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Entrepreneurial Women and Life Expectancy

Jeannette Oppedisano
Sandra Lueder

This article explores whether the longevity phenomenon experienced by entrepreneurial women born between 1720 and 1940 can be explained by the life circumstances of these women or whether other research may provide better insights into their remarkable tenacity. The characteristics of hardiness, resiliency, and self-efficacy should be examined as well as the newly developing research theories of perseverance in the face of adversity to determine which are most appropriate in explaining what is clearly female entrepreneurial endurance.

Recent historical research into the lives of entrepreneurial women (Oppedisano 2000) unveiled a dramatic fact: 97 percent of the profiled women born between 1720 and 1940 surpassed the life expectancy of their generation—and, for the most part, by large margins. This article delves into whether the longevity phenomenon is easily explained by the life circumstances of these women (e.g., being born into affluence, living in a physically safe time/environment, choosing low-stress career paths, not getting pregnant). It also explores whether the research on hardiness, resiliency, self-efficacy, and perseverance in the face of adversity provides insights into possible alternative explanations for the long lives of these women.

Introduction and Background

Commonly identified factors that contribute to life expectancy are heredity, lifestyle, health and health care opportunities, affluence, marriage, stress management, and personality. According to gerontologist Kevan Namazi, 20 to 30 percent of the success of living a long life is based on heredity, 50 percent on lifestyle, with the balance influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status and strong social ties (Schneider 2002). “All along the social class gradient, at each of its levels, richer and more socially prominent people live longer than poorer and less advantaged people...even in the advantaged group, those higher up in the hierarchy are healthier than those lower down,” reports Shelley Taylor, professor of psychology (Taylor 2002, 163).

Additionally, starting an entrepreneurial venture has substantial negative impact on not only the entrepreneur, but on the spouse and family because of conflicting needs/demands of business interests and family commitments (Kuratko and Hodgetts 1995; Liang and Dunn 2002). This family pressure is supported in research

conducted by Liang and Dunn (2002). When they posed the question to entrepreneurs of whether they would start a business again, of those who responded affirmatively, more than 50 percent cited not enough time for spouse and children as a problem. Of those who would not start such a venture again, the numbers climbed to 61 percent and 72 percent, respectively. Taylor’s research on health and stress highlights the importance of social ties for women. She points out that women and men respond differently to stress. Instead of a “flight or fight response” typified by men, women respond in a nurturing manner referred to as the “tending instinct” (Taylor 2002).

Ecological Approach to Assessing Longevity Factors

Dr. Robert Butler, president and CEO of the International Longevity Center, brought together a group of researchers and experts in medicine and public health to explore the factors that contribute to a healthy life. Among their suggestions was that an expanded, ecological approach be used to effectively assess the dynamics involved. (See Figure 1.) They noted that it was a necessity to identify “...behavioral determinants including psychological factors...interpersonal processes, primary social groups...institutional factors...community factors, public policies, and physical environmental factors (Butler 2000, 13).

Ecological Approach Applied to Profiled Female Entrepreneurs

This section explores physical environmental factors, the historical context, social factors, and capacity of individual and resources that influenced the longevity of entrepreneurial women.

Physical Environmental Factors

Women born in the 1700s to the 1800s were primarily “frontier” immigrant women living through all of the dangers such a label implies. Women like Ann Lee, Mary Donoho, Abigail Dunaway, and Freda Ehmann crossed oceans, continents, mountains, and rivers by boat, wagon train, horseback, or early railcars often in the face of possible attack by robbers, Indians, or persons of malicious intent. Others were born into or were children of slavery; for example, Madame C. J. Walker, Lucy Laney, Clara Brown, Elizabeth Keckley, and Mary Ellen Pleasant.

