

THE PROSPECTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES (PWDs) PARTICIPATION IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP: THE PERSPECTIVE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH PHYSICAL AND SENSORY DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The subject of disability has risen to be a topic of importance for these few decades. Various agencies and world bodies have gone into looking into this issue with keenness. One of the subjects taken into consideration within disability is disability entrepreneurship. The idea of disability entrepreneurship arises due to the fact that employability of persons with disabilities is low. More often than not, when they are employed, they are given a salary that is much lower than what others, who work the same jobs, receive. With this, the main objective of this study is to describe the belief of persons with disabilities participation in entrepreneurship. The study employed qualitative design. Ten persons with disabilities, mainly youths aged between 19-25 years were recruited via purposive sampling. Data was collected using in-depth interviews, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative technique. This study reveals that entrepreneurship is a pivotal means to empower PWDs. Participation in entrepreneurship has increased their self-power and self-reliance. They are also able to lead a life of dignity in accordance with their values. In addition, participation in entrepreneurship for PWDs is not merely a source of income, but at the same time it helps them to satisfy their psychological and social needs. Psychologically, participation in entrepreneurship strengthened their self-esteem, independence and reduces the feeling that disabilities are manifestations of their deficiency. Also, entrepreneurship enables them to be socially inclusive and to contribute to the development of the society through charity and donations. In these ways, they may contribute to the well-being of the community of which they are a part of despite their disabilities. Serious efforts should be made to develop awareness among Malaysians on the importance of PWDs participation in entrepreneurship. PWDs are an integral part of the Malaysian society and as such it is the responsibility of the society to enable them to lead a dignified life and contribute effectively to nation-building. This study also expects to add to the scarce literature on disability issues, within the Malaysian context, specifically in business and entrepreneurship.

Keywords: culture, disability, entrepreneurship, Malaysia, students.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of disability has risen to be a topic of importance in these past few decades. Speaking of which, a decade to the end of the 20th century, the United Nations outlined *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*, which covers 19 rules, ranging from the creation of awareness on disability, to the proper services that are to be rendered to those persons with disabilities, in terms of health, support services, and even inclusivity (WHO, 2016). Disability, as defined by the World Health Organisation (2011), is a wide-ranging term which encompasses impairments, limitations to activity, which refers to negative interactions between an individual and their environment (the health factor versus their surroundings and their own persons).

With this general definition, conception can be divided into two components: one is the person's own obstruction to achieving something, and the other, the environment that the person is in (WHO, 2011; Goodley, Lawthom, & Runswick-Cole, 2014). If neither aspect exist in the situation that the person is experiencing, then disability is absent for that person. However, this is not the case, even for persons who are of sound and full health. Eventually, they will encounter a form of disability sooner or later in life (WHO, 2011). With old age, the deterioration of health, as well as environmental factors that are ever-changing, it is obvious that disability has even become a human rights issue. The main objective of this study is to examine the understanding of persons with disabilities participation in entrepreneurship.

This study focuses on university students because universities in the Malaysian context act as platforms for students to explore their capabilities and competencies. In addition, university students are the ones that will be joining the workforce upon their graduation. The kind of work they choose varies greatly during their formative years as a university student. Students also begin to build networks of friends and future colleagues as well as acquaintances through their studies in the universities. With these justifications, they serve as motivation for the writing of this paper.

DISABILITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A GLOBAL REVIEW

Disability is a phenomenon which naturally occurs in society. Persons with disabilities are also a valuable part of the society at large. According to Human Rights Watch (2011), more than 1 billion of the world's population are those with disabilities. This accounts to an approximate of 15% of the total 7 billion people on earth (Population Reference Bureau, 2011). These numbers might be on the increase though, since the population has grown to 7.4 billion in 2016 (Population Reference Bureau, 2016). In Malaysia, according to the Department of Social Welfare (2015), in 2015 a total of 365,677 persons with disabilities were

registered with the department. Accounting the total population of Malaysia, which is at an estimate of 31.7 million (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2016), persons with disabilities make up an approximate of 1.53% of the total population, where the numbers might be higher due to the low reachability to the rural population in Malaysia. Although the number seems to be low, just at 1.53% of the population, people with disabilities still make up a major part of the Malaysian society.

