

Examining Female Entrepreneurs' Management Style: An Application of a Relational Frame

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Abstract:

This paper reports the results of a qualitative analysis of female entrepreneurs' accounts of their role in their organizations using Relational Theory as the analytical frame. Content analysis of focus group comments indicated that the women used a relational approach in working with employees and clients. Relational skills included preserving, mutual empowering, achieving, and creating team. Findings demonstrate that Relational Theory is a useful frame for identifying and explicating women entrepreneurs' interactive style in their own businesses. Implications and future directions for research are discussed.

KEY WORDS: leadership, management style, relational theory, women entrepreneurs

Article:

The business-society interface is characterized by ongoing ethical tensions, for example the dialectic between socially responsible action and business performance. Davis (1973) suggests that business should "accomplish social benefits along with the traditional economic gains which the firm seeks" (p. 312). Recent research suggests that women may use a different conceptual model than has traditionally been employed in large organizations in mediating between these two, sometimes conflicting, goals. In particular, women may adopt a more relational approach (Miller, 1976) in interactions with employees and clients. This paper explores the leadership/management style described by women entrepreneurs in their own organizations. The independent small business setting provides an opportunity to examine women's management style. In their own companies, women are unencumbered by the cultural influences and behavioral expectations regarding appropriate management and interpersonal styles that exist in large organizations.

Small business has been the major engine of growth in the U.S. economy in the past decade. Women have been starting their own businesses in record numbers in recent years. Women-owned businesses employ more workers than the Fortune 500 companies worldwide (National Foundation for Women Business Owners and Dun and Bradstreet Information Services, 1995). The women-owned business setting provides a unique opportunity to study how women run their organizations, a practice that has received little attention. Understanding how women run their businesses may provide an alternative paradigm to the traditional, male-dominated, hierarchical, command and control approach common in many business organizations. This paper presents a study of female entrepreneurs who described their roles in their own businesses. The findings

provide insight into the choices the participants make about their management of relationships with employees and clients. This insight illuminates the ethical perspective driving the entrepreneur's management decisions concerning their businesses. In the next section, background about the gendered nature of organizations will be presented. Then the literature on women's leadership style and on women entrepreneurs' management skills and strategies will be reviewed, followed by a report of an exploratory analysis of women entrepreneurs' relational management style in their organizations.

Sociological research has highlighted the gendered nature of organizations (Baron, Davis-Blake and Bielby, 1986; Bielby and Baron, 1987; Burrell and Hearn, 1989; Hearn and Parkin, 1988; Hearn, Sheppard, Tancred-Sherriff and Burrell, 1989; Martin, 1991; see Martin, 1993 for a review). Historically, there has been a separation of work and family spheres where men predominate in business and government, the public sphere, while women predominate at home, the private sphere. Over time, the private and public domains have become gendered spheres, with masculine values and skills governing in the public and feminine skills and values in the private sphere. Thus, men have defined the nature of organizations and work in terms of their experience (Acker, 1992). Because males developed and built organizations, their cultures reflect male values and development (Mills, 1989). Recent economic changes include a more diverse and highly educated U.S. workforce, accelerating rate of change, and growing reliance on work teams to address increasingly complex business issues. In this context, the traditional command and control management style is no longer effective in many organizational settings (Kanter, 1994; Mohrman, Cohen and Mohrman, 1995; Rosener, 1995; Senge, 1990). More recently, skills heretofore utilized predominantly in the private domain (and used primarily by women) have been shown to be effective in the workplace (Fletcher, 1998; Jacques, 1993; Weisinger, 1998).

Previous research on women's leadership style has shown that while men and women lead in similar ways, there are also demonstrated differences in style by gender. Women have been shown to be transformational as opposed to transactional (Bass, 1991), and more participative and democratic in their leadership style than are many men (Eagley and Johnson, 1990; Grant, 1988; Helgeson, 1990; Loden, 1985; Rosener, 1990). Women also tend to have more highly developed interpersonal skills (Brenner, Tomkiewicz and Schein, 1989; Frank, 1988; Heilman, Block, Martell and Simon, 1989). For example, Rosener (1995) describes women's leadership style as interactive, emphasizing consensus building, comfortable with ambiguity, and sharing power and information. She has found that women leaders tend to encourage multidirectional feedback, develop reward systems that value group as well as individual contributions and foster empowerment of employees at all levels. Bancroft (1995) reported that women adopt a holistic, process-oriented approach that is inclusive and collaborative. Calas and Smircich (1992) posit that while women have been compared to men, women's experience and their alternative ways of thinking (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986), hence women's voice, has been largely ignored in organizational research. Organizations created and built by women may reflect their values and socialization. This study investigates how entrepreneurial women define their role within their own companies.

