

## SUBJECTIVE POWER AMONG SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN – CONSTRUCT OF EXPERIENCE

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### Track 3 – Work, Family and Community

## INTRODUCTION

Power is traditionally associated with coercive and controlling patterns in social life. It has been studied earlier mainly through its negative aspects such as subjugation and conflicts at work or between couples. In this study we are interested in to see whether there are positive dimensions to experienced power, does power have empowering elements and qualities? We are also questioning how women – especially self-employed women experience power? Further, we are interested in how the power experience is constructed on the phenomenological level.

## BACKGROUND

As stated earlier, power is traditionally associated with coercive and controlling patterns in social life. It has been studied earlier mainly through its negative aspects such as subjugation and conflicts at work or between couples. It is often defined as a relationship between the powerful one who has control over the powerless one (Dunbar, Bippus & Young 2008; Foucault 1980; Lukes 1974). Power has been connected strongly with male behavior i.e. power approach and usage of it is expected from men through the male role expectations. So power is not equally approached and experienced among genders.

More recently scholars in the field of communication especially have stated that both power and dominance are fundamental structures in all human relationships (Dunbar, Bippus & Young 2008; Burgoon & Hale 1984; Foucault 1980; Cromwell & Olson 1975). This being the case it can be said that power may have many meanings depending on the context, however the subjective experience of power has not been explored in detail earlier. In this paper power is not seen only as the ability to influence another person (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000) but also as a potentially positive and productive force (i.e. A and B being each enabled as well as constrained within relations of power, Knights & Willmott 2004) possibly empowering all parties involved. In this study the focus is on women – especially self-employed women to see how they experience power? Does power have empowering elements or qualities?

## METHODS

The contribution of the current study is in its novel way of combining quantitative methods with overall qualitative research. The method allows for quantitative analysis, but still the results concentrate on understanding the uniqueness of subjective

experiences. As in the cognitive constructive approach to knowledge states experiences are seen as both individually and socially constructed. On the every day level we all have practical experiences of this. We can talk about willpower for instance, but when the dialogue is over we discover that we have meant slightly different things. In essence the holistic, system dynamic view (Kauko-Valli 2008) allows seeing into what having power as willpower, power of decision and dominance feels like on the phenomenological level. As experience is also socially constructed we were interested how, if at all, the experience differs in different subcultures of occupation and age.

An internet based survey (N=942) was conducted using a well established descriptive visual analogue scale (DVAS) (Ojanen 2005; Kauko-Valli 2008) covering different dimensions of interest. The scale has been used in several studies earlier, with fairly good results (e.g. Sjögren, Nissinen, Jävenpää, Ojanen, Vanharanta & Malkiä 2006) and has been assessed both for validity and reliability. The sample represented well the overall working age adults and was balanced in regards to age, gender and background education of respondents, so the findings could be generalized to the whole population. In the current study only the data (N=171) concerning self-employed women were utilized. Out of the 171 informants 56 per cent regarded their enterprise specifically as a family business, thus having family influence to a varying degree in their venture. The age of informants varied between 22 and 71 years of age with a mean age of 43 years. Both groups were analyzed separately (family business owners, N=96; other business owners, N=76). Instead of establishing clear cut cause-effect relationships or building predictive models the aim was to look closely at the two-way correlation relationships to understand more clearly the role of subjective evaluations of reality for experiences of power. A system dynamic approach (Kauko-Valli 2008) was used to analyze the data.

## RESULTS

Experienced power was studied among self-employed women through three different aspects: individually experienced decision power, dominance and willpower.

The concepts of decision making and power of decision come from Dyadic Power Theory and refer to specific strategies and to the overall willingness and ability to make decisions on different aspects used to exert power in situations needed also to the outcome of the situation (Dunbar 2004; Ojanen 2001). Given that power can be latent, dominance is a strong manifest and can be seen as a personality trait or individual temperament and situational features that encourage dominant behavior (Dunbar 2004) It was approached as one's ability to take initiative and leadership, especially in new situations (Ojanen 2001). The experienced level of willpower was looked at from the perspective of being able to perform successfully in tasks that are important to the person in question.

