. It is also note-worthy that all 3 respondents in the manufacturing sector and one in the service sector were copreneurs, meaning that they were in some kind of partnership with their husbands.

When asked why they decided to go into business, reasons given were highly varied. 3 respondents suggested

Table 2. Profile of respondents in the personal interviews.

Identification	Age	Education	Marital status	Type of business	Duration (years)	Ownership structure
Case 1	Early 30s	Tertiary	Married; have children	Sauce manufacturer	2	Copreneurship
Case 2	Early 50s	Higher secondary	Married; have children	Cookie manufacturer	4	Copreneurship
Case 3	Late 20s	Higher secondary	Single	Office supplies provider	2	Sole proprietor
Case 4	Early 50s	Tertiary	Married; have children	Direct selling agent	1	Sole proprietor
Case 5	Late 30s	Higher secondary	Married; have children	Beauty centre	7	Partnership with sister
Case 6	Mid-40s	Higher secondary	Married; have children	Construction material supplier	13	Family business
Case 7	Late 40s	Higher secondary	Married; have children	Batik manufacturer	8	Copreneurship
Case 8	Late 30s	Higher secondary	Married; have children	Canteen operator	11	Copreneurship
Case 9	Early 40s	Lower secondary	Divorced; single mother	Transport operator	5	Sole proprietor
Case 10	Late 30s	Higher secondary	Married; have children	Kindergarten operator	4	Sole proprietor

economic necessity as the main motivator. As narrated by Case 9, I didn't really have much choice. My husband left us and it became a matter of survival. I don't have high academic qualifications, and I had been a housewife for a long time, so going into business was the most obvious solution.

One Chinese respondent, the construction material supplier, indicated filial piety as her primary motive while another said it ran in the family. 2 respondents, the batik manufacturer and kindergarten operator - cited passion for the industry as the major factor. Those who had children also said they enjoyed the flexibility in their work schedule which allowed them a much-needed balance between career and family.

9 respondents quoted personal savings and family as the main sources of fund. The only one who used a bank loan as her main source was the single mother. In most cases, customers were initially made up of family, friends and neighbors. For the Malay-Muslims, religious communities also appeared to be an important part of their social networks. Additionally 2 of them, the direct-seller and the canteen operator, emphasized the importance of political connections. None of the entrepreneurs utilized formal methods of promotion, instead they preferred to rely on word-of-mouth, repeat purchases and door-to-door marketing.

On the subject of success, 8 quoted family happiness as the ultimate measure. 2 further added that they were very thankful for being able to lead a wholesome life and contribute to the society. The construction material supplier merely shrugged her shoulders and said "I don't really think about stuff like that". Only the office supplies provider, who was single, suggested business growth as her definition of success.

Nevertheless, all the respondents acknowledged the

need to continuously reinvent themselves. Most of them did not have problems describing their understanding of the concept of innovation, which they perceived as "change" or "something new or different". However the degree of importance they attached to it and how it was managed in the organization varied, as described in the following paragraphs.

Types Of innovation

The discussion then proceeded to the implementation of innovation in the women's respective businesses. The most common types of innovation among the respondents appeared to be product or service-related (8 respondents), as evident from the following statements:

Case 1: We've churned out new products beside the chili sauce, which is still our main line. Just recently we started marketing our peanut sauce and ready-to-cook spices.

Case 2: I've experimented with new flavors and designs. English cookies like butter raisins are my latest. Packaging is also very important now as some of my customers buy the cookies to give them away as wedding presents."

Case 5: The latest trends are hair coloring and bonding, as well as palm and nail drawing. So we began to offer those services some time back. Hair styling techniques too have evolved over time... now to dry hair, there's more than just hair dryers. We can even iron hair, so that it's not only dry but also straight!

Administrative innovations (five respondents) such as ha-

ving flexible operating hours also appeared to be quite popular, as suggested below.

Case 4: To me in this line the key thing is being flexible with your operating hours. Usually my customers are only free to see me after they have returned from work or during the weekends. So I find myself adapting to my customers' schedule very often.

Case 9: Being a single mother, I've also had to make a lot of adjustments in terms of striking a balance between the business and my children. For instance, although I have an office, I often have to work from home to accommodate their needs.

The other types of innovation were noticeably less popular such as process: Also we've hired a graduate food technologist as quality controller (Case 1),

Supply: If there are any complaints from the customers, I will immediately call my supplier and cancel other orders from the same batch. Then I will either ask for another supply or switch to another supplier (Case 6).

Market: "Our market, too, has expanded from just the local sundry shops to multinational retail chains such as Carrefour" (Case 1).