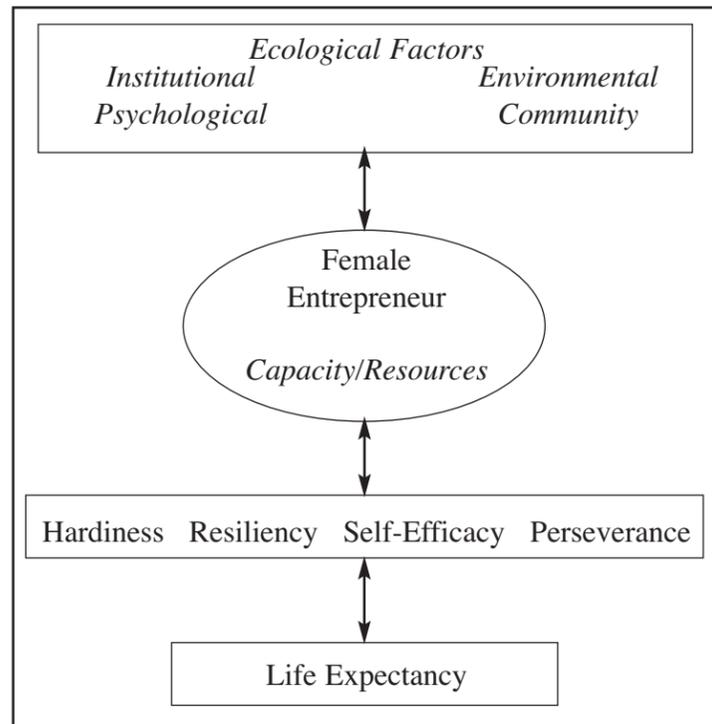


Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Female Entrepreneurs and Life Expectancy

Additionally, even women born into privilege, such as Henriette Delille, Juliette Low, Jane Addams, Lucy Scribner, and Katherine Drexel, gave their money away and, in the cases of Delille, Addams, and Drexel, chose to live in poverty to support their “missions.” Their goals might seem exaggerated if we could not place them in the historical framework in which these women found themselves.

Historical Context

For the first two centuries covered in this data, many women died because of the medical care of the times; for example, dying in childbirth, being medically diagnosed incorrectly because of the “dictates of Victorian prudishness” (Stage 1979, 78), or succumbing to infectious diseases in these preantibiotic days. Thus, when we review the life circumstances of the profiled women, we might wonder why they did not die young because so much was going against them in terms of health care. Juxtapose this with the following facts about some of these women.

Childbirth. Giving birth was a dangerous, life-threatening experience for women in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, Ann Lee (1736–1784), founder of the Shaker movement, gave birth to four children; Lydia Pinkham

(1819–1873), founder of the Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company, had four; Clara Brown (1803–1885), a former slave who became the owner of a number of laundry businesses and mining companies, had four; Rebecca Lukens (1794–1854), champion of the Lukens Steel company, had five; Mary Donoho (1807–1880), proprietress of the Donoho Hotel, had six; Abigail Duniway (1834–1915), founder/publisher of the *New Northwest* newspaper, had six; and Ninnie Baird (1869–1961) initiator of Mrs. Baird’s Bakeries, had eight.

Early Medical Practices. Medical practices during the early period of the United States were in the beginning development stages of this scientific endeavor; surgical instruments were not sterilized, bloodletting was practiced, and the doctors (almost entirely men) were not supposed to look at the naked body of a female. Juliette Low (1860–1927) had an ear infection that led to deafness, yet she founded the Girl Scouts of America. Julia Morgan (1872–1957), who led her own architectural firm for more than 46 years, had an “altered” line to her face because of a bone infection behind the ear. Susan La Flesche Picotte (1865–1915), the first female Native American medical doctor, became deaf and eventually died following a long struggle with cancer. The Walthill hospital she initiated in Nebraska was renamed the Dr. Susan Picotte Memorial Hospital in her honor.

Infections. Infections developed and spread quickly because those living in the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries did not have antibiotics or even widely practiced sanitation methods. Henriette Delille (1813–1862), founder of the Order of the Sisters of the Holy Family—a religious community for women of color as well as a school, hospital, and home for the sick, aged, and poor—suffered from pleurisy throughout her life. Susan Anderson, M.D. (1860–1960), went to Colorado because she was suffering from tuberculosis. Here she set up a frontier medical practice and survived calamities such as a diphtheria epidemic, an avalanche, blizzards, and mountain lions as she served her patients throughout this nascent state until she was 48 years old. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1912) was the first female medical doctor in the United States and the cofounder of the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. She had wanted to be a surgeon, but an eye disease she caught from a patient during her residency in France led to blindness in one eye.