All correlations were on the statistically most significant level unless otherwise mentioned. And it can be noted that there were no negative correlations on this level.

<b>FBOE Women</b>	
<b>Positive Correlations:</b>	<b>Decision power</b>
Quality of work	.557
Satisfaction with life	.537

Appreciation	.472
Happiness	.451
Balance btw challenges and resources	.435

All presented correlations are on the  $p \leq .001$  level. Family business owner entrepreneurs women N= 96.

Decision power seems to be connected both to overall well-being (happiness & satisfaction with life) and to empowerment. Decision power is connected to a sense of being appreciated by others and the other way around also when you feel that you are in control you interpret the situation as others appreciating you more.

Decision power – balance between challenges and resource and quality of work: you are in charge and you can affect your own situation may have a connection on experience that you can adjust challenges and resources.

<b>OBOE Women</b>	
<b>Positive Correlations:</b>	<b>Decision power</b>
Meaning of Life	.507
Self-efficacy	.464
Appreciation of Self	.370
Quality of work	.362
Happiness	.361

All presented correlations are on the  $p \leq .001$  level. Other owner entrepreneurs women N= 76.

Decision power seems to be connected strongly with meaning of life, self-efficacy and appreciation of self. Also quality of work and happiness are important elements for the other business owners women when experiencing power of decision. All these elements can be seen connected to experienced empowerment.

<b>FBOE Women</b>	
<b>Positive Correlations:</b>	<b>Dominance</b>
Self-efficacy	.537
Willpower	.450
Hope	.416
Appreciation of self	.347
Sense of peace	.301

All presented correlations are on the  $p \leq .001$  level. Family business owner entrepreneurs women N= 96.

Self-efficacy, willpower and hope arise to the top together with appreciation of self and sense of peace when looking at the experienced dominance among family business owner entrepreneur women. The correlates work both ways and it can be seen that strong self-efficacy, willpower and hope support the dominant behavior. And on the other hand gives the person a sense of peace and more appreciation of oneself.

<b>OBOE Women</b>	
<b>Positive Correlations:</b>	<b>Dominance</b>
Quality of Work	.329, (.004)
Self-Efficacy	.312, (.007)
Stress at Work	.311, (.007)
Willpower	.284, (.014)
Sense of Control	.275, (.017)

Presented correlations are on the  $p \leq .004$  to  $.017$  level. Other owner entrepreneurs women N= 76.

Dominance for other business owners seems to be a bit ambiguous as if it is not a very desirable outcome? The correlations are statistically significant but on a lower level.

<b>FBOE Women</b>	
<b>Positive Correlations:</b>	<b>Willpower</b>
Dominance	.450
Appreciation of self	.395
Self-efficacy	.366
Quality of work	.345
Variation in environment	.343

All presented correlations are on the  $p \leq .001$  level. Family business owner entrepreneurs women N= 96.

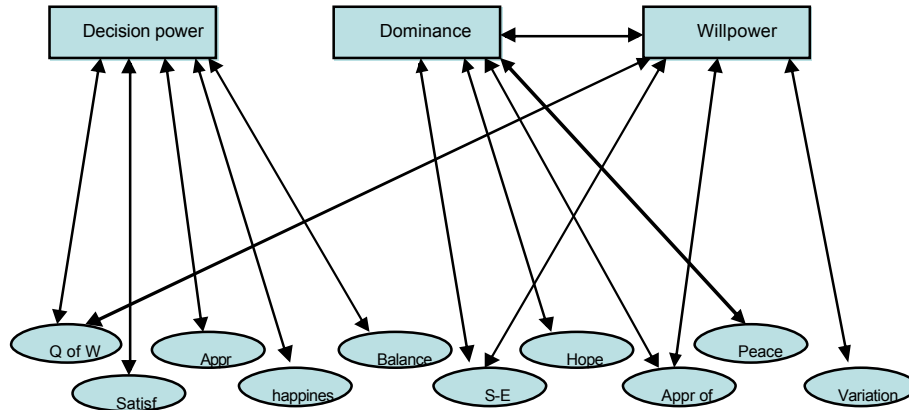
Willpower shows the willingness to take action and can be seen in connection with not only dominance but appreciation of self and self-efficacy. Willingness to take action influences the quality of work and is connected to variation in environment.