Process and supply innovations might not be very relevant because the majority of the women were in low-technology industries. On the other hand, the lack of market innovation could reflect: one, the women's reluctance to venture too far from their families, and 2, the characteristics of services which make it difficult to package and distribute them.

Common problems in innovation management

When asked about major challenges faced in the implementation of innovation, most of the respondents highlighted human-related problems. Sources of the problem included employees, customers and the entrepreneur herself, as typified by the following responses.

Case 6: Sometimes the staff can be a problem. Most of them are resistant to change. For example, whenever I try to vary their tasks or get them to cross-function one another, they'll kick up a lot of fuss.

Case 8: I am always afraid that the customers won't like it. Just the other day, we stopped using the old type of tea leaves because we found out that they contained too much colouring... some of the customers demanded that we continued using them because the colour looked more genuine!

Case 10: My own limited capacity as a human being. I think being a woman has something to do with it. We tire

out more easily than men. And we have more family commitments. There's only so much that I can do in 24 h.

Based on the following response there was also evidence of financial constraints, which reflected the small-size of most women-owned businesses. According to case 1, Our greatest constraint is lack of personal capital. Suppose I can apply for more loans but then what if it doesn't work out? Then I'll end up with losses as well as more loans to repay.

Interestingly, although the respondent knew that there were external sources of fund such as government agencies, her reluctance to apply for loans indicated an aversion towards financial risks.

Typology of female entrepreneur-leaders

Based on their description of how innovation was perceived and managed, as well as how certain problems were overcome, four distinct styles of female leadership were identified. These styles, referred here as the "Mother", the "Teacher", the "Boss" and the "Chameleon", are described as follows.

The "mother"

This style reflects a family-oriented approach in the management of business innovation. The 4 women who fall into this category, namely Cases 2, 7, 8 and 9, view their employees and other stakeholders as their extended families. They are extremely protective of others, and often get involved in the personal affairs of those they perceive to be under their care. These women frequently use phrases such as "help each other out like brothers and sisters", "they respect me like their own mother", and "I scold them if they do anything wrong".

In their organizations, innovation is often treated with caution. Each time the entrepreneur decides to embark on a new project, she tries it out herself first. When she is absolutely sure of its success, she demonstrates in detail to others how exactly she wants things to be done and takes great care to minimize the chances of failure. Consider the following statement by Case 8, I will try out the new recipe several times and when I am completely satisfied, I will show my girls how to do it. Otherwise, they won't have a clue whatsoever, and end up putting too little or too much of everything.

She also has very little reservation about asking for help and personal opinions from suppliers and customers. According to Case 2, she often borrows women's magazines from her customers and looks up the creativity section to learn about the latest packaging designs. While for Case 7: When I want to get information about my competitors, I will ask my supplier who also delivers material to the other stores. Like for instance, what type of cloth they use, the quantity of order and the price they pay for it. Then I will decide whether I want to follow suit or not.

The “teacher”

The style displayed by cases 1 and 10 closely approximates that of an educationist. The women believe in the good of academic qualification, training and continuous upgrading of skill and technology. Case 1 tells of her latest recruit, a Chemistry graduate, who is hired as her food technologist and quality controller. And case 10 apologises at the outset of the interview that she only has an hour before having to rush off to Singapore for a workshop on childhood education.

The women have a very open attitude towards the learning process, and regards mistakes as a natural part of it. They encourage their employees to try out new things on their own and the organizations often develop new ideas by trial-and-error.

Computerisation and automation are integrated within the process flow to improve quality and maintain standards. They even educate their customers on the benefits of innovation.

As stated by case 10: I tell the parents what new modules we have, and why their children should enroll in a particular module. I remember a girl who had a natural gift for music. I suggested to her parents that she should try out our piano lessons. They were reluctant at first because they wanted her to concentrate on the academic stuff but I convinced them that in this age academic excellence alone is not enough. They relented in the end, and now the girl is already in Standard 3, every time they bump into me, they can never thank me enough for introducing piano to their child.

The “boss”

This particular style, which is adopted by cases 5 and 6, describes the entrepreneur’s emphasis on the formalization of innovation. Novelties are adopted as official business targets tied to the employees’ performance evaluation and remuneration packages. According to case 5: I give incentives to my staff if they are willing to be flexible about their schedule... when I promote someone I take into consideration their ability to master the latest styles and trends.

Instructions are given in a precise and orderly manner. As narrated by case 5, most of the time they know exactly what’s expected of them. As long as I give clear instructions, they will carry them out accordingly. Especially when I have to leave the shop on some errands, I will write down my instructions on a piece of paper and put it up on the wall.

