





Positive deviant unemployed individuals: Survivalist entrepreneurs in marginalised communities



Authors:

Melinda du Toit¹ 
 Hans de Witte^{2,3} 
 Sebastiaan Rothmann² 
 Anja van den Broeck^{2,4} 

Affiliations:

¹The Center for Social Development in Africa (CSDA), University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

²Optentia Research Focus Area, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

³Department of Research Group Work Organisational and Personnel Psychology, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

⁴Work and Organization Studies, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Corresponding author:

Sebastiaan Rothmann,
 ian@ianrothmann.com

Dates:

Received: 29 May 2019
 Accepted: 02 July 2020
 Published: 29 Sept. 2020

How to cite this article:

Du Toit, M., De Witte, H., Rothmann, S., & Van den Broeck, A. (2020). Positive deviant unemployed individuals: Survivalist entrepreneurs in marginalised communities. *South African Journal of Business Management* 51(1), a1627. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v51i1.1627>

Copyright:

© 2020. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Purpose: This exploratory study aimed to provide a description of the experiences and perceptions of survivalist entrepreneurs in under-resourced communities. These survivalist entrepreneurs perceived themselves as 'temporary' entrepreneurs. They engaged in entrepreneurial ventures, whilst actively searching for secure formal employment.

Design/methodology/approach: Qualitative interviews were conducted with four informal survivalist microenterprise entrepreneurs (ISM-E entrepreneurs). Narratives relating to their experiences and perceptions of their environment, community and government support and their experience of owning a microenterprise in an impoverished community were analysed inductively.

Findings/results: Fourteen themes were identified and were grouped under two broad topics, namely the characterisation of the entrepreneur and the surrounding setting of the ISM-E entrepreneur. The discussion of the findings was presented in a positive deviance framework.

Practical implications: It was proposed that the ingenuity and strengths of these ISM-E entrepreneurs be acknowledged and that their positive discourses be cultivated and encouraged in order to inspire unemployed people around them. These ISM-E entrepreneurs could, ideally, point social scientists to possible context-appropriate solutions to the huge unemployment challenge experienced in disadvantaged communities.

Originality/value: This study addresses a knowledge gap pertaining to the exploration of micro-entrepreneurship in under-resourced communities within a positive deviance framework.

Keywords: unemployment; positive deviance; under-resourced communities; microbusiness entrepreneurs; informal entrepreneurs; South Africa.

Introduction

Informal enterprises is an alternative available to unemployed individuals (Fourie, 2011; Ligthelm, 2006; Ranyane, 2015; Robertson & Choto, 2015; Yu, 2012). Research has shown that unemployed people become informal entrepreneurs not because they see it as a preferred career choice, but singularly driven by necessity (Ligthelm, 2006; Woodward, Ligthelm, & Guimarães, 2011). Morris and Pitt (1995) argued that personal survival rather than profit-driven motivation is the most important force behind entry into an informal entrepreneurial venture.

South Africa's informal entrepreneurial sector appears to be particularly underdeveloped (Yu, 2012). Especially given the reality of a steadily increasing unemployment rate over the past nine years (Yu, 2012). For the first quarter of 2020, the official unemployment rate reached 30.1%, with the expanded unemployment rate reported at 39.7% (Statistics SA, 2020). Academics have, therefore, posed the following questions: 'Why do the unemployed not enter the informal sector, as is common in other developing countries?' (Kingdon & Knight, 2004, p. 391) and 'Where are the South African entrepreneurs?' (Manyaka, 2015, p. 2).

Depending on the definition used, it is estimated that between 1 and 2 million people are involved in small informal self-owned entrepreneurial undertakings (Bradford, 2007, p. 95; Statistics South Africa, 2014). However, many people involved in this sector are survivalist entrepreneurs and may leave the sector when they enter formal employment or when a family member is employed. Survivalist entrepreneurs are individuals involved in microenterprises with a specific survivalist objective. A microenterprise is owner-managed and is assisted by unpaid family and/or fewer than five employees (according to the classification of the *National Small Business Amendment Act 26 of 2003*). Survivalist entrepreneurs are thus involved in the informal selling of services and products with a very small profit margin in order to earn an

income for the basic survival of their families. The survivalist entrepreneurial venture is almost exclusively there to be a buffer against starvation and other poverty-related issues (Fourie, 2011; Ranyane, 2015; Robertson & Choto, 2015). The extent of the sluggish flow from unemployment to informal entrepreneurship becomes clear when the estimated number of 1.4 m informal entrepreneurs given in the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 1 of 2017, is compared with the 9.2 m unemployed people for the same quarter. Except for informal self-employment not being taken up by enough unemployed South Africans as an alternative to formal employment, a further challenge is that 70% to 80% of informal entrepreneurial ventures fail in the first year, and only 50% of the remaining group survive after 5 years (Strydom, 2017).

