



The contextual characteristics of successful small upper segment culinary restaurant owners and their potential influence on hospitality management education

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

To explore how the contextual characteristics of successful small upper segment culinary restaurant owners (SSUSCROs) potentially can be used in hospitality management education, in order to have students, faculty, programme and management connected to the professional work field.

Objectives

1. To describe and explain SSUSCROs' value systems, other driving powers and social context.
2. To provide an insight into how the SSUSCROs see and experience their professional and personal lives, and what constitutes the definition of being successful based on their careers.
3. To suggest ways as to how the characteristics and vision of the SSUSCROs

potentially can be used in hospitality management education.

Methodology

The research was designed from a constructionist epistemological point of view, which means that the data supplied by the respondents, and the background and vision of the researcher provided an interplay. By using grounded theory methodology, theory is constructed from the empirical data. Six retired, four practising famous Dutch restaurant owners, and a connoisseur of the business were interviewed in one to three hour depth interviews that were digitally recorded. The verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews were analysed line-by-line, applying the specific constructivist version of grounded theory methodology as described by Charmaz's (2006).

Results

The research generated a grounded theory in the form of a conceptual model visualizing the SSUSCRO social construct and a narrative about its central theme 'Living the Business'. The model and connected narrative inform future practitioners i.e. students, about how they can prepare for possible future business ventures in the culinary restaurant business. Furthermore, it informs practitioners and educators in hospitality management about the particular contextual characteristics and value systems that are important for successfully engaging in and sustaining a career in the culinary restaurant sector. Elements of the narrative, connected to Covey's 7-Habits of Highly Effective People framework for personal leadership.

Theoretical conclusions

Balazs's (2001, 2002) research into French three Michelin star chefs seemed to be the strongest example of earlier literature related to the SSUSCRO study. This could be considered as an example of SSUSCROs' contextual characteristics indirectly influencing education. Balazs's approach was found valuable, but limited when considering this research in the Dutch situation. There were more interesting places and people to research than only three Michelin star restaurants and successful restaurant owners were not necessarily also the chef. Another important dimension missing in Balazs's research was the 'dark side of the SSUSCRO world', in which elements of business and personal life go wrong. One more example in the literature is from Johnson et al. (2005) who looked at two- or three Michelin star restaurants in France, Belgium, Switzerland and UK, and found that the entrepreneurs had challenges with finances and staff. Neither Balazs nor Johnson et al. came up with the notion that hospitality management programmes could potentially benefit from their findings, which in contrast became clear from the SSUSCRO research. Relating to the more general restaurant entrepreneurship literature, it was interesting to see that the Virtuous Circle of Enlightened Hospitality (Meyer, 2006) was not reflected in the practices of the SSUSCROs. Putting staff as

a first priority for entrepreneurs is not custom and illustrates an interesting point for further discussion. The Viability Model for Successful Restaurant Entrepreneurship of Camillo et al. (2008) has potential leads to explain what influences successful restaurant entrepreneurship and many aspects were found to be valid among the SSUSCROs. Camillo et al. reported about the creative emotional factors that affect success and provided examples of the destructive factors that cause entrepreneurs to lose track. The influence of emotional and operational factors were confirmed by the SSUSCROs with particular emphasis on the cost-, location- and human resources related issues. In the specific small upper segment culinary restaurant sector, aspects of culinary performance and artistry, and balancing this with financial aspects, turned out to be much more important than presented in Camillo et al's model. The sense of 'communityship' such as presented by Mintzberg (2011) was found to be present in the way the SSUSCROs referred to their way of managing, but none of them actually used the term nor indirectly indicated being aware of it. Personal leadership strategies such as the 7-Habits (Covey, 2004) approach and Quinn et al's (2011) Competing Values Framework were not recognized within the culinary restaurant sector. In building the SSUSCRO Social Construct as the grounded theory of this research, however, there turned out to be some aspects of the See-Do-Get circle present which seems to support one of the principles in the 7-Habits approach. The SSUSCRO Social Construct also reflected the critical comments to the 7-Habits model in the sense that becoming successful is much more complex and more dependent on other than individual factors than is acknowledged in the 7-Habits model.

