

# Critical incidents among women entrepreneurs: Personal and professional issues

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## RESUMO

### Incidentes críticos envolvendo mulheres empreendedoras: O entrelaçamento de questões pessoais e profissionais

O objetivo neste trabalho é apresentar os resultados de uma pesquisa em que se analisam situações críticas vivenciadas por mulheres empreendedoras, e buscar entender como elas superam tais situações. O estudo contribui conceitualmente para o entendimento das questões que circundam as atividades das mulheres empreendedoras e, na perspectiva metodológica, mostra que a utilização da técnica de incidentes críticos é relevante para o desenvolvimento de pesquisas no campo do empreendedorismo. A coleta de dados foi feita por formulário específico com 115 mulheres participantes do estudo. A análise dos incidentes críticos evidencia que, ao lado de questões práticas na gestão, emoções se entrelaçam para o desenvolvimento dos negócios. Diferentemente de estudos internacionais no campo, constata-se que nos incidentes críticos vividos por empreendedoras brasileiras, os aspectos pessoais confundem-se com os profissionais, acarretando problemas desafiadores nessas duas esferas da vida. O grupo de mulheres empreendedoras participantes da pesquisa enfrentam tais dificuldades mobilizadas por emoções, mas também movidas por fortes sentimentos de superação.

**Palavras-chave:** mulheres, empreendedoras, incidentes críticos.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been over sixty years since the publication of John Flanagan's article in *Psychological Bulletin* (Flanagan, 1954), which introduced the critical incident technique (CIT) based on the studies he conducted during World War

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II. Since then, the technique has been used in a number of fields of knowledge to identify significant events and examine how they are managed, always from the perspective of the individual (Thorpe & Holt, 2012). A search of the Proquest database for the last 40 years using the key words “critical incident technique”, identified 297 articles. Of these, 33% were in the field of Health (nursing, medicine, social services), 24% in Management, 15% in Psychology, 14% in Education, 9% in Information Science and 5% in other fields.

Of the 71 articles in the field of Management that used the critical incident technique, 36% addressed the quality of services and interaction between customers and salespeople. These were followed by articles related to Human Resources (24%), General Management (19%), Information Technology (10%), Communication (7%) and Entrepreneurship (4%). In other words, only three articles (Stokes, 2000; Taylor & Thorpe, 2004; Turcan, 2011) of the 297 listed in the Proquest database made use of this technique in this field.

In Brazil, a survey of the Spell database identified only one article (Angnes & Moyano, 2013) published in the field of Management and Tourism using this methodology.

Although studies on women entrepreneurs are nothing new, the studies identified above that used the critical incident technique do not address specific issues facing women entrepreneurs. Here there is an opportunity to conduct research using this methodology to understand the difficulties facing women entrepreneurs in the development of their businesses.

In the Brazilian context, many studies focus on analyzing the behavior and characteristics of these women (see, for example, Barbosa, Carvalho, Simões, & Teixeira, 2011; Cramer, Cappelle, Andrade, & Brito, 2012; Ferreira & Nogueira, 2013; Gouvêa, Silveira, & Machado, 2013; Machado, 2009; Machado, Gazola, & Anez, 2013; Nassif, Andreassi, Tonelli, & Fleury, 2012; Nunes, Ferreira, Minuzzi, & Casarotto Filho, 2009; Silveira, Gouvêa, & Hoeltgebaum, 2008; Vale, Serafim, & Teodósio, 2011). At the international level, studies look at trends among women entrepreneurs in the technology sector and start-ups in the entrepreneurial education process (Auchter & Kriz, 2013). They also look at gender differences in business administration (Carter, Anderson, & Shaw, 2001), recognition of entrepreneurial opportunities by women entrepreneurs (Eckhardt & Shane, 2003), decisions to innovate and take risks and how these differ between women and men (Sonfield, Lussier, Corman, & McKinney, 2001), the competencies of women entrepreneurs (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010) and other aspects.

Despite the diversity of studies that address the specific aspects of women in entrepreneurship, Ahl (2006) argues that research on women entrepreneurs should seek new directions in order to stop reproducing work on the subordination of women or simply comparing genders. The author stresses the importance of producing studies in which women entrepreneurs are the central element of analysis, performing the role of an

active agent, creating jobs and products, or even operating as business managers.

With a view to bridging this gap, this article aims to analyze critical situations experienced by women entrepreneurs and understand how they overcome them. We believe that the results of this study can contribute towards an understanding of the particular experiences of women entrepreneurs. We propose using the Critical Incident technique as a methodology that will substantially aid understanding of the significant experiences of women entrepreneurs in the management of their businesses.

Research using Critical Incidents is eminently qualitative (Thorpe & Holt, 2012). By enabling the recording and analysis of behavior (Yin, 2009), it can help to achieve a better understanding of the challenges involved in being an entrepreneur. In this case, a critical situation is understood as a very serious occurrence experienced by the women entrepreneurs who were interviewed that could have led to the closure of their businesses. The results can aid the development of public policies for entrepreneurs and the structuring of training and educational programs for entrepreneurs or help small business consultants to provide better guidance.

To contribute to the debate, this article has been organized into four sections. The first includes a brief review of the literature on the theoretical approach that guides this study to identify themes and insufficiently explored issues in research on women entrepreneurs. In the second, the methodological research procedures are presented. In the third, the results are given and discussed in the light of the related theory. The study is brought to a close with the limits and proposals for future studies.

## 2. CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL ISSUES SURROUNDING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The European Economic and Social Committee held a plenary session in September of 2013 to prepare a report on the social issues and citizenship. The first item in the report refers to women in the following terms:

Women employment should no longer be raised as another debate on gender equality, but instead as an economic imperative to bring prosperity and jobs to the European Union – a social necessity to face the challenges of demographics, social and environmental concerns to ensure sustainable growth (Official Journal of the European Union, September 21, 2013).

As far back as 2001, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001, p. 260) pointed to the need for a better understanding of how to promote entrepreneurship among women with a view to eliminating the specific obstacles they face when it comes to creating

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