



A Phenomenological Exploration of Social Entrepreneurs' Experiences in Competency-Based Entrepreneurship Training for Business Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship, particularly social entrepreneurship, plays a critical role in fostering economic growth and addressing societal challenges. While much has been studied about the technical skills gained through entrepreneurship training, less is known about the subjective experiences of social entrepreneurs and how these experiences influence the sustainability of their businesses. Existing literature often overlooks the personal and emotional aspects of entrepreneurship, focusing instead on quantitative outcomes such as financial performance. This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by exploring the lived experiences of social entrepreneurs participating in competency-based entrepreneurship training programs. Using a phenomenological approach, this research examines how entrepreneurs make sense of their training and its impact on both their personal growth and business sustainability. In-depth interviews with 12 social entrepreneurs revealed that while the training boosted entrepreneurial confidence and social responsibility, its effectiveness in promoting long-term business sustainability was often limited by external factors, such as market conditions and resource availability. These challenges should be considered when evaluating the overall impact of training programs. These findings highlight the importance of designing training programs that are adaptable to local contexts and address both technical and social dimensions of entrepreneurship. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding entrepreneurship training and offers valuable implications for future research and program design.



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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has long been recognized as a key driver of economic development and social transformation, particularly in underserved communities. The growth of social entrepreneurship, where the primary goal is not just profit generation but also creating social value, has gained significant attention in recent years (Chow dkk., 2021). This phenomenon has emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional business models, where economic success is often divorced from social impact. Social entrepreneurs aim to address pressing societal issues, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability, through innovative and sustainable business practices. However, despite the increasing emphasis on social entrepreneurship, there is still limited understanding of how training programs designed to enhance entrepreneurial competencies impact the long-term sustainability of such businesses.

The relevance of exploring this phenomenon lies in its potential to shape not only economic landscapes but also the social fabric of communities. The experience of participating in competency-based entrepreneurship training programs holds significant value for social entrepreneurs, as it can influence their decision-making processes, entrepreneurial confidence, and overall business strategies. These programs are designed to equip individuals with the skills necessary to run successful businesses, but they also offer deeper, subjective experiences that can shape how entrepreneurs

perceive their role within their communities and their broader social responsibility. Understanding these experiences is essential to capturing the nuanced ways in which training affects both the business and personal growth of social entrepreneurs.

This research underscores the need to explore the meaning behind these experiences, particularly from a phenomenological perspective. The lived experiences of social entrepreneurs are rich with insights that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods or generalized frameworks. Instead, the subjective nature of their entrepreneurial journey requires an in-depth exploration of the feelings, challenges, and transformations they undergo. Phenomenology is particularly suited for this inquiry because it allows for a deep examination of the personal and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurs' experiences, which are essential for understanding their business sustainability. This study aims to delve into the personal and social dimensions of entrepreneurship, offering a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of their training experiences and how these experiences contribute to their businesses' sustainability (Rahiem, 2021). By focusing on these personal narratives, this research seeks to highlight the critical role of competency-based training in shaping the future of social entrepreneurship.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena, particularly in social entrepreneurship, has become a crucial area of study. Understanding how social entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of their businesses and training programs offers valuable insights into the intersection of personal growth and professional development. These experiences are not merely about the technical acquisition of skills but also about how entrepreneurs perceive, interpret, and respond to their environments. This nuanced understanding of human experience can only be fully captured through qualitative methods, particularly phenomenology, which focuses on the meanings and essences of lived experiences.

However, exploring these meanings is not without its challenges. One major methodological issue is the difficulty of capturing deep, subjective experiences through traditional quantitative approaches. While surveys and statistical analyses provide valuable data on outcomes, they fail to account for the personal and emotional aspects of entrepreneurship that influence decisions and outcomes. These dimensions are vital for understanding the real impact of training programs and how they resonate with participants (Lipira dkk., 2019). Quantitative data cannot explain how participants emotionally connect with the knowledge they gain, nor can it provide insight into the social and cultural factors that shape their entrepreneurial journey. As a result, traditional methods often fall short in fully encapsulating the complexity of personal transformation that occurs within the context of entrepreneurial training.