Case 6 relates of her initial difficulty to get her employees to be cross-functional but says that with persistent assertiveness the problem is gradually ironed out, my workers are mostly immigrants so they have special requirements, especially in terms of work permits, accommodation and transportation. I make sure they are well looked after and I expect them to carry out their jobs

well. Otherwise, I will terminate their services and ask for replacements.

She also stresses the need for implementing changes systematically, when I introduce a new material, I will record the manufacturing batch number. Then I will track its movement until the point of consumption. This way, I can detect problems as they are happening and solve them immediately instead of having to rework finished products.

The “chameleon”

This style reflects the entrepreneur’s tendency to be situational. She believes in adopting different approaches to different individuals and circumstances. According to her, to be effective an entrepreneur needs to understand the exact needs and wants of various customers and strive to fulfill each in many different ways. Innovation is perceived as merely a means to an end, and not something which should be actively encouraged.

Case 3 says she visits government and business clients with 2 different sets of product catalogue, because she knows that each has a different budget. The private companies usually have a much smaller budget than the government. So they’ll go just for the basic product. A government institution will ask for the additional frills as well. For instance if they are purchasing a fax machine, they’ll go for the papers and cartridges too.”

Therefore her style is very much dependent on the type of customer she is dealing with at any particular time. For certain segments, new products or services are continuously introduced. For others, innovation is not worth pursuing simply because the budget will not allow for it.

In the case of case 4, she carries products from 4 parent companies and adjusts her presentation package and style according to the customer, take health supplements, for instance, there are people who prefer company A’s products and there are those who like company B’s. So I carry both and promote each accordingly.

She does not see anything wrong with the practice because she is not legally bound to any one of them. Also according to her, not everyone welcomes innovation as many Malaysians prefer to stick with the tried-and-tested.

Conclusion

As the study was intended to examine female and cross-cultural perspectives in innovation management, the following conclusions are organized in 2 sub-sections.

Female perspectives in innovation

In general, the study has found some empirical support for researchers who have argued for further discourse in

women-related studies. Particularly when discussing women entrepreneurs, scholars have criticized the normal practice of comparing women and men on male terms and then making conclusions based on those biased comparisons (Bruni et al., 2004). Thus, it is hoped that this study can provide the impetus for greater debate and reforms in female entrepreneurship research.

The findings show that existing typologies of management style (Roberts et al., 1989; Damanpour, 1991; Zhao, 2005; De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007) do not adequately explain the female perspective in innovation. For one thing, dimensions such as transformational versus transactional, participation and employee-orientation do not emphasize enough the importance of stakeholders other than employees to women entrepreneurs. As evidenced in the study, women find relationships and networking critical in the start-up phase as well as to the long-term growth of the business. This is consistent with the observations made by previous researchers (Al-Riyami et al., 2002; Ong and Sieh, 2003; McClelland et al., 2005; Farr-Wharton and Brunetto, 2006; Lee, 2007). Hence the proposed typology is developed to take into greater consideration the women's relationships with their families, customers, suppliers, and the society at large.

Secondly, existing typologies fail to consider specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs such as single motherhood, limited physical stamina and lack of capital. In contrast, the current study acknowledges that these are genuine female concerns and that women entrepreneurs have to devise specific strategies to cope with these challenges. In other words, while existing typologies may be applied to entrepreneurs in general, the current one has been developed to take into consideration specific female characteristics and their response to environmental stimuli. For instance, it is hard to see how any of the existing styles can explain the way case 9 manages innovation, when it is her single motherhood which influences her choice of strategies such as flexibility in work premise and schedule.

On the types of innovation, current findings suggest that women entrepreneurs too operationalise their innovations according to the 6 general categories identified earlier, that is product, service, supply, market, process and administrative innovations (Damanpour, 1991; Johanessen et al., 2001). However, market, supply and process innovations seem less popular - again apparently due to specific female business characteristics in Malaysia such as low technology usage, high service-orientation and high family-orientation (Ariffin, 1994; Ong and Sieh, 2003; Ndubisi and Kahraman, 2005).

Cross-cultural perspectives in innovation

The current study supports earlier observations on the popularity of social networking among women entrepreneurs in collectivistic societies (Al-Riyami et al., 2002;

Ong and Sieh, 2003; McClelland et al., 2005; Ming-Yen et al., 2007; Tambunan, 2009). Unlike many of their western counterparts who emphasize the importance of business associations and other formal networks (McClelland et al., 2005; Farr-Wharton and Brunetto, 2006; Lee, 2007), the women in this study have highlighted the contribution of informal social networks such as neighbours, religious communities and political connections. The significance of religion in particular seems to support the study by Ismail and Joned (1999) which finds that Malaysian women entrepreneurs identify strongly with religious values.