Even though some people would be overwhelmed with such hurdles, none of these life experience factors limited what these women went on to accomplish. In fact, some of these negative dynamics could be viewed as “triggering events”—catalysts toward the ultimate entrepreneurial ventures of these women.

Social Factors

In addition to the physical and medical constraints noted above, a number of the women in this database suffered discrimination through racism, legal limitations, and gender-role expectations.

Racism. Henriette Delille (1813–1862) was a quadroon; that is, she was a woman of mixed blood who “passed” for white. She had access to money, education, etc. However, because she wanted to educate “Negroes,” she risked not only her own possible imprisonment but disgrace for her prominent family because of the laws forbidding education of those in bondage. And, in fact, her family disowned her because of her chosen mission. Clara Brown, was a slave until her owners freed her at the age of 57. Well aware that her newly acquired status was tenuous because of “nigger traders”—people who would steal former slaves’ legal documents and resell them as runaways—Brown went west to Colorado. Once she earned enough money through her many and varied businesses to go back to Kentucky, Brown risked her life on many occasions to bring other freed blacks out west and help them get established with jobs and homes. Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) was the 15th of 17 children born to her parents and the first to be born free. She went on to initiate the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls, Bethune–Cookman College, and McLeod Hospital and Training School for Nurses. Yet, racism was ever present in her life. As a young girl, she had been taunted and assaulted. As a young woman, she was denied her dream of becoming a missionary in Africa because the Presbyterian Church “had no openings for black missionaries” on that continent. As an established educator, she and her students were threatened by the Ku Klux Klan.

Illegal Actions. Illegal actions and legal constraints also were perpetrated on some of the entrepreneurial women. In assessing these experiences, we must remember that these women lived in times when females were considered a property of their fathers or husbands and did not yet have the right to vote. Harriet Hubbard Ayer (1849–1903), initiator of her own international cosmetics firm, was illegally declared mentally unfit and institutionalized. She went on to become a vocal advocate for the mentally ill. At the age of 21, Martha Coston’s (1826–1902) husband died, leaving her with three small boys to raise. She soon discovered she was penniless because her husband’s partners had swindled her of his assets. She went on to invent the Coston maritime signals and founded the Coston Supply Company. While still a teenager, Eliza Pinckney (1722–1793) was left in charge of her father’s plantation as well as the care of her mother and sibling. Since she had always been fascinated with botany, Eliza experimented with plants and eventually discovered how to successfully farm indigo in South Carolina, which then became a “cash crop” for that state. However, her overseer went to great lengths to sabotage her early efforts because of his loyalty to his native country, the island of Montserrat—the original source of the indigo harvest.

Gender-Role Expectations. In addition to the gender constraints noted above, female children had extremely limited access to education if they had any access at all. Emma Willard (1787–1870) was one of the first to change

this. Although she had actually begun to teach at the age of 16, Willard started her first school, Middlebury Female Seminary, when she was 27. She advocated that girls be taught such “nontraditional” subjects as science, mathematics, and social studies. Religion was another arena where females had limited opportunities until women like Ann Lee (1736–1784), the Shaker religion founder, and Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944), architect of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, chose this line of work. According to Oppedisano, Lee’s American persecutors had great difficulty accepting that a woman would choose to take this path. To “test their theory that she *had* to be a man in disguise, they tore her clothes and beat her across the chest—once in front of a judge in a court of law, and he didn’t object” (2000, 159). Even centuries later, Molly Haley (1942) was still feeling the constraints of being born female. In 1967 she was married and a schoolteacher, but had to leave her job when she became pregnant because women were not allowed to teach in this “condition.” She went on to establish Marblehead Handprints with her friend, Kathy Walters, a business that they shared for almost 25 years.

Capacity of Individual and Resources

In analyzing the life factors of these women, we must also consider the dynamics of an entrepreneurial venture itself. From the earliest definition of entrepreneurship to those frequently utilized now, such ventures incorporate starting an entity, taking risk (human, physical, and financial), and having an economic impact (Cantillon, in Brewer 1992). Certainly such an undertaking produces significant stress that puts strain on the entrepreneur’s body, mind, and spirit. For those willing to take on such responsibility, this choice could have a negative impact on overall life expectancy.