According to Caldwell, Parker, and Renko (2016), it has been discussed that entrepreneurship has been gaining ground in the disabled person's community, especially social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is a sub-field of entrepreneurship whereby, it adds focus to a social mission, not just a search for profits like conventional entrepreneurship. For example, a disabled social entrepreneur may focus more on the growth of the disabled community, through the business of which he or she chooses (Caldwell, Parker, & Renko, 2016). This is just a general example. A more specific example would be a case of a particular person with disabilities who is quite popular in the USA. He owns a restaurant in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and goes by the name of Tim. Tim has Down syndrome, but through his business, Tim spreads the idea and understanding that Down Syndrome is not a reason for one not to participate in entrepreneurship (Tim's Place, Albuquerque: Good Food, Good People, 2013). By giving out hugs, as well as motivational talks through his business, Tim manages to bring a social benefit towards his peers with Down Syndrome, enabling a better understanding of those with Down Syndrome and hence, adding social value to his business.

On another note, studies by Hogan et al., (2012) as well as Goodley, Lawton, and Runswick-Cole (2016) bring forward the point that persons with disabilities are not given equal opportunity when it comes to participation in the workforce. In addition, according to Jones (2008) (as cited in Hogan et al., 2012), people with disabilities are paid less, compared to those who are abled bodied. Unemployment is also rife within the disabled communities. Moreover, employment opportunities are greatly restricted for those with disabilities. This is due to the fact that employers need to prepare extra hands to assist those with disabilities, or even provide special tools for the said disabled employees (Hogan, et al., 2012). According to Goodley (2014) (in Goodley, Lawton, & Runswick-Cole, 2016), those who are disabled are often forced to embrace ableism, to be like those who are able, in order to overcome their conditions.

Following the discussion of social entrepreneurship, Sefotho (2015) brings a different idea of entrepreneurship for persons with disabilities. He coined the term *hephapreneurship*, a term to further specify social entrepreneurship. It is a "process of fostering positive and meaningful existence anchored on subsistence entrepreneurship of differently abled persons and underprivileged persons, which is founded on the ethos of career choice/construction, towards transformative social justice and change" (Sefotho, 2015:2). With this form of entrepreneurship, it can be seen that one of the objectives is to bring positivity, both to the person, as well as to society. By participating in entrepreneurship, people with disabilities are also able to self-sustain, without the need to seek too much help from outside forces. This seeking of positive feelings and social justice is seconded by Mladenov (2016). Through their entrepreneurial prowess, as mentioned in the example given by Sefotho (2015), the disabled person is able to even sustain his/her parents at the same time. With these points presented, the viability of disabled entrepreneurship becomes much larger, and more significant. However, it is to be noted that Sefotho conducted his research in Lesotho, thus his findings might be unique to that specific country or region. The need to study PWDs in other social and cultural background is indeed essential. This is the gap this study tries to address.

In short, this study discusses that entrepreneurship is a very viable and strong option, for those people with disabilities to pursue. Within the context of Malaysia, the research of people with disabilities participating in entrepreneurship is scarce, and information regarding their participation, as well as their accessibility to the resources which can help them to enter entrepreneurship, is not readily available. Looking through an infrastructural view even, Malaysia still needs further improvement in order to accommodate those with disabilities. Based on the reviewed literature, more understanding of what the issue is currently, as well as the importance to carry out this research has been discovered. There is also a gap within the Malaysian study context of PWDs participation in entrepreneurship, where little, or even none, has ventured into the socio-cultural determinants of disabled persons in entrepreneurship participation.