Research on women entrepreneurs' management style and strategies

Women business owners' skills and strategies have been the subject of numerous recent studies. Previous research on female entrepreneurs has examined their perceptions of entrepreneurship (Hisrich, Koiranen and Hyrski, 1996), entrepreneurial traits (Sexton and Bowman-Upton, 1990), gender and ownership patterns (Rosa and Hamilton, 1994), and career selection (Matthews and Moser, 1996; Scherer, Brodzinski and Weibe, 1990). Additional research has examined the effect of education on ownership (Dolinsky, Caputo, Parsumarty and Quazi, 1993; Hisrich and Brush, 1983), work-home role conflict (Stoner, Hartman and Arora, 1990), and networking patterns (Aldrich, Reese and Dubini, 1989; Andre, 1992; Carsrud, Gaglio and Olm, 1986; Cromie and Birley, 1992). Other studies have investigated entrepreneurial financial strategies (Buttner and Rosen, 1992), advertising strategies (Van Auken, Rittenburg, Doran and Hsieh, 1994), business problems (Hisrich and Brush, 1984; Hisrich and O'Brien, 1981), discrimination in the loan application process (Buttner and Rosen, 1988, 1989; Fay and Williams, 1993; Riding and Swift, 1990), business survival and growth (Srinivasan, Woo and Cooper, 1994), business performance (Allen and Carter, 1996; Chaganti and Parasuraman, 1996; Lerner, Brush and Hisrich, 1997), and values and strategies in male-dominated industries (Olson and Currie, 1992). Many of these studies compared male and female entrepreneurs and used instruments developed from research on samples of male entrepreneurs. Therefore the findings do not explicate the management styles of female entrepreneurs (Brush, 1992; Hurley, 1991). In addition, while these studies may clarify the ways in which female and male entrepreneurs are different, the research fails to elucidate the unique dimensions of women entrepreneurs' enactment of their roles in their organizations.

Only a few studies have focused on women business owners' values and management style which has been described as "feminine" (Chaganti, 1986) and participative (Neider, 1987). Brush (1992, 1997) and Holmquist and Sundin (1988) reported that women entrepreneurs rated social goals highly. In a related vein, Fagenson and Marcus (1991) found that women employees in women-owned businesses gave greater weight to feminine attributes including warmth, being understanding, helpful to others, aware of others' feelings, and kind than did women in male-owned businesses. Two possible explanations come to mind for the employees' different perceptions of female and male business owners' attributes in the Fagenson and Marcus study. One possibility is that the women business owners enacted the entrepreneurial role differently from their male counterparts. Alternately, the female employees may have had greater appreciation of their female bosses' feminine attributes. Research by others suggests the first explanation is more valid (Fletcher, 1998; Jacques, 1993). In Brush's (1997) presentation of the results of a focus group interview of women entrepreneurs, she reported that participants believed that women would be very comfortable in business environments where cooperation and communitarianism are valued, lending additional evidence to the literature that women manage differently from the traditional command and control approach. This paper presents results of an exploratory study designed to give "voice" to women entrepreneurs' conceptions of their roles as managers and leaders in their own businesses.

To avoid the potential problem of confounding the results by analyzing the interview transcripts from a traditional, male-defined approach, a review of the psychology literature was conducted with the objective of identifying a theory based on women's development and socialization. The logic behind this strategy was that such a theoretical approach would be more likely to highlight

the unique dimensions of the women entrepreneurs' approach to managing in their organizations. The literature review yielded Relational Theory, which will be presented next.

Relational theory

Relational Theory (Miller, 1976, 1987, 1988, 1991; Miller and Stiver, 1997) was developed based on the experiences of women and on earlier research on gender-related developmental issues. In a preceding study, Chodorow (1978) found that girls and women develop a sense of connection based on their original relationship with the (similar) mother while boys' (men's) original issue is to separate from their (different) mothers and to become autonomous. In his study of power perceptions, McClelland (1979) found that women tend to define power in terms of the ability to care for and contribute to others' well being. Gilligan (1982) found that women's sense of self and morality are conceived as involving issues of responsibility and care for others and that this self conception includes an appreciation of the context in which events occur, rather than a view of events in isolation. In addition, decisions women make tend to include consideration of the effects of the decision on others involved in the situation.