Given these limitations, many previous studies that attempt to assess the effectiveness of entrepreneurship training through surveys or performance metrics are insufficient for truly understanding the essence of the phenomenon. To gain a holistic view of how training programs influence social entrepreneurs, it is necessary to delve into the subjective, lived experiences of the participants themselves. Phenomenological research offers the appropriate framework for this inquiry, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individual perceptions, emotions, and transformations that occur during and after participation in competency-based training programs. This method provides a more accurate and complete understanding of how social entrepreneurs make sense of their training and apply it to their businesses in meaningful ways.

Current research on entrepreneurship training, especially in the context of social entrepreneurship, often relies on practical, outcome-focused approaches. These methods, such as performance metrics and quantitative surveys, provide useful data on the success rates and tangible outcomes of training programs (Zahodne, 2021). However, these approaches have significant limitations in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences that drive entrepreneurial behavior and decision-making. While they can measure business growth or financial success, they fail to explore how participants internalize and apply the knowledge gained, or how they emotionally and psychologically process their entrepreneurial journeys. The reliance on these generalizable metrics results in a limited understanding of the true impact of such training programs on social entrepreneurs' personal development and their businesses' sustainability.

This gap in understanding underscores the need for an alternative approach. A phenomenological method, with its focus on the lived experiences and meanings of participants, provides an opportunity to gain a more holistic and nuanced understanding of how training influences social entrepreneurs. By exploring the personal, emotional, and social dimensions of entrepreneurship, phenomenology allows for a deeper investigation into how entrepreneurs make sense of their training and how it shapes their business practices and social impact. This approach moves beyond surface-level data to reveal the essence of what it means to be a social entrepreneur, offering valuable insights into the personal transformations that often precede business success. Therefore, adopting a phenomenological approach is essential for filling this knowledge gap and providing a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the role of entrepreneurship training in social entrepreneurship.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of entrepreneurship training, particularly focusing on its outcomes and the skills acquired by participants. Much of the existing literature has concentrated on quantitative measures of success, such as business growth, financial stability, and market performance. However, few studies have delved into the subjective, lived experiences of entrepreneurs, particularly those in social entrepreneurship. Theories related to social entrepreneurship and adult learning have often been employed to explain the impact of training programs, but these theories rarely address the personal, emotional, and cognitive transformations that entrepreneurs undergo. Studies like those by Cetrez dkk. (2022) have highlighted the importance of understanding the human side of entrepreneurship but have not fully explored the deep, personal meanings attached to the training process itself.

The approach taken in this study uses phenomenology to address the gaps identified in the existing literature. By adopting a phenomenological framework, the research aims to explore the essence of the experiences of social entrepreneurs participating in competency-based training programs. This method allows for a rich, in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and how they make sense of their training, which is essential for understanding the true impact of these programs (O'Rourke dkk., 2021). Unlike traditional methods, phenomenology enables the study to uncover the personal and emotional aspects of entrepreneurship, providing insights that are not captured by surface-level data. Therefore, phenomenology is the ideal approach for understanding the subjective experiences that shape entrepreneurs' behaviors, decisions, and business outcomes.

This article is structured to first introduce the context of the research, including an overview of the phenomenon under investigation. The methodology section follows, where the phenomenological approach is detailed, explaining the data collection and analysis processes. The findings are presented in the results section, where the key themes identified through analysis are discussed in relation to the research questions. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the results, highlighting their implications for theory and practice in social entrepreneurship training. By providing a comprehensive look at the experiences of social entrepreneurs, this research aims to contribute valuable insights into the ways training programs can be improved to better support long-term business sustainability.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of social entrepreneurs who have participated in competency-based entrepreneurship training programs. The decision to employ phenomenology stems from its focus on understanding the essence of individual experiences, making it ideal for addressing the research question (Sumbulah, 2019). Phenomenology emphasizes subjective experiences and seeks to uncover the meanings participants attach to their experiences. In this study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was chosen to examine the in-depth personal perspectives of participants regarding their entrepreneurial journey post-training. IPA is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences and the impact these experiences have on their personal and professional lives.