STUDY DESIGN

The research employed qualitative approach. The qualitative method chosen is a semi-structured interview. This method is chosen because of its inductive nature, as well as its ability to measure and create new concepts at the same time. Through qualitative method, abstract concepts can be conceptualized and further elaborated, in order to further understand what the participants are trying to convey (Neuman, 2014). To obtain meaningful data, in-depth interview was used to understand what the participants are experiencing. According to Seidman (1998), in-depth interview also allows us to realize that the stories of others are equally important. The interviews were at nearby eateries or cafes that are convenient for the participants. All interviews were recorded with their permission, either through voice or video. The duration of each interviews are between 45 minutes to one hour. This research recruited 10 participants, purposively selected, where all of them are persons with disabilities from the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic group. The participants were selected based on their participation in entrepreneurship. The participants are mainly university students, aged between 19-30 years old, both male and female. Data was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. To conceptualize what the participants are trying to present, codes were assigned to locate themes.

FINDINGS

This study found that there are three prospects of PWDs participation in entrepreneurship, which are; (i) empowerment of oneself; (ii) ensuring security; and (iii) maintaining exclusivity.

a) Empowerment of oneself

This study found that all respondents have shown a great enthusiasm to become an entrepreneur. They agreed that entrepreneurship will help them to become self-sustaining individuals. One respondent mentioned:

I used to own a burger shop with a friend. We also did *nasi bungkus* (packed rice with dishes)... Now I'm trying out the travel agency business. I need to do something meaningful in my life. Doing business is something I described... fulfilling, and business will help me in the years to come. (Abu Bakar, 24, Partially sighted)

Another replied that participation in entrepreneurship motivates him:

Business keeps me on track with what I should be doing. Achieving something in a day or week or a month, motivates me to accomplish better results. When PWDs are able to carry out business, it shows that we can do just as good as normal people can do. Sometimes I feel that we can provide even better service compared to other people. Doing business means that I'm able to carry out my daily life, just as any normal person can. (Qayyum, 21, Crippled foot)

Similarly, another respondent said:

I don't see that having ADHD will restrict me in doing business. If I do get to do business, I think it will be able to help us as special needs persons very much. (Malek, 19, ADHD)

Based on the above responses, PWDs in this study have reflected that participation in entrepreneurship allows them to contribute towards the integration of persons into the society like other individuals. This finding supports Abbasian and Bildt (2009) who studied immigrant women from Chile, Iran and Turkey who ventured into businesses in Sweden and become successful. Accordingly, the process of empowerment embodies independent living and dignified life for PWDs. As the process of empowerment is the process of transformation from powerlessness to situation of ability, entrepreneurship has a crucial role in the empowerment of PWDs to obtain the right to independent living like the non-disabled.

b) Ensuring financial security

In this study too, the researchers discovered that, participation in entrepreneurship by large will strengthen their financial standing in the long run. This has been declared by one student:

By having these businesses, I can make sure that in the future, I am able to provide for my family especially parents, to bring them for *Hajj* (pilgrimage). Persons with special needs don't actually get the proper salary they deserve... But with business, I can get my own salary. (Abu Bakar, 24, Partially sighted)

Another respondent mentioned:

When I do have a business, with the current economic condition, I am able to support myself better, given that I am still a student. (Danial, 22, ADHD)

In a similar vein, Iffa a caretaker of Down syndrome children acknowledged that:

Persons with special needs don't get the same salary as normal people do. They do the same amount of work...even struggle more to achieve the same results...but were not given proper rewards for their work. They need to find other means to sustain their living. Business is a potential one.