Miller (1976) theorizes that an inner sense of connection to others is a central organizing feature of women's development. According to relational theory, one's sense of self and worth is grounded in the ability to make and maintain connections with others. In an empirical study of relational theory, Sperberg and Stabb (1998) found that lack of mutuality in women's relationships was associated with depression thus providing support for the conceptualization of Relational Theory. Surrey (1991) posits out that mutual empathy, "being with" others, is experienced as self-enhancing for women (Surrey, 1991, p. 55). A large part of women's life activity involves active participation in the development of others (Miller, 1976). Jordan (1993) argues that creative action occurs through connection and that a greater sense of clarity and confidence is achieved within relationships (as opposed to alone), in effect, a synergistic growth. According to Fletcher and Jacques (1998), relational theory engages an expanded view of work to include enabling and empowering others through sharing of information and through teaching. The theory enacts an expanded definition of "outcome" to include outcomes embedded in others, e.g. their increased knowledge or competence. Skills involved in relational practice include: empathy, authenticity, the ability to connect or build relationships with others' ideas, and openness to being influenced by others' emotional, physical and intellectual reality. Also important is the ability to understand, interpret and use emotional data, and the ability to share information, to admit not knowing, and to affirm others without loss of self-esteem. While based on listening to women's experiences, Relational Theory is not proposed as a theory to explain all women's experience; nor is it applied only to women. It is presented as a model of human growth and development that is an alternative to the masculine bias in mainstream theories of development (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1993; Miller, 1976).

Several studies have identified relational practices in organizations. Rapoport and Bailyn (1996) reported in a study of work practices at three large corporations that employees, particularly women, drew not only on skills and behaviors typical in large organizations, such as rationality, linear thinking, assertiveness and competitiveness, but also those (relational skills) associated with the private, domestic sphere, including collaboration, sharing of information, empathy, and nurturing. These skills contributed to effectiveness and facilitated work accomplishment.

Fletcher (1998) identified ways in which women engineers used relational skills and practices in their work to enhance their effectiveness.

Ballard's ongoing research on women lawyers also indicates that the female partners in her study often report a relational approach to their jobs. In the health care setting, Jacques (1993) examined the way that nurses enact relational practices in the caring for patients through activities that preserved the patients' well-being including empathy, attentiveness to the patients' needs, and involvement in their care. Finally, Weisinger (1998) identifies (relational) skills including the ability to build relationships, empathy, authenticity, mutual empowering, and creating team as keys for enhancing effectiveness at work. The research on Relational Theory is presented in Table I.

Related research in the organizational context further indicates that use of relational practice can enhance effectiveness in organizations. Tsui, Pearce, Porter and Tripoli (1997) found that some organizations employed practices that were relational in nature, including developing a long-term relationship with employees, investing in the employees' career through training, investment in the employee's well-being, mentoring relationships, and the expectation that the employee will be willing to go beyond the narrowly defined tasks associated with the job description. These organizations reported higher levels of performance, citizenship behavior, intentions to stay, attendance, and perceptions of fairness. The companies also reported greater trust among co-workers, more positive employee attitudes, and higher employee commitment than did organizations using non-relational practices. Fondas (1997) in her review of the management literature points out that qualities culturally associated with the feminine, including sharing power and authority, assisting and developing others, and building a connected network of relationships are now appearing in descriptions of ways to enhance managerial effectiveness.

In summary, Relational Theory appears to concisely explain and illustrate developmental experience that underlies the skills and practices used primarily by women across a range of organizational domains. To date, there have been no reported studies of women entrepreneurs' use of relational practices. The purposes of the present study were four-fold: (1) to apply

TABLE I
Major contributors to the development of relational theory and its application

Author(s)	Conclusion
Chodorow (1978)	Females develop a sense of connection based on their original relationship with their mother.
Miller (1976, 1988, 1991)	Theorized that an inner sense of connection is a central organizing dimension of development, particularly for women.
McClelland (1979)	Women tend to define power in terms of care for others.
Gilligan (1982)	Females' social development includes evolution of an ethic of care in making decisions involving others.
Surrey (1991)	Proposes a self-in-relation developmental model for women's growth and connection.
Jordan (1993)	Posits that relational theory is a contextual paradigm, that creative action occurs through connection and that a greater sense of clarity and confidence is achieved through connection.
Jacques (1993)	Nurses use relational skills in caring for patients.
Rappaport and Bailyn (1996)	Employees, especially women, in three large organizations studied used relational skills at work.
Fletcher and Jacques (1998)	Expand the definition or relational practice for workplace application.
Fletcher (1998)	Female engineers used relational skills as part of their jobs.

Relational Theory to an unexplored organizational context: women-owned business, (2) to determine whether Relational Theory would provide a framework for understanding women entrepreneurs' approach to managing their businesses, (3) to expand the entrepreneurship literature regarding women entrepreneurs' style of business management, and (4) to determine whether relational practices utilized by women engineers in Fletcher's (1998) study were also described by women entrepreneurs as part of their repertoire of behaviors used in running their own businesses. Thus, Relational Theory was applied as a "frame" for analyzing women entrepreneurs' comments about their role in their businesses.