Defining 'positive deviance' and 'entrepreneur'

The concept of positive deviance (PD) originated in the 1970s in the healthcare field. The concept was used to explain the occurrence of children who, unexpectedly, did not suffer from malnutrition, despite having the same environment as the majority of children who were suffering from malnutrition. Positive deviance cases are thus seen as those individuals or occurrences that can be typified as exceptional cases amongst the general population of cases. The deviance is termed positive because the outcome of the behaviour of these deviants results in improved situations or positive changes. Positive deviance refers to strategies that enable some individuals to overcome their challenges better than other individuals faced with exactly the same difficult situations and equal lack of resources. From the literature, the following definition was constructed: Positive deviance is extraordinary, non-normative, unconventional, conscious and unexpected strategies and behaviour employed by individuals that put them in an enhanced position in relation to others in the same situation or context (Bhattacharyal & Singh, 2019; Huffman, Tracy, & Bisel, 2019; Marsh, Schroeder, Dearden, Sternin, & Sternin, 2004; Rose & McCullough, 2017; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). The fact that these positive deviants succeed in overcoming barriers in the same challenging context points to possible context-appropriate solutions 'that are currently feasible because someone is already employing them [in that context]' (Rose & McCullough, 2017, p. 1208).

The term 'entrepreneurs' refers to all persons who manage enablers and constraints in order to engage in actions for the purpose of earning an income by establishing an enterprise that provides a service or trades products (Mazzarol, 2013; Ramoglou, 2011). From an integration of the definitions given by Hartnack and Liedeman (2017), Jackson (2016), Ligthelm (2006) and Woodward et al. (2011), this study used the following definition of an informal enterprise: any enterprise that is small, community-based, owner-managed, unregistered, unregulated, untaxed, unrecorded and resultantly unprotected. The emphasis in

this study was particularly on South African nationals in informal survivalist microenterprises (ISM-Es) operating only in the townships and, additionally, on entrepreneurs who could be described as 'unwilling, survivalist, necessity-driven' entrepreneurs (Bradford, 2007; Hartnack & Liedeman, 2017; Ligthelm, 2006; Rakabe, 2017; Woodward et al., 2011; Yu, 2012). The terms 'enterprise', 'business', 'undertaking', 'operation' and 'venture' are used interchangeably here to refer to the activity or concern in which the entrepreneur is involved. In addition, the term 'informal entrepreneur' refers to the self-employed entrepreneur.

Context of the informal entrepreneur

The informal township entrepreneur

Acknowledging the taxing environment and the apparent lack of support experienced by township entrepreneurs, it seems logical that they should be able to manage limited resources in an unpredictable environment (Mazzarol, 2013). Much of the literature depicts the ISM-E entrepreneur as having, first, a lack of inherited business acumen and experience because of the country's history (Ntema, 2016; Perks, 2010), second, a strained development of the social capital necessary in the business domain as well as a limited social network – also because of the particular historical background (Kingdon & Knight, 2004) – and, third, 'alarmingly low levels of education', especially because of poverty and the deprived township community (Willemse, 2013, p. 169). Most township entrepreneurs do not have the benefit of role models (Donaldson & Du Plessis, 2013; Ntema, 2016). Moving from unemployment to an informal venture in impoverished and marginalised communities means that there are limited resources available to these entrepreneurs to start a business (Bradford, 2007; Woodward et al., 2011). Informal entrepreneurship is primarily regarded as an interim plan to survive or as a stepping stone to a formal job (Fourie, 2011; Rakabe, 2017; Ramoglou, 2011; Woodward et al., 2011).

Township reality: The space and relations that have an impact on informal entrepreneurship

The term 'township' refers to spaces on the periphery of formal developed villages, towns or cities, typically situated between 3 and 8 km from the formal economic hubs of the region. These living spaces are characterised by dilapidated infrastructure and limited access to modern facilities; they are sometimes described as emerging Third World environments (Donaldson & Du Plessis, 2013; Du Toit & Neves, 2007; Rakabe, 2017). This geographical organisation of the urban and rural landscape of South Africa is a remnant of the pre-democratic era of South African history (Du Toit & Neves, 2007, p. 20) and continues to have an impact on the informal entrepreneurs of today (Kingdon & Knight, 2004; Pranger, 2006; Willemse, 2013).