Participants

The study engaged a purposive sample of 12 social entrepreneurs who had completed a competency-based entrepreneurship training program within the past year. The inclusion criteria for participants were: (1) individuals who had actively participated in a recognized entrepreneurship training program; (2) entrepreneurs who identified themselves as social entrepreneurs, with a focus on creating sustainable businesses with social impact; and (3) participants who were engaged in the operation of their business at the time of the study (Liddle dkk., 2022). Exclusion criteria included individuals who had not yet established a business post-training or those whose businesses were not intended to generate social value. The participants were diverse in terms of gender, age, and business type, with an average age of 34 years. This diversity helped to capture a range of experiences and perspectives relevant to the research. The participants were primarily selected from a program focused on social entrepreneurship, and their regional diversity adds depth to the findings, though the generalizability to other contexts may be limited.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in person at locations convenient for the participants, such as their business premises or community centers. The interviews were designed to explore participants' experiences during the entrepreneurship training and its effects on their business practices and sustainability. A semi-structured interview guide was used, which allowed for flexibility in exploring topics that emerged during the conversation. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. To ensure a comfortable environment, participants were given time to express their thoughts freely, and the interviews were conducted in a relaxed and confidential setting. Audio recordings were made with participants' consent, and field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which focuses on identifying and interpreting themes within participants' accounts. IPA was chosen because it allows for a detailed exploration of how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. The process began with transcribing the audio recordings verbatim, followed by multiple readings of the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. The data were then coded, and emergent themes were identified through systematic categorization (shoib dkk., 2022). Themes were analyzed in relation to the broader social context of entrepreneurship and the participants' personal experiences. NVivo software was used to assist with organizing the data and identifying patterns, although the focus remained on the manual analysis to maintain a nuanced understanding of the data. The final step involved interpreting the themes and linking them to the research question, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee, and the research adhered to international ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent in writing, acknowledging their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The confidentiality of participants was ensured by anonymizing their personal information and storing data securely (Soehl, 2020). Additionally, the study ensured that all participants understood the purpose of the research and how their data would be used, in compliance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

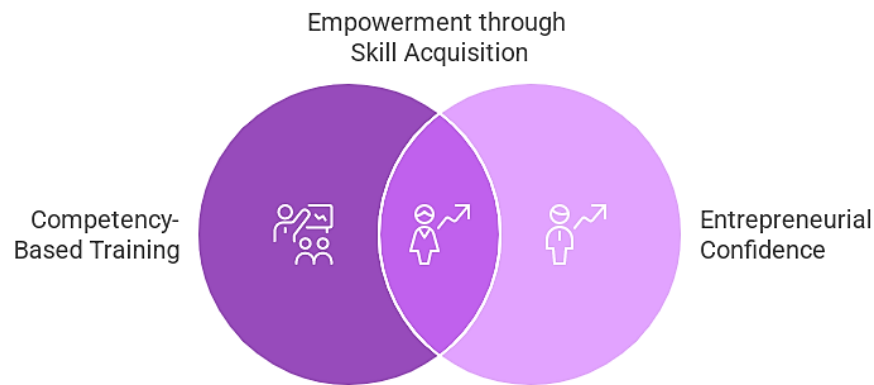
RESULTS

The Impact of Competency-Based Training on Entrepreneurial Confidence

The participants consistently expressed that competency-based entrepreneurship training significantly influenced their entrepreneurial confidence. They shared how specific skills learned during the training, such as financial management, marketing strategies, and leadership development, empowered them to take more risks in their business ventures. One participant, Zainab, emphasized,

"Before the training, I lacked confidence in handling finances for my business. Now, I feel I have a better grasp of how to manage my funds, which has made me more confident in my decisions." This statement highlights a recurring theme in the data: the acquisition of practical, actionable knowledge that leads to increased self-efficacy in entrepreneurship. Other participants echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing the role of these practical skills in overcoming initial barriers to starting and sustaining a business.