METHODOLOGY

Selection criteria for inclusion in the study

The data used in this report was collected as part of a larger study of women entrepreneurs (Moore and Buttner, 1997). Potential participants were identified via a two-step selection process. First, women entrepreneurs were randomly selected from lists of successful entrepreneurs identified by Small Business Development Center directors, were identified as successful entrepreneurs by chapter presidents of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), or were candidates for Entrepreneur of the Year Awards given by the

Chamber of Commerce in their respective cities. Second, each entrepreneur had to meet the following criteria: (1) had previous managerial or professional experience in a large organization, (2) started her own business, (3) being established in her business at least one year, (4) owning at least 50% of her business, and (5) having a major managerial role in her business at the time of the study.

Procedure

This study was exploratory, designed to capture the women's "voice" as they spoke about their role in their businesses. As such, it was important not to impose a research bias; a focus group format was used with a structured interview protocol. The entrepreneurs participated in focus group interviews in which they discussed their experiences operating their own businesses. One topic discussed was the way they enacted their role as leader in their organizations. The interviews were videotaped and transcribed. Since Relational Theory pertains to the definition of work in relation to others, responses which concerned working with subordinates and clients/customers in the transcripts were content analyzed for this report. The results of content analysis of the focus group transcripts are reported in this article.

Prior to meeting in the focus groups, each participant received information about the purpose of the study, focal topics for discussion, and a statement of confidentiality about information provided by participants in the study.

Sample

There were 129 women entrepreneurs in the entire sample. A total of 148 women entrepreneurs were contacted and 129 entrepreneurs participated in the larger study, for a response rate of 87.2 percent. Of the 129 women, 117 participated in the interviews (79% of all invited participants). The sample included participants in 7 of the top 10 states with the largest numbers of women entrepreneurs according to the National Foundation for Women Business Owners (1995). To avoid regional bias, women from five smaller cities across the country were included as well. In summary, the twelve research sites were Atlanta, Boston, Charleston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, New Orleans, New York, Orlando, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Winston-Salem.

The women entrepreneurs' average age was 43.9 (S.D. = 7.9). The sample was 93% white and 7% African American. Eighty-eight percent of the sample defined their role as President, CEO, or owner, while 12% defined their role as other, including manager, or CFO. The participants had operated their businesses an average of 7.4 years (S.D. = 4.7), had 15.1 full-time employees on average (S.D. = 37.6), and worked an average of 52 hours a week in their businesses. Median sales revenues were in the \$250 000– 500 000 range. Eighty-one percent of the businesses were service-related, while 8% were in manufacturing, construction or mining, 6% in finance, insurance or real estate, 5% in transportation or communications and 1% in wholesale trade. In a comparison with the sample demographics of a profile of self-employed women in the 1990 U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) (Devine, 1994), participants in the present study were similar in terms of age, race, and distribution in types of business. The women participants were somewhat less likely to be married (60 percent versus 75 percent in the CPS) and were more educated (94 percent had one or more years of college education versus 45 percent in the CPS). Finally, the entrepreneurs in this study had worked as managers, executives or professionals in a

large organization immediately prior to business initiation for an average of 6.1 years (S.D. = 5.4).

Analysis

A qualitative analysis was conducted since the purpose of the study was to inform about the essential qualities of the women entrepreneurs' relational practice (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In the present study, the Ethnograph, an ethnographic software program (Seidel, Friese and Leonard, 1995) was used for the content analysis of the focus group comments. Evaluation of computer-aided qualitative analysis versus human-coded content analysis has indicated that the two methods are equally effective (Morris, 1993). An inductive approach was taken to the content analysis since the purpose was to identify the ways in which the women entrepreneurs engaged in relational practice in their businesses (Mossholder, Settoon, Harris and Armenakis, 1995). Test-retest reliability (Miles and Huberman, 1984) was 87.9% with a five-month interval between coding procedures.

In identifying the categories for analysis, reference was made to works by Fletcher (1998) and Fletcher and Jacques (1998) to identify each major category of relational practice to be used in the analysis since these researchers have applied relational practice to the organizational setting. The works of Jordan (1993), Miller (1991), and Surrey (1991) were referenced to supplement and flesh out the main relational categories for the qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts. All comments in the transcripts in which the entrepreneurs talked about relationships with or management of subordinates or clients were assembled into one master file. Then, this master file was systematically coded four times, once for each category of relational practice. In each coding session, comments that pertained to the category under study were marked within the Ethnograph program. The comments for each category were then assembled into a separate file resulting in four subfiles, one each for preserving, mutual empowering, achieving, and creating team respectively. Finally, each subfile was then carefully analyzed for themes in the comments. The findings are reported in the Results section. Operationalization of the dimensions of Relational Psychology is discussed below.