A challenge for many entrepreneurs is fierce competition in their township environment. The first source of competition

is the growing number of foreign nationals opening informal businesses in the townships (Hartnack & Liedeman, 2017; Manyaka, 2015; Ntema, 2016; Rakabe, 2017; Willemse, 2013). The second source is the current trend of erecting shopping malls containing large retail stores on the outskirts of townships (Du Toit & Neves, 2007; Ligthelm, 2006; Ntema, 2016; Strydom, 2017). The third source of competition is other members of the community. Woodward et al. (2011) termed it the 'copy-cat mentality' (p. 67), where those entrepreneurial ideas that are cheap and easy to set up are duplicated by others in the community (Du Toit & Neves, 2007).

Relations with the township community constitute an additional taxing situation for the informal township entrepreneur (Du Toit & Neves, 2007; Hartnack & Liedeman, 2017; Parkinson & Howorth, 2017). A conducive relationship with other members of the community is of the utmost importance to informal township entrepreneurs, as these people are their customers. Therefore, conflict with the people in their immediate environment will affect their business negatively.

South African government and informal entrepreneurship

Judging by the many initiatives that have been put in place by the first democratic government of South Africa, it is clear that stimulating the development of small businesses and entrepreneurial ventures is a priority. To date, the South African government has undertaken the following initiatives to address this issue: the Small Business Development Agency (SEDA), Community Self-Employment Centres (COMSECs), the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) (Fury, 2010, p. 12). In addition, there are the South African Black Entrepreneurs Forum (SABEF) and the Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA) (United Nations – Office of the Secretary-General Envoy on Youth, 2014). Rakabe (2017) wrote that 'government has recently acknowledged that support for township informal enterprises is a key way in which township spatial and economic marginalisation can be addressed and local growth be ignited' (p. 1).

It appears that the strategies of both local and national government are ineffective. In the words of Xaba, Horn and Motala (2002):

The Department of Trade and Industry acknowledged that the Small Business strategy had not been successful in relation to the poorest and most marginalised people it had been designed to assist. (p. 26)

According to the available literature, there appear to be various possible reasons why the initiatives of the South African government fail to bear fruit. These include four constraining factors. First, there is a lack of consultation with informal entrepreneurs (Donaldson & Du Plessis, 2013; Jackson, 2016). Second, implementation strategies appear

to be insufficient, and there is a lack of implementation. According to Bradford (2007), one possible reason for the lack of sufficient implementation might be the absence of necessary financial and human resources of the South African government in order to address the vast need and massive demand. Third, there is a failure to grasp the lived reality of the informal microentrepreneur and very small entrepreneur (Du Toit & Neves, 2007; Pranger, 2006). Lastly, the emphasis is skewed towards only the medium, more formal enterprises, whilst ignoring and failing to give support to smaller entrepreneurs; the emphasis also tends to be on regulating instead of supporting (Hartnack & Liedeman, 2017; Ntema, 2016).

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to deduce from the narratives of the ISM-E entrepreneurs what aspects in their behaviour, attitude and/or perceptions (characterisation) could explain their apparent success in earning a living through entrepreneurship in a seemingly unconducive environment (positive deviance). Based on what we learnt from their positively deviant characteristics, suggestions will be made regarding context-appropriate interventions for unemployed people.

Research method

The purpose of the qualitative data collection was to elicit rich, nuanced narratives of the experiences of black South African-born informal township entrepreneurs. Qualitative research is highly suggested by most of the authors writing on the advantages of PD research because of the benefits regarding the understanding of context and nuances (Huffman et al., 2019; Rose & McCullough, 2017). The foundation of this study was a phronetic epistemology and a phenomenological approach. A PD framework was utilised to explain the findings. Phronesis, as explained by Flyvbjerg (2010) and Tracy (2013), means doing research in such a way that it involves caring and respect and adding practical value; it is performed in collaboration with the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined phenomenology as the study of 'the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon' (p. 75).

The rigour, sincerity, credibility and resonance (Tracy, 2013) of the study were ensured by involving cultural experts, community experts and African language experts to thoroughly review the guiding interview questions and comment on all aspects of the data collection processes. A research advisory board was appointed, made up of community leaders, government officials, academics and business owners. At a biannual feedback session, this advisory board could provide input regarding the research processes and findings. In addition, the co-interviewers were considered experts in the specific context, culture and language of the communities involved in this research.

Thus, they assisted in reviewing the interview transcripts to control for authenticity. Reflective conversations and discussion of the findings with them took place as well. Furthermore, a co-coder was involved in validating the coding of the data. Valuable rapport with members of the community was established over a 4-year period in which the primary researcher did voluntary work in the two communities.

Research context, participants, and data gathering procedure

Data were collected from two townships: Boipatong and Orange Farm. Boipatong has a population of 22 168, of whom 99.3% are black individuals. From the census carried out in 2011, it was reported that 'Only 17.7% of the sampled population in Boipatong are formally employed' (Frith, 2011a). The unemployment rate in the larger region in which Boipatong is situated was estimated to stand at 60.7% in 2003 (Slabbert, 2004). The much larger Orange Farm has a population of 76 767, of whom 99.4% are black people (Frith, 2011b). A report from the Affordable Land and Housing Data Centre (2012) estimated that approximately 60% of the total population in Orange Farm was unemployed in 2012. Moreover, an estimated 70% of the inhabitants lived below the poverty line (<USD 1 per day).