Due to some challenges like discrimination, unfair treatment and limited accessibility to business opportunities, most respondents ascertained that entrepreneurship can be another promising avenue to earn a living, for today and in the future. The participants saw that their involvement in entrepreneurship ensured them of a constant flow of income. Although businesses might not yield a definite constant flow of money into one's bank accounts, it can be way better than what the PWDs might earn, if they were to only work off of a salary. Being university students, having an income while studying helps them to increase their savings as well as enabling them to fulfill their extra wants and needs. In addition, by participating in business, they are attesting to the opinion that others with disabilities can be helped by becoming one of their own team members or resort to entrepreneurship like them.

c) Maintaining exclusivity

Another interesting finding of this research is the need to maintain exclusivity. Most of the respondents agreed that PWDs participation in entrepreneurship should be seen as a form of solidarity within their own groups, as well as exclusivity when it comes to them being able to carry out business, in comparison to other members of society. One participant said:

When I do business, I feel that I am my own person. I also see it as a means to show that we people with special needs are able to look after each other. PWDs can become business partners with other PWDs. We know our problems, find solutions together as PWDs and look after one another. (Abu Bakar, 24, Partially sighted)

Another respondent shares her view:

My family is very supportive towards me... wanting to do business. I feel special when they do that for me, especially with my father also being a businessman. (Amirah, 20, Dyslexia)

In addition, being exclusive as a business person itself brings a feeling of confidence towards the PWDs. With the proliferation of various kinds of special needs and disabilities being portrayed in the media, it brings forward an idea that PWDs are also part of society. One respondent asserted:

Media has opened my eyes showing that we are special. It enables people to understand us better...compared previously. I think I understand myself better due to the media coverage about us. Through entrepreneurship, PWDs are able to even emphasize further their exclusivity within the society, by providing a service or product by themselves". (Malek, 19, ADHD)

The notion of exclusivity appears based on two dimensions: first, being a PWD and second, participating in business together with people of the same group. The feeling of being able to provide a service or product which comes from their own group also creates exclusivity.

DISCUSSION

The subject of disability is a sensitive matter to the public eye, what more to those who experience disability (Mladenov, 2016). The number of disability cases are rising each year in Malaysia. In 2015, there were 365,677 registered persons with disabilities (Social Welfare Department, 2015). An increasing trend could also be seen through the same report by the Department of Social Welfare, where the rate has increased to at least 14.95% from the year 2014 to the year 2015. This rate shows that more people are recognized as disabled and they need to be assisted in order to live in a more meaningful and productive manner. Hence, getting them to participate in entrepreneurship is deemed appropriate.

Entrepreneurship has opened up new prospects in the labour market for many people. However, disadvantaged groups such as PWDs face several constraints to get to these opportunities such as lack of skills to use computers and access the Internet, financial limitations and lack social support (Norhasyikin Rozali et al., 2016; Piriri & Makurumidze, 2014; Bratnicki, Kulikowska-Mrozek, Marzec & Zbierowski, 2007). The findings in this study supports the existing studies on disability which indicate the challenges and prospects of PWDs participating in entrepreneurship activities. The positive aspects of this study corroborates with that of Caldwell, Parker and Renko (2016) who discovered that social entrepreneurship has a means of empowering persons with disabilities. This, in part is due to the fact that by being a social entrepreneur, persons with disabilities are able to change the stigma and discrimination that once haunted them. Secondly, by being social entrepreneurs, persons with disabilities are able to be more motivated in contributing to the society. The motivation that was discovered is both a push – for becoming an entrepreneur, as well as the pull – of the lack of other working opportunities. According to them, these are the elements which have determined the persons with disabilities to be within the sphere of entrepreneurship.

Norhasyikin Rozali et al. (2017) also reported that only 44% of employees are PWDs, in comparison with 75% of normal persons; showing a gap of unemployment for the PWDs. They suggested that entrepreneurship be a viable solution for PWDs to overcome unemployment. Moreover, the tendency of a PWD to employ other PWDs once they have set up their business is evident in the study of Zalinawati Abdullah and Norudin Mansor (2013). In a similar vein, Che Asniza Osman et al. (2014) study confirmed that providing PWDs with entrepreneurial values will make them feel empowered to carry out their daily activities and hence, motivate them to be more independent. In addition, from the study of Hashmat, Rehbichler and Fänders (2016) too, they have found that through entrepreneurship, the inclusion of PWDs in the community is clearly seen and the feeling of belongingness within their community increased. These are done through several apprenticeship trainings, setting up businesses and technical trainings.