Operationalization of the dimensions of relational psychology

Relational comments in the interviews that concerned management of subordinates or interactions with clients/ customers were sorted into four categories: preserving, mutual empowering, achievement, or creating team, as identified by Fletcher (1998). Each dimension was coded as follows:

Preserving: characterized by a focus on task through nurturing, protecting, and safeguarding. Dimensions included:

- Shouldering: assuming responsibility for tasks not assigned to employees;
- Preventive connecting: keeping people connected to resources and other people who were necessary to accomplishing the firm's goals;
- maintaining relationships critical to the business' success.

Mutual empowering: characterized by a focus on contributing to the development of another person, e.g. a subordinate or client. Dimensions were:

- being open to others' point of view;
- expressing willingness to learn from others;

- willingness to put energy into others to enhance their competence, self-confidence and/or knowledge;
- willingness to step away from the “expert” or “boss” role.

Achieving: characterized by using relational skills to enhance her own professional growth and effectiveness. Dimensions were:

- using relational skills to achieve goals and enhance the organization’s success;
- reflecting, paying attention to the emotional overlay of situations so she can understand what happened and determine the most appropriate response;
- sharing information to enhance her own effectiveness through improved working relationships.

Creating team: characterized by a focus on creating the sense of team. Dimensions were:

- indicating that she relies on relational skills rather than her hierarchical position as business owner in working with others;
- talking about conditions she has created in which the company team can flourish;
- recognizing others’ unique preferences, problems, feelings or circumstances and attending to these attributes;
- ways that she fosters collaboration in her organization;
- encouraging cooperation;
- exploring and building on others’ ideas.

RESULTS

In the focus groups, 94 of the women talked about employees or clients. Sixty-nine of these women made at least one comment that was relational in nature about their client/employee relationships (73.4% of women responding to the topic). In all, 312 comments were classified into one or more of the four categories. One hundred ninety-five comments fell into one relational category, for an average of 4.5 comments for each of the 69 participants who used relational concepts in their comments. There were 118 comments describing preserving activities. Eighty-six comments described empowering activities. Entrepreneurs discussed achieving 69 times and creating team 39 times. One hundred seventeen comments fell into more than one category, e.g. mutual empowering and creating team. Of those 117 comments, 18 described activities that included preserving and empowering, 19 described preserving and achieving and 22 described preserving and creating team. There were 21 comments that included both empowering others and achieving, and 24 that described empowering and creating team. Finally, 13 comments included descriptions of behaviors that included achieving and creating team. The large number of comments that spanned several relational categories suggested that the participants’ behaviors fell into a repertoire that is holistically relational in nature.

Preserving for the women entrepreneurs centered on relational activities associated with the tasks necessary to keep their business running smoothly. These activities included moving from the big picture of overall management of the firm to completion of mundane tasks and filling in where activities did not fit the job requirements of employees. One entrepreneur took a holistic approach to conceptualizing her role in her business and described it thus: “I see my role as a rainmaker. I have to drive the business through the door or nobody here has a job. And then coupled with that is the business of managing the operation and creating an environment that is healthy and gives them the kind of support that they should need in order to want to be here.”

Shouldering, assuming responsibility for tasks outside the typical job description of a manager was common among the women participants. Recognizing that she had ultimate responsibility for her firm, an entrepreneur commented, "But it is also up to me to set directions, hire staff, and train staff and make sure that it is all working and that it will make money." An owner of a construction company extended shouldering throughout her firm as a means of ensuring its success and survival: ". . . when we hire people, we hire them for a specialty as an electrician, but he's also got to be willing to do other things too, so on the day we don't have any electrical work, he may be the plumber's helper, but everybody understands that up front. So, like I've told them, I'm the maid. I clean the toilets here, so I expect your hands to the shovel, so that way everybody continues to work and we have enough work to do."

For other entrepreneurs in the focus groups, preventive connecting involved maintaining effective working relationships with important providers in their company's networks. In response to a question about her management style, an entrepreneur replied, "I see my role as maintaining the corporate structure, keeping the bank happy, the insurance company, and the bonding, and the board of directors' work done, dealing with the unions, and sort of providing the house where the guys can come to it and do their work." Another entrepreneur believed it was her responsibility to ensure that employees worked towards a common vision of her company's direction: "I feel that I am a facilitator. I know my role in getting the management team together to a point where they are realizing that we are all working for the same goal."

A common preserving theme among comments across focus groups was the parallel between the entrepreneur's organization and the family structure. This commonality evolved from the sense of responsibility the entrepreneurs felt towards others with whom she worked. One entrepreneur remarked, "I think you approach growing a business much the same as you approach growing a family. I know one year I became very maternal about my staff. Our health insurance fees were increased 100% and I couldn't determine what the problem was. I couldn't leave my employees without insurance. So the company picked up an incredible increase in costs for insurance. That wasn't a bottom line business decision but I care about those people who work in the company. I don't know if that is because we are women. I don't always make decision just based on my bottom line."