The concept of filial piety as a primary motive for business start-up is believed to be a strong Chinese characteristic, and is consistent with previous deductions on the high power distance index in many societies in Asia (Hofstede, 1980; Chow, 2005). The prevalence of copreneurship is also striking. The idea that Malaysian men are comfortable working as equal partners to their wives is heart-warming and augurs well for the future of female entrepreneurship in the country. It also suggests that Malaysian women have been quite successful in exploiting copreneurship as a viable route towards personal growth and family wellbeing. For the women, copreneurship offers multiple advantages in terms of greater synergy at the workplace, improved family relationships and an opportunity to develop a family business which may be passed on the next generation.

At a deeper level, the results imply that some women entrepreneurs may assume traditional roles such as "mother" and "teacher" so that the society will be more tolerant and accepting towards their leadership. This may be explained by the theory of social conditioning (Best and Williams, 1997; Ismail and Ibrahim, 2008) which argues that because society conditions women to be gentle and nurturing, they behave as such. Bruni et al. (2004) acknowledge that women often have to resort to alternative management styles possibly because social expectation makes it difficult for them to wield formal authority in organizations. Having said that, there are women entrepreneurs (as typified by the "boss" personality) who are not afraid to exercise their formal authority. This is quite likely in the Malaysian society which is only slightly masculine (Hofstede, 1998) and thus allows some degree of gender equality (Ahmad, 1998).

The "chameleon", too, exhibits a woman's adaptive response to the environment. However, in this case, instead of cultural values the stimuli appear to be market characteristics such as local needs and wants. This particular style also highlights the fact that entrepreneurs in developing countries may have a perception of innovation which does not conform to western norms. While innovation is consistently encouraged in western societies (Kanter, 1984; Neely et al., 2001; Zhao, 2005), in developing nations there is a view that it is not always worth pursuing, as indicated earlier by case 3.

From another point of view, the study is expected to help trainers develop better training programs particularly for women entrepreneurs. Having understood that innovation is very much related to interpersonal relationships within and beyond the organization's boundaries, entrepreneurship training should also incorporate modules on cultural values as well as communication and social skills. In Malaysia, where entrepreneurship training programs are mainly concerned with the development of business plans, this proposal requires changes even at policy level since it also involves retraining the trainers or recruiting new ones. In particular there ought to be an increased effort to rope in more female trainers due to their greater understanding of the unique characteristics and needs of women entrepreneurs.

Suggestions for future research

Of course, due to the limited sample size, it would be presumptuous to conclude that the study's findings can adequately explain female management styles in every setting. As management style is highly cultural, different cultural groups are expected to have different tendencies towards a particular style. For instance, in highly masculine societies such as Japan (Hofstede, 1998), women managers may only adopt the "mother" and "teacher" styles while the "boss" may be a clear exception.

Even within the Malaysian environment, cultural differences among the various ethnic groups suggest that certain styles may be more predominant in a particular ethnic community. It is also important to determine which style is more effective for women entrepreneurs. In other words, is the organization more innovative when she behaves in a specific manner? To make reasonable conclusions, obviously more data is required. Hence quantitative studies involving larger samples of women entrepreneurs are recommended to ascertain the following patterns:

- i) The relationship between culture and management style.
- ii) The effect of management style on rate of innovation.
- lii) The effect of other characteristics such as age, type and length of business, education, etc. on rate of innovation.

Other findings such as the importance of filial piety and copreneurship have raised further questions on female entrepreneurship in non-western settings. Although filial piety has been identified here as a reason for going into business, it does raise concern on the rights of Malaysian women to determine the course of their lives. The response given by case 6 on the subject of success, and her narrative of her early days in the business, imply to a certain degree a sense of self-repression by a woman coming from a highly paternalistic culture. Additionally, while filial piety may be effective as a start-up motive, it is

not necessarily a positive factor in the ongoing performance of the business.

On copreneurship, operational matters such as decision-making, power-sharing and division of tasks are of particular interest. Researchers may wish to examine specifically the effect of centralisation (versus decentrisation) on job satisfaction and business performance. Also worth investigating is the issue of corporate governance including the mechanisms used by copreneurs to separate business and domestic affairs, as well as the effectiveness of each respective mechanism, and their succession strategies.

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