Empowerment through Skill Acquisition



This theme was aligned with the research question concerning how competency-based training impacts social entrepreneurs' sense of empowerment. The participants expressed that the skills gained through training not only boosted their confidence but also increased their ability to execute their business strategies more effectively. This empowerment through skill acquisition was fundamental in enabling them to overcome initial business challenges and make more informed decisions.

Challenges in Implementing Training Knowledge in Rural Contexts

While many participants appreciated the training, there were notable challenges in applying what they had learned, especially in rural or underdeveloped areas. These challenges were largely contextual, with participants citing limitations such as poor access to resources, lack of networking opportunities, and insufficient local market demand. Ali, a participant from a rural area, stated, "The training was useful, but the real difficulty comes from the environment. In my village, there aren't enough customers, and not all the skills I learned can be applied here." This theme indicates a significant gap between the theoretical aspects of the training and the practical constraints of the local environment. It suggests that while the competencies gained during training were perceived as valuable, the participants' ability to implement these skills effectively was often hindered by external factors such as geographical isolation and economic limitations.

Social Entrepreneurial Mindset Shift

A striking theme emerged regarding the shift in mindset toward social entrepreneurship. Several participants shared that the training not only equipped them with the technical aspects of entrepreneurship but also broadened their perspective on the role of business in societal development. Fatima, for instance, noted, "I have always wanted to make a difference, and now I understand that a successful business doesn't just make profits—it should also give back to the community." This shift reflects an increased awareness of the ethical and social dimensions of entrepreneurship, especially in the context of rural and underserved areas. The participants' growing sense of responsibility towards their communities was one of the most notable findings of the study.

Long-Term Sustainability and Adaptation

When asked about the long-term impact of the training, participants were divided. While some expressed optimism about the sustainability of their businesses, others felt uncertain about their long-term survival due to the volatile nature of their local economies. Ibrahim, another participant, explained, "The training helped me grow my business, but I'm not sure it will last if the market

doesn't improve. I hope the knowledge I gained will help me adapt to future changes." This theme underscores a crucial point in the research: while the training provided valuable skills, the long-term viability of the businesses was seen as contingent on external economic and market conditions. The adaptability of the businesses, and by extension the entrepreneurs, was seen as key to their survival in a rapidly changing environment.

The findings highlight the complexity of applying entrepreneurship training in rural and socially-driven contexts. The training was largely beneficial in boosting entrepreneurial confidence, but the practical challenges of operating within rural and underdeveloped areas were prominent. Additionally, the shift toward social entrepreneurship demonstrated the broader impact of the training, suggesting that it not only enhanced business skills but also fostered a more socially conscious entrepreneurial mindset. However, concerns about long-term sustainability and market adaptability remain central to the participants' experiences.

DISCUSSION

Key Findings Summary

The study reveals that competency-based entrepreneurship training significantly influences the entrepreneurial confidence, social responsibility, and sustainability of social entrepreneurs' businesses (Tanyanyiwa, 2019). Participants described how the practical knowledge gained from the training enhanced their decision-making and business management skills, while also fostering a deeper sense of social mission. However, the training was also found to present challenges when applied in rural or underdeveloped settings, where market and resource limitations constrained the full application of acquired skills. These challenges, particularly in rural areas, need further exploration to understand how training can be adapted to overcome these limitations.

Contribution to the Research Question

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into how competency-based entrepreneurship training shapes the subjective experiences of social entrepreneurs. This study answers the research question by demonstrating that while the training boosts entrepreneurial confidence and fosters a social entrepreneurial mindset, its impact on business sustainability is contingent upon external factors such as market conditions and access to resources (Terrana dkk., 2022). The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the training not only equips entrepreneurs with necessary skills but also transforms their perceptions of their roles within their communities. This transformation emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive approach to entrepreneurship training, one that addresses both the technical skills and the broader social and environmental challenges faced by social entrepreneurs.