Some skills developed in nurturing a family were perceived as enhancing the entrepreneur's management of her organization. "I think the new '90s management style that men are adopting comes from women. We do it because we have had to. You can't get a 3-year old to do things through intimidation. I raised two sons who were 6 feet tall and they did what I told them to do and in order to survive, I had to manage them. And so I manage my company through a team concept."

However, some of the entrepreneurs experienced difficulties arising from the caring perspective they took with them into their firms. One entrepreneur expressed frustration that employees sometimes did not respond to the care she displayed for them: "I see someone else who needs help and I have it in my head, if I reach out and help pull them up, they will do as I did and pull themselves up and succeed and I will take great pride in that. And that just doesn't happen."

Other entrepreneurs had had similar experiences and had come to terms with the need to be caring and nurturing while recognizing that they had a business to run and sometimes the employee's needs and the firm's needs were incompatible. Said one, "I think you always have to keep some distance there even though you have this tremendous affection for the people who work for you. But in their minds they know that there is a difference. At some point, should the situation evolve, they might have to leave, and it would be my choice in essence that made that happen. And that has to be part of the dynamics of the group. And if it isn't then things get difficult to control whereas you would never have that in your family. And there is a very big difference. I think it is kind of dangerous to equate a company with a family because sometimes you have to do things that are not in their interest but it is in the company's interest, so you have to do it."

For the dimension, mutual empowering, the predominant theme in the women's comments was the belief in the importance of empowering others. One woman reported, "My most successful attribute is taking people and developing them. People are now coming to me because they want to be part of the organization." Another entrepreneur expressed willingness to let her employees decide how best to do their jobs, thus demonstrating a willingness to step away from the role as expert: "My feeling is, 'Look, this is the end result. Now whether you take a bus, you take the train, or you take the car to get to this end result, I don't care. It's whatever works best for you. It doesn't make any difference as long as the work gets done on time.'"

A second theme was empowered teaching. An entrepreneur indicated she was open to others' points of view when she said, "Who knows, you might learn from somebody else and that was the philosophy I took with my employees and they respected that." Another woman business owner recognized that empowered teaching increased employees' competence and also contributed to the welfare of her firm: "It's just a basic principle. If you teach people to fish, they can bring you fish all the time. If you just feed them the fish, they are going to expect you to go out and keep on bringing the fish back to feed them. You have nothing coming in." An entrepreneur encouraged employees to think through problems and come up with their own solutions: "When they come to me with a problem, I try to train myself to say to them, 'Well, what would you do?' And they they're supposed to tell me what they'd do and ninety percent of the time, they're right."

Similar to the concept of empowered teaching is empowered learning, where the employee has the opportunity to take risks and try new skills and to be supported in that process. An entrepreneur recognized that employees make mistakes in the developmental process and that ultimately, she and her firm could benefit from her employee's development: "You can't beat up on employees because once you learn to forgive yourself for mistakes, you have to recognize that that person is in a growth mode as well and if you want to depend on that person you better nurture and grow them."

Other entrepreneurs experienced difficulties when their employees did not share their values regarding empowerment. An entrepreneur learned she had to give her employees more autonomy and encouragement to act independently. She said, "I'm learning to be tougher and stronger, not only with my son but also the people under my unit. The first tendency is to just baby them

along, but as you gain more business-mindedness you begin to see that you have to let them learn on their own. It is important to not only be business-minded but also to be caring as well. I'm learning to be a better mother and a better manager." So while the entrepreneurs recognized the importance of empowerment, some reported being challenged in enacting those relational practices in their organizations and they were successful after learning to mediate between the desire to be nurturing and the need to encourage employee autonomy.

Achieving involves using relational skills and practice to be successful personally and as business owners. In describing their work, some entrepreneurs talked about using relational skills in working with clients. Said one entrepreneur: "I have an incredible need to help people short cut some of the difficulties in their lives. I feel that's my reason for being in business on my own." An entrepreneur who runs a computer training company recognized the need to be relational as well as rational: "I can be very analytical about systems when I need to be. But I can also be very sensitive to human issues when I need to be. And my real strength in my industry is that I can balance them both."

Achieving for these entrepreneurs often meant the business' success was indistinguishable from their own growth. One entrepreneur described achieving when she said: "So the success of my business in part becomes self-fulfillment of me in the way that I find myself reflected and expressed in my business. I see parallels in growth and direction related to my own growth." For another business owner, her primary motivation was to provide a relational culture for her employees: "My whole objective was to provide a supportive and nurturing environment." For another entrepreneur, achieving (using relational skills for personal growth) was accomplished by empowering her clients: "What I find more successful is that I can teach them something and they really come back and are so complimentary. It is really a very heavy feeling for me. And I try then to accept only things that will make money. But I really love helping people."