Once again, however, the women entrepreneurs seem to contradict such assumptions. In fact, some of these women did not even start their ventures until they were “past their prime”—that is, in their late 50s and beyond. Clara Brown was a slave until she was almost 60, yet she went on to become a noted miner, philanthropist, and elected member of the Colorado Pioneer Association. At 58, Freda Ehmman (1839–1932) was widowed and deeply in debt from investing in her son’s agricultural dream. Yet, with no relevant educational background, she went on to invent the process for preserving olives, initiated the Ehmman Olive Company, and was later acknowledged as the “mother” of the California ripe olive industry. Mary Baker Eddy founded the Church of Christ Scientist in 1879 when she was 58, and left an estate of \$2.5 million when she died at the age of 89. Her international church and its related enterprises are still thriving. In 1890, Amanda Theodisia Jones (1835–1914), age 55 and the holder of over six patents, started the United States Women’s Pure Food Vacuum Preserving Company. Clara Hale (1905–1992) began Hale House, a residential treatment center for drug-addicted babies, when she was 65 years

Table 1

Life Expectancy v. Actual Life Span for Women Entrepreneurs

Life Expectancy at Birth	Age at Death	Race/Ethnicity ¹	Entrepreneur ¹	Life Span ¹
1700-1799 25-35 ²	48	Caucasian	Lee, Ann	1736-1784
	60	Caucasian	Lukens, Rebecca	1794-1854
	71	Caucasian	Pinckney, Eliza	1722-1793
	83	Caucasian	Willard, Emma	1787-1870
1800-1899 35-45 ³	35	Caucasian	Smith, Elizabeth Drexel	1855-1890
	47	Caucasian	Seymour, Mary	1846-1893
	49	African American	Delille, Henriette	1813-1862
	50	Native American	Picotte, Susan La Flesche	1865-1915
	52	African American	Walker, Madame C./Breedlove	1867-1919
	54	Caucasian	Pinkham, Lydia	1819-1873
	54	Caucasian	Ayer, Harriet Hubbard	1849-1903
	54	Caucasian	McPherson, Aimee Semple	1890-1944
	67	African American	Walker, Maggie Lena	1867-1934
	67	Caucasian	Low, Juliette	1860-1927
	70	Caucasian	O'Neill, Rose	1874-1944
	70	Caucasian	Rudkin, Margaret	1897-1967
	72	Caucasian	Stinson, Emma	1868-1940
	73	Caucasian	Donoho, Mary	1807-1880
	75	Caucasian	Addams, Jane	1860-1935
	76	Caucasian	Coston, Martha	1826-1902
78	Caucasian	Scribner, Lucy Skidmore	1853-1931	
79	Caucasian	Jones, Amanda	1835-1914	
79	African American	Laney, Lucy	1854-1933	
79	Caucasian	Stinson, Marjorie	1896-1975	
80	Caucasian	Morrell, Louise Drexel	1863-1943	
80	African American	Bethune, Mary McLeod	1875-1955	
81	Caucasian	Duniway, Abigail	1834-1915	
82	African American	Brown, Clara	1803-1885	
82	Caucasian	Strong, Harriet	1844-1926	
82	Caucasian	Emery, Mary	1845-1927	
83	Caucasian	Day, Dorothy	1897-1980	
85	Caucasian	deWolfe, Elsie	1865-1950	
85	Caucasian	Morgan, Julia		
1872-1957	85	Caucasian	Everleigh, Ada	1875-1960
	85	Caucasian	Stinson, Katherine	1891-1977
	89	African American	Keckley, Elizabeth	1818-1907
	89	Caucasian	Blackwell, Elizabeth	1821-1912
	89	Caucasian	Eddy, Mary Baker	1821-1910
	90	African American	Pleasant, Mary Ellen	1814-1904
	92	Caucasian	Baird, Ninnie	1869-1961
	93	Caucasian	Ehmann, Freda	1839-1932
95	Caucasian	Behrman, Beatrice	1895-1990	
97	Caucasian	Bulliff, Dorothy Stinson	1892-1989	

Table 1 (con't.)