<b>OBOE Women</b>	
<b>Positive Correlations:</b>	<b>Willpower</b>
Activity	.457, (.000)
Decision power	.307, (.007)
Physical Health	.306, (.008)
Dominance	.284, (.014)
Self-Efficacy	.282, (.014)

Presented correlations are on the  $p \leq .000$  to  $.014$  level. Family business owner entrepreneurs N= 76.

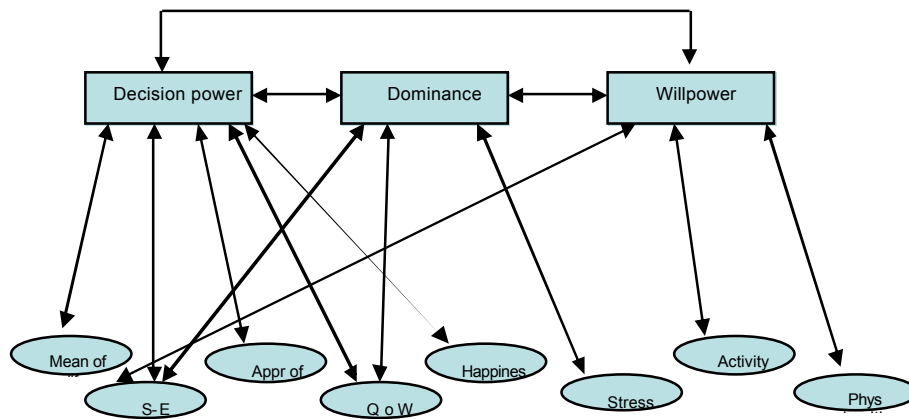
Willpower and activity have strong correlation and it can be easy to understand that willingness to take action creates activity and the other way round. Willpower is also connected to different elements like decision power, physical health, dominance and self-efficacy which all can be seen as empowering elements.

## **System dynamic model on power experience - family business owners**



Shorten symbols: Quality of work, satisfaction with life, appreciation, happiness, balance between challenges and resources, self-efficacy, hope, appreciation of self, sense of peace and variation in environment.

**System dynamic model on power experience – other business owners**



Shorten symbols: meaning of life, self-efficacy, appreciation of self, Quality of work, happiness, stress work, activity and physical health.

**DISCUSSION**

Women experiencing strong sense of quality or work, satisfaction, self-efficacy, appreciation of self, appreciation, sense on peace and activity are likely to take action in

their lives. They will sense willpower and dominance in a way that it encourages them to make decisions by having strong sense of decision power. The elements showed above in system dynamic model show that the elements intertwine and have correlations both ways. Also can be said that by doing so individual empowerment arises. Empowerment on the other hand is a very complex phenomenon. According many scholars there are several different indicators to show empowerment (Järvinen 2009). Empowerment combines individually from dozens of different elements and they intertwine so it is not possible to point out a single element of empowerment.

The results also seem to point to the experience of power as a multidimensional construct with a lot of potential for enhancing well-being and as empowering experience on the individual level.

## CONCLUSIONS

Subjective experienced power among women need further in depth studies and interviews might give more deep understanding on the experience. Actually comparing men's and women's experience looking for similarities and clear differences in experience of genders have been studied also (Kauko-Valli & Solankallio, unpublished). The main interest was in understanding the phenomena through group level analysis. The results show both individually and socially constructed experience, there might be individual differences but the results highlight the group experience on average. I.e. if you are a woman owning a family business this is how your experience would most probably look like and there can be seen different rules within different groups on what is acceptable or valued behavior in regards to power especially.

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