Some entrepreneurs defined achieving in terms of using relational skills to empower others. A woman operating her own management development consulting firm reported, "The work that I did on that project was the peak experience workwise for me. Partially because of the experience of creating it with three other women who have become lifelong friends as a result of that. And the other part of it is seeing the impact that it had on the lives of the women who went through that program. Because for many people, it was transformational. I don't know that any other work I have done I've been able to see and get direct feedback about the impact of my work."

The fourth dimension of relational theory, Creating team, involves developing and fostering the conditions of teamwork. The entrepreneurs talked about relationships with employees using such terms as collaboration and cooperation. The entrepreneurs reported including others in their firms in important decisions and about generating business that they then passed on to employees to nurture and manage. One study participant described this process: "An important transition for an entrepreneur is to build the customer's confidence in your staff. The rest of the people who work for you. When a customer has a question, although you may have an answer, you want to start turning the reins over to somebody else who is going to handle that account day to day. So you turn around and say, 'Wait a minute, let me go get Sam or Sally or whoever, because I am sure they have the answer.' So you are right there making the transition for them. And showing this person has the answer, not me."

Other entrepreneurs recognized the importance of ensuring that all employees in their firm shared a common vision of the company and that this sense of team needed to be nurtured on a day to day basis. The head of a fitness-training center talked about her daily morning meeting with her employees: “. . . every day, we all get together and meet. Talk about the day and leave the office feeling – all right, we’re ready! This is great! We’ve all discussed what we’ve done. We’ve helped each other along the way and I think we want to start the day feeling good about being there and the job that has to be done.”

Finally, an entrepreneur recognized the personal benefit of creating team for synergy and for allowing downtime for herself and the other owners of her firm: “We keep each other on track and the team approach has been the real gift of the thing. I never felt I could do this alone. So when I have a downtime I have other partners that can carry some of the series and can do things and then we put back in again.”

Further analysis of the data was conducted to identify comments that included more than one dimension of relational practice. The greatest number of overlaps occurred between the mutual empowering and creating team dimensions. Examination of the comments indicated that the entrepreneurs believed that a critical component of creating a team-oriented culture was to empower others. The emergent theme was that employees would be more effective team members if they were more competent, self- confident, and knowledgeable. Therefore, many entrepreneurs saw part of their role to include nurturing the growth and development of subordinates. As employees’ development was enhanced, the potential growth of the firm would be augmented as well. An owner of a promotional products company integrated both empowered teaching and learning with a team fostering structure: “Everybody asked me if I were going to have an office. And I said, ‘No’. I didn’t want to have an office. I want to be with the people who work for me . . . because we learn from each other and we share projects and we work on the same things . . . I develop the relationship (with clients) and then I count on her (employee) to nurture it. And if she doesn’t know who I’m talking to or what’s important to me, it doesn’t seem like a smart move to me.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to determine whether Relational Theory could be used to classify women entrepreneurs’ comments about the ways they managed employees and worked with clients in their businesses. The findings from this study suggest that Relational Theory is a useful frame for examining the ways women entrepreneurs approach relationships in their businesses. The evidence provides insights about another relatively unexplored dimension of women entrepreneurs’ management practice. This sample was utilized because the women participants had opportunity to implement management practices in their own businesses. Their management style would be based on their values and beliefs about effective ways to relate to employees and clients outside a previously established (male dominated) organizational culture or tradition.

Preserving was enacted in various ways. It is common for entrepreneurs of both genders to fill in the many areas of their firms where employees’ responsibilities leave gaps. The women entrepreneurs’ preserving efforts appeared to go beyond the jack-of-all-trades comprehensiveness though. The role expectations of mothering carried over to the business setting for many of the

women who realized both benefits and struggles as they attempted to take responsibility for clients' and employees' growth and development.

The content analysis findings regarding mutual empowerment corroborate other research (Eagley and Johnson, 1990; Grant, 1988; Helgeson, 1990; Loden, 1985; Rosener, 1990) that women tend to lead in a participative and democratic manner. The women entrepreneurs often reported that they believed that increasing the competence of their employees would enhance the success of their firms. Thus, the entrepreneurs talked about investing time and energy to nurture subordinates with the expectation that the employees would be able to operate autonomously in the future, thus freeing the entrepreneur for other responsibilities. At the same time the entrepreneurs reported feeling significant satisfaction in participating in the growth and development of their employees.

Achieving, the use of relational skills for personal and professional development, is an important dimension of the way that the women entrepreneurs defined growth for themselves. It appears that achieving may be more broadly defined than Fletcher's (1996) original conceptualization. In her study of engineers, participants were employees in large organizations while in the present study, the participants were business owners. For example, the entrepreneurial participants often defined professional growth in terms of the growth of others. Additionally, this study's participants often saw their own success as indistinguishable from their firms' success. Since their companies depended on relationships with employees, suppliers, clients, and other service providers, the entrepreneurs' relational practice was often seen as a key to business success. The evidence also suggests that working from a relational stance enhanced the entrepreneurs' sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

Relational practices reported by the women entrepreneurs that enhanced the creation of a sense of team included collaborative decision-making and ensuring a shared vision of the firm. Creating a team atmosphere involved both empowered teaching of employees and empowered learning by the owners. The business owners' reports of relationships were more akin to Helgeson's (1990) web structure than the traditional hierarchical structure.