This study is based on Social Identity theory and Affect Theory of Happiness as the theoretical framework. These two theories enable us to understand that group attachments can affect the happiness of the participants within the entrepreneurial sphere and secondly, to further enhance our understanding of happiness of persons with disabilities, when they participate in entrepreneurship activities. As a person who participates within society, people are subjected to having a personal, as well as a social identity. This social identity is highly impacted by the acceptance of a person into a specific group. In this point, Social Identity theory identifies two cognitive processes: *categorisation*, and *identification* which, in combination, transform the membership of the person in a group, to an identity (Trepte, 2006).

Firstly, categorisation assists us human beings to assort ourselves into various groups and categories, without being too specific to the qualities that individuals attain. These categories are mainly to ease ourselves in the identification of which we belong with (Forsyth, 2006). In addition, categorisation lends to awareness of one's own social identity. For example, in the context of this study, when persons with disability are to discuss on the issues pertaining to entrepreneurship, they will feel that they are part of the larger group of people with disability, that they feel they belong to, and try to give their best for their group. Secondly, according to Forsyth (2006), identification is the cause for people to connect with one another, as well as, take the characteristics of the group which they belong to. When we identify ourselves with a group more than we do for another one, we are more likely to feel that the group we identify with is more significant. In the case of PWDs, participating in entrepreneurship with a

homogeneous group even though at times, there are no official ties with the team in question, the sense of affiliation, as well as significance, in their identification with the group members exist. This identification however, might not be instant; identification with a group can take time.

The Affect Theory of Happiness on the other hand, describes happiness as an emotion, subjectively seen after taking in everything into consideration. It is a sum of experienced pleasures and pain, balancing them out on a frequency and duration of the happiness which occurs. When one fulfils one's needs and wants, then one can be happy (Aydin, 2012). The Affect Theory sees that happiness is an emotion that is positive, which approves the emotions that a person feels. This notion supports the respondents' viewpoints. Findings of this research show that happiness can be achieved by them through their participation in entrepreneurship. According to Sizer (2010), having a good life is a way towards having good feelings; in this case feeling happy. By participating in entrepreneurship, persons with disabilities are able to fulfil their happiness, by engaging in activities they perceived meaningful.

The following graphic representation illustrates the connection between the theories and the findings of this research:

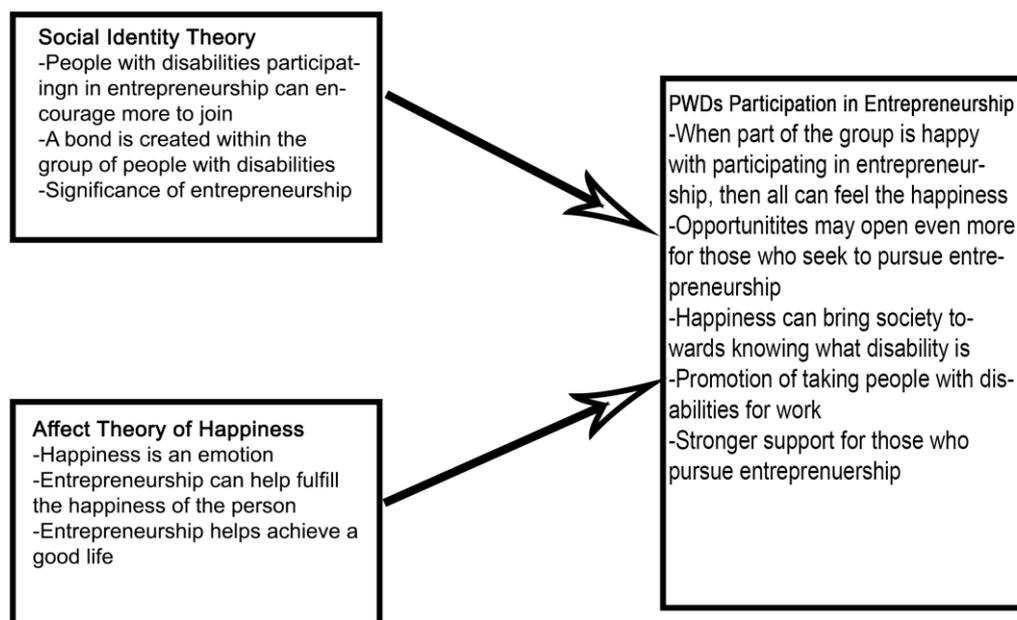


Figure 1. PWDs Participation in Entrepreneurship Framework.

This framework also presumes that education helps disabled people to achieve more in entrepreneurship, which in turn enables them to compete in the job market and get empowered. Education also helps PWDs to get access to entrepreneurial trainings, resources and thus increases the chances to become competent in entrepreneurship. Essentially, Hogan et al., (2012) agreed that entrepreneurship is a very viable means for disabled persons to achieve better income. In the United Kingdom, Roni (2009) discussed that disabled entrepreneurship can be an opportunity for those with disability to be more independent in everyday life. He discovered that many factors influenced the chances for the disabled entrepreneurs. These factors include resource capital, their business performance itself, and even their rates of success. Indeed, entrepreneurship further enables PWDs to lead an independent and dignified life and in the end, strengthened their self-will.

All in all, this study supports the idea of *hephapreneurship*, a form of social enterprise proposed by Sefotho (2015) to promote entrepreneurship amongst persons with disabilities. This idea if adopted by universities will enable PWDs to venture into entrepreneurship more confidently. Universities could assist disabled students for example, by providing resources, conducting entrepreneurial trainings and programmes as well as allowing them to run their own businesses on campus. As mentioned earlier, this study found that PWDs have a sense of exclusivity amongst themselves, this feeling can be fostered through the mentoring programme between the senior and junior PWDs. The notion of educating other PWDs is also supported by Wasike and Likoko (2013) in which they discovered that educating fellow PWDs concerning entrepreneurship will enable better participation in business. Moreover, it also provides PWDs to be better equipped and more confident to join the workforce. Indeed, *hephapreneurship* can create awareness on PWDs needs within the university community.

CONCLUSION

This study brings forward three main themes: empowerment, security, and exclusivity. This research contributes greatly to the body of knowledge particularly in the area of disability and entrepreneurship. Most importantly, this research is in-line with the Government Transformation Programme (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2010), the Malaysian government aims to improve the outcomes of the students. In addition, through its 14th NKRA of Malaysian government central agencies also states that also states that it would like to promote a healthy, safe, and caring society which helps in the intervention of those persons with disabilities.

In addition, this research also heeds the call of the Ministry of Higher Education in its Entrepreneurial Action Plan of Institutes of Higher Education 2016-2020 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, n.d.). It outlines several cores which include the consolidation of entrepreneurial centers in institutes of higher education, providing ample trainings and programmes for holistic and properly planned entrepreneurship, as well as supply an ecosystem and environment which is conducive for the development of entrepreneurship. Thus, this research can be considered as a catalyst towards more involvement of disabled persons in entrepreneurship activities, within universities, as well as after students' graduation from universities. With this in mind, this study will give a significant impact towards the community of disabled people in particular and Malaysian society in general.

However, this study has several limitations. The study focused only on university students. The sample was also small, where only ten participants participated in the interviews; specifically only those with physical and sensory disabilities. PWDs with mental disabilities were not chosen in this study, making it a limiting factor. For future research, this study suggests to include non-university PWDs as well as to increase the number of research participants.

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