Practical application of the dissertation

The contribution to current practice is divided in three sections: A. Advice to would be SSUSCROs – entering, sustaining and exiting, B. Education and support, and C. Bridging the gap between the two worlds. Throughout the past two decades, attention to culinary aspects in society such as high

quality food and beverages, has significantly increased. Furthermore, a wealth of information has become available about the chefs and restaurants that offer culinary products and services. People have become more interested and increasingly knowledgeable about culinary aspects of life. Television shows about preparing high quality food such as 'MasterChef', are broadcasted in many countries in the world, and this has increased the awareness of the general public about this topic. Hospitality management programmes educate students to be employed in a diversity of hospitality management related fields. Although the culinary restaurant sector only constitutes a relatively small proportion of the total Dutch hospitality industry (0.2-0.5% of the total number of restaurants), it is the segment where customer quality demands and prices are high. This means that practitioners, and particularly entrepreneurs, within the culinary restaurant sector are faced with a challenging profession. They need to perform at a high level in order to sustain and to be successful. The increasingly available information about culinary products and the media presence of chefs would make it tempting to choose a career in the culinary restaurant sector or one that is closely related. Hospitality management programmes are in many countries one of the most obvious pathways towards a career in management or entrepreneurship in the hospitality industry. Although knowledge and skills related to the culinary restaurant sector are part of many hospitality management programmes, the literature review in this research revealed that there is virtually no research based in-depth knowledge about entrepreneurship in this specific segment. The findings of the SSUSCRO research can potentially benefit both hospitality management practice and education.

Content of the thesis

Abstract of chapter one

In this chapter the context of the research is explained. It is about a particular group of Dutch restaurant owner's (SSUSCROs) and how their contextual characteristics might be used in a professional hospitality education

programme. This very small segment of the Dutch restaurant business is known for its strong commitment to competitiveness, in delivering quality service and products. No previous research in The Netherlands had embarked on an in-depth investigation in order to connect this specific category of practitioners to education.

Abstract of chapter two

In this chapter the literature review is presented. It became clear that the contextual characteristics of SSUSCROs and the environment in which they operate could only be partly described and explored by the available literature. Entrepreneurship and specifically restaurant entrepreneurship were taken as the starting point. Literature about where the contextual characteristics of SSUSCROs were used in education was virtually absent.

The category of leadership and management, provided some direction as well as the body of knowledge on 'value systems' and 'driving powers' (personality traits). The literature review helped to formulate direction and approach for the field study and it assisted in setting the context for choosing a grounded theory methodology, and the content for the interviews with the SSUSCROs.

Abstract of chapter three

A constructivist grounded theory approach was applied as suggested by Charmaz (2006). Ten entrepreneurs and one lifetime connoisseur of the restaurant segment were asked about their experiences and perception by means of depth interviews. Each interview was coded line-by-line after it had been transcribed, and categories and potential conceptual themes were continually created, refined and verified. The information obtained from the first eight individual interviews subsequently formed the basis for defining code labels and categories that captured the SSUSCROs worlds and from which the SSUSCRO social construct emerged. After tentatively formulating the SSUSCRO social construct, three additional interviews were done to engage in theoretical sampling in which the findings were compared and

validated. An essential element in the research process was the writing of theoretical memos that captured the ongoing thoughts of theorizing while analysing the data.

Abstract of chapter four

The first round of interviews resulted in an unstructured overview of codes, which then were further explored in order to generate categories. Developing categories initiated searching for the theoretical elevation in the process. The emerging categories were connected to the research questions. The first category was called: 'personality related', which held the codes that were close to the person, the individual entrepreneur himself. Then next, connected to the person in the story were the situations happening or the issues presenting themselves to the SSUSCRO in life. This category was marked as 'Issues/happenings/themes' and contained codes like 'challenges', 'moments of change', 'the economic situation', 'family & partner', 'perceived quality of life' and 'influencing people or situations'. Throughout the interviews, a code 'dark side of SSUSCRO life' emerged, which was used to mark the negative occurrences that SSUSCROs encountered and how they affected their lives. Next step was to move from categories to conceptual themes and 'personality related' led to the theme of '*constituting*', the beginning. The second category was defined as '*valuing*'. The process followed Saldana's (2009, p. 12) suggestion to progress from the coding to the eventual theory and elevating the analysis via categories and themes, moving from the 'real' and 'particular' captured in the coding process to the more 'abstract' and 'general' in the theory of the SSUSCRO social construct and Living the Business.

Abstract of chapter five

In this chapter the second part of the findings is presented under the two concepts of 'facing' and 'managing'. The concept of 'facing' is mainly connected to the challenges that entrepreneurs come across, but it also about how they deal with the world around them. The themes that emerged were: 'keeping the business alive', 'influencing the SSUSCRO', 'doing the right things right', 'getting towards the end. The concept of 'managing' relates to the way the successful entrepreneurs did their business and the following themes were identified: 'managing costs and traffic', 'working - changing and sustaining', 'focusing on the big picture and the details', 'getting the money in and out', 'being successful or not', 'shining stars not always found', 'being in a people business', 'profiling and connecting'. The chapter explains the SSUSCRO Social Construct.

Abstract of chapter six

In the final chapter a reflection on the research is offered in terms of the theoretical approach applied and what was learned from it. The benefits and drawbacks of the chosen research design are considered. The findings contributing to the practice of hospitality management and education are presented. The social construct of the successful small upper segment culinary restaurant owner is reflected upon. Explanation is given about how the central theme 'Living the Business' can be put to use in hospitality management education and recommendations for practice and further research are given.