Life Expectancy at Birth	Age at Death	Race/Ethnicity ¹	Entrepreneur ¹	Life Span ¹
	97	Caucasian	Graham, Martha	1894-1991
	99	Native American	Martinez, Maria	1881-1980
	100	Caucasian	Anderson, Susan	1860-1960
1900-1940 49-67 ⁴	56	Caucasian	Graham, Bette Nesmeth	1924-1980
	85	Caucasian	Ash, Mary Kay	1916-2001
	87	Caucasian	Hale, Clara	1905-1992
	98	African American	Austin, Hattie Moseley	1900-1998
Still Living...	63	Asian	An, Helene	1938
	67	Caucasian	Hinds, Catherine	1934
	67	Caucasian	Steinem, Gloria	1934
	71	Caucasian	Siebert, Muriel	1930
	71	Caucasian	Treganowan, Lucille	1930
	74	Caucasian	Vernon, Lillian	1927
	75	Caucasian	Billings, Patricia	1926
	78	Caucasian	Caplan, Frieda	1923
	81	African American	Stewart, Ellen	1920
	91	Caucasian	Duss, Vera	1910

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- Adapted from the U.S. Census Bureau. 1995. *Sixty-five plus in the United States*, <http://www.census.gov/socdemo/www/age-brief/html> (accessed July 11, 2001).
- Adapted from the U.S. Census Bureau. 1975. *Historical statistics of the United States: Part I*; Vinovskis, M., ed. 1979. *Studies in American historical demography*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Adapted from the Berkeley Mortality Database. 1998, <http://www.demog.berkeley.edu/wilmoth/mortality/overview.html> (accessed July 11, 2001); U.S. Government, National Vital Statistics Report. 1999. *Estimated life expectancy at birth in years, by race and sex: Death-registration States, 1900-28, and United States, 1929-97*: 32-33.

old. And Patricia Billings (1926) initiated the Geobond Company, a chemical research facility, as she was turning 70.

Although primarily only one example of life circumstances is presented in the text for each of these women, most of them experienced multiples of these factors such as death of or divorce from a spouse, racism and sexism, poverty, danger, poor health as well as shouldering responsibility for parents, children, and community. Thus, their life expectancy should be shorter than what was projected for their contemporaries, not longer. (See Table 1 for a listing of these women, their life expectancy at birth, and their age at death.)

Toward a Better Understanding of Life Expectancy and Women Entrepreneurs

The women entrepreneurs born between 1720 and 1940 who were profiled by Oppedisano (2000) lived much longer lives than their generational counterparts (see Table 2). Their significant successes in the face of great adversity may be due to their innate personalities. It certainly

appears that, rather than being overcome or defeated by adversity, these women turned stressful events into life-changing possibilities and opportunities for their personal and professional development and that of others around them.

Some might argue that longevity of entrepreneurs cannot be compared directly with the general population life expectancy at birth because the former suffers from a form of survivor bias. However, the differences in Table 2 are so great that further research is warranted to understand their causes.

Research on hardiness, resiliency, self-efficacy, and perseverance in the face of adversity holds much promise in understanding the factors that contributed to the long lives of the profiled women entrepreneurs. Four major research constructs emerge about which greater understanding is needed for the relevant contribution to life expectancy for female entrepreneurship.

Hardiness

Research was initiated on the hardiness concept in the mid-1970s by Salvatore Maddi at the Illinois Bell

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Dr. Oppedisano has practitioner experience as an executive administrator, teacher, researcher, and entrepreneur. For more than 10 years, she has been writing about and encouraging the direct approach of economic independence for girls and women as a faster, more effective, less emotionally debilitating route to equality. In the fall of 2000, Dr. Oppedisano published the first *Encyclopedia of American Women Entrepreneurs 1776 to the Present* (Greenwood Press). Her articles and case studies have appeared in several journals as well as in many academic proceedings. Dr. Oppedisano established the first women's multidisciplinary entrepreneurship course at Skidmore College and the first to be offered at Southern Connecticut State University. While at Skidmore, she also spearheaded the effort to bring the summer entrepreneurship program for teenage girls, Camp \$tart-Up, to the college.



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Prior to coming to SCSU, Dr. Lueder was a principal planner for the state of New Jersey in the Department of Institutions and Agencies and the Department of Community Affairs. Subsequently, she joined United Engineers and Constructors, Inc., a subsidiary of Raytheon, as a manager of technical subdiscipline and environmental planning.