In related research using the same sample, the women entrepreneurs rated self-fulfillment their most important measure of success, followed by profits (Buttner and Moore, 1997). These priorities, coupled with their descriptions of use of relational practices as strategies to achieve these goals suggests that they saw relational practice as an effective way to successfully operate their businesses for long-term success and survival. Other research indicates that rapid firm growth is not a top priority for many women entrepreneurs (Chaganti, 1986; Holmquist and Sundin, 1988). Future research should investigate the relationship between relational practice and goal achievement as defined by women entrepreneurs.

The results indicate that the dimensions of relational behavior contribute to each other in a synergistic way. Encouraging open communication was one way to identify potential problems in the organization, and to enhance the likelihood of long-term survival. The open communication also facilitated the creation of team-enhancing culture. The entrepreneurs believed that nurturing, supporting and thus empowering subordinates augmented the esprit of team.

Thus, the relational approach may constitute a cluster of dimensions, similar to transformational leadership which taken together, constitute a particular type of interactive style.

Many of the relational activities reported by the women business owners are activities unrewarded in traditional organizations (Jacques, 1993; Fletcher and Jacques, 1998), such as preserving through assuming responsibility for tasks not covered in job descriptions, empowered teaching, and fostering a collaborative team culture. That these women chose to engage in these activities and talked about them in the focus groups suggests that they recognized the importance of these dimensions of relational practice, independent of their prior organizational experiences. The findings suggest that the women who talked about employees and clients in relational terms may define social responsibility in personal, immediate terms including the relationships they maintain on a day-to-day basis.

Future research could enhance our understanding of women entrepreneurs' management style by observing women entrepreneurs in their organizations to explicate in more detail the ways that relational practices are operationalized (Fletcher, 1998). Past research indicates that firms utilizing relational practices have more satisfied and committed work forces (Tsui, et al., 1997). Women business owners who use a relational approach may reduce selection, hiring, and training expenses, thus gaining a competitive advantage in labor-intensive industries in which they tend to predominate. The entrepreneurs' use of relational skills and practices may create a more open and empowering work environment for employees. Future research could test these possibilities.

Additional research should examine the extent to which female entrepreneurs use traditional practices versus relational practices. When do women entrepreneurs rely on relational practices and when do they resort to the traditional command-and-control style of management? Do women who seek rapid business growth differ in their use of relational practices? When operating under time pressures, do women resort to more traditional autocratic management?

A number of women talked about the struggle they experienced when they had a non-productive employee. On the one hand, the business owners related to the employee as an individual with needs, obligations, strengths and weaknesses. Parallel to that understanding was the knowledge that the worker was not performing satisfactorily and constituted a drag and possibly a danger to the business' survival and success. Future research should examine how women entrepreneurs mediate the need for profit and the focus on the bottom line (i.e. making the "hard decisions") with the desire to manage in an empathetic and empowering manner. Comments in the interviews indicate that this is a major developmental pivot point for the women entrepreneurs.

Two possible factors may limit the generalizability of the study. The women participants had higher levels of education on average than do many female business owners. It is possible that this more highly educated group differs from other women business owners. The relatively small firm size in the sample could be a possible confounding influence. The small firm setting means organization members often must work together, thus relational practices related to preserving may be an inherent part of being a small business owner. Because of the small size, a structured hierarchy would be less necessary. Perhaps the small firm size precipitates a more relational approach to employee management. Examination of the management styles of male

entrepreneurs of small firms and of women entrepreneurs with large firms would help address this question.

On the other hand, the women entrepreneurs often talked about a relational approach when working with clients. Here organization size would have less influence and entrepreneurs would be free to select an interactional style that fit their preferences. The cultivation of a relational approach with clients suggests that this is a preferred style rather than a response to organizational constraints.

Finally, the results of this study indicate that the women entrepreneur participants reported using relational practices similar in nature to women engineers (Fletcher, 1998), nurses (Jacques, 1993) and women employed in large corporations (Rapoport and Bailyn, 1996). Thus, this report adds to the growing body of research indicating that women use a relational approach in their work settings. In conclusion, women entrepreneurs using a relational approach with their employees and clients appear to be using strategies and skills well suited for a more highly educated work force in the new millenium.

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Note

¹ Ballard, N.: 1998, 'Equal Engagement: Observations on Success and Career Meaning in the Lives of Women Lawyers', Working Paper.

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