Relationship with Existing Literature and Theory

The findings align with existing literature on the importance of entrepreneurial confidence and the role of training in enhancing business skills (Rahman, 2022). These studies also highlight the role of social responsibility in shaping the behaviors and goals of social entrepreneurs. However, this study adds a nuanced perspective by emphasizing that the perceived impact of the training extends beyond business skills to include a significant shift in the participants' social and ethical outlook. While previous studies have largely focused on quantifiable outcomes like business performance and market growth, the current research enriches the discussion by incorporating the personal, subjective experiences that influence entrepreneurs' decisions and long-term business strategies. Additionally, the challenges faced in rural settings corroborate findings by Phillips, (2021), who identified contextual limitations in implementing entrepreneurial training in resource-constrained environments. This study, however, further deepens the understanding by highlighting the direct impact of these limitations on the entrepreneurs' ability to apply what they have learned, stressing the need for training programs to adapt to local contexts.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners in the field of social entrepreneurship. From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the role of training in social entrepreneurship, particularly in understanding how such training influences the personal and professional growth of social entrepreneurs. The study highlights the importance of not only equipping entrepreneurs with business-related skills but also fostering a deeper understanding of their social responsibility and ethical obligations (Simpson, 2021). Practically, the findings suggest that entrepreneurship training programs should be designed with more flexibility to adapt to the specific social, cultural, and economic contexts in which participants operate. This could involve incorporating contextual knowledge and local market conditions into the training curriculum, ensuring that participants can effectively apply their learning within their unique environments. For social entrepreneurs, these findings emphasize the importance of creating a balance between technical competencies and the broader social mission they aim to achieve.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. One key limitation is the relatively small sample size, which was drawn from a specific group of social entrepreneurs who had participated in competency-based training. This limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of social entrepreneurs who may not share similar backgrounds or training experiences. Additionally, the study's focus on qualitative data, while rich in detail, means that it cannot provide statistical evidence of the direct impact of training on business performance. The contextual factors explored in this research, such as local market conditions and resource availability, may not apply universally to all social entrepreneurship settings, suggesting the need for further research in different geographic regions and cultural contexts. Therefore, while the findings offer important insights, they should be interpreted with caution, and future research should seek to replicate and expand upon these results.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore how different types of entrepreneurship training (e.g., digital, leadership, financial management) impact the social entrepreneurship sector. Additionally, future studies could examine how the specific challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in rural or underdeveloped areas can be addressed through tailored training programs. Another important area for future research is the long-term impact of such training on business sustainability and community development. This study focused on the immediate experiences of entrepreneurs after completing training, but a longitudinal study would provide more insight into how the training's effects evolve over time. By addressing these gaps, future research could further refine the understanding of the role of training in social entrepreneurship and contribute to the development of more effective training programs that support long-term success and social impact.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of social entrepreneurs who participated in competency-based entrepreneurship training programs, focusing on how these experiences influence their business practices and sustainability. The findings revealed that while the training enhanced participants' entrepreneurial confidence and social responsibility, its impact on long-term business sustainability was contingent on external factors like market conditions and resource availability. By employing a phenomenological approach, this research addressed a gap in the existing literature, which often overlooks the subjective, lived experiences of entrepreneurs in favor of quantitative metrics. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how training programs can be improved to better support the personal and professional growth of social entrepreneurs. Future research could extend this work by exploring the long-term effects of such training, particularly through longitudinal studies that track the evolution of businesses over time. Additionally, studies should focus on how training programs can be tailored to fit different socio-economic contexts, such as rural versus urban settings or developed versus developing economies. Such studies would provide valuable insights into the

adaptability of training programs and refine the methods for enhancing their effectiveness in fostering sustainable social businesses.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial or personal relationships that could influence the research process or outcomes have been identified.

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