The data-gathering phase of this study was part of a bigger study aimed at understanding the experiences of unemployed people living in two under-resourced, marginalised communities. The aim of the broader project was to arrive at a deep and nuanced understanding of perceptions and experiences of unemployment in this context through involving various community groups to advise on a context-appropriate, best-practice intervention. Consequently, community leaders, service providers, recently employed individuals and employers were included in interviews that probed perceptions, behaviour and experiences of unemployment in the two targeted communities. The primary researcher conducted 48 semi-structured interviews, extracting narratives on the daily experience of unemployment, from either personally experiencing it or from its impact on the community and community members.

Initially, this study did not identify ISM-E entrepreneurs as a separate group, only employers with at least six employees. However, in recruiting unemployed individuals, it became apparent that a few of the 'unemployed individuals' who had been recruited were engaged in a small venture that kept them occupied every day and earned them a meagre income whilst they were searching for formal employment. They were, therefore, not unemployed according to the true meaning of the word. For this group, their microenterprises were perceived as an 'interim job' whilst they kept looking for more formal employment. These individuals differed markedly from the 'other unemployed' people who were also looking for work, but who were not involved in any 'interim income-generating

activity'. This prompted the researchers to study this group more closely, combined with the findings from the study of the unemployed participants. The findings pertaining to the thematic analysis of the interviews with the unemployed interviewees were published by Du Toit, De Witte, Rothmann and Van den Broeck (2018b).

Survivalist entrepreneurs were sampled through a purposive sampling strategy. Those who met the inclusion criteria were recruited at local shops and taverns in different areas in the community (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) The participant had to be the owner of an ISM-E doing business exclusively in Boipatong or Orange Farm. (2) The informal microventure had to be owned by the participant, and he/she had to be involved in the business on a full-time basis. (3) The business had to employ fewer than five employees. (4) The business had to be older than 2 years. (5) The participants had to indicate that the venture was perceived as a part-time venture and a strategy to address their unemployment status. (6) The individual had to be actively searching for a job. (7) The informant had to be South African-born or had to have South African citizenship. (8) The age of the participant had to be between 18 and 64 years. (9) The participant had to be able to communicate his or her own thoughts, experiences and feelings in Afrikaans, English, isiZulu or Sesotho.

The most suitable method for gaining deep and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences was to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews (Silverman, 2011). Semi-structured recorded interviews of between 60 and 120 min duration were conducted with four informal microventure township entrepreneurs. The following were the main guiding questions – all of which were further probed depending on the story that unfolded:

1. Complete this sentence: I was unemployed until I started my own little business. When I think back, unemployment was like ... (How did it made you feel/think? What did you do?)
2. When I was unemployed, people in the community described me as ...
3. Describe what you and people in your community do to earn some sort of income.
4. To your mind, what is the reason for the high unemployment rate in our country?
5. If we could have the President of South Africa here today, what would you tell him or request of him to improve your or your community's situation?
6. Describe your experience of help and support (ubuntu) in your community.
7. Describe your feelings towards traditional African rituals or ceremonies. How do these help (or not) with the success/failures of your business?
8. What do you anticipate your future to be like? Is there hope for the future, and what are your plans?
9. What do you think makes you different from the unemployed people in your community who are not involved in entrepreneurial businesses?

TABLE 1: Description of the participants.

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Education	Type	Employees	Years in business
D3: Rihana	F	24	Not completed secondary school	Fruit and vegetables	1	Between 2 and 5 years
D4: Tomuch	M	34	Not completed secondary school	Car wash	0	Between 2 and 5 years
D5: Star	M	31	Not completed secondary school	Car wash	2	Between 2 and 5 years
D6: George	M	35	Not completed secondary school	Spaza shop	1	More than 5 years

The interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, accompanied by a co-interviewer. The four co-interviewers were isiZulu or Sesotho mother-tongue speakers trained in interviewing and listening skills during 10 intensive training sessions presented by the primary researcher. Participants were encouraged to use their first language to answer questions if they preferred. The interview recordings were transcribed, and the African vernacular pieces were translated by professional translators. Field notes and observations complemented the interview data. Each participant received a ZAR 80.00 grocery gift card redeemable at a local grocery chain store as a token of appreciation for his or her participation. Table 1 provides background information on the interview sample ($n = 4$). (The identification of the participants was carried out by using a D# to denote each participant. D1 and D2 were included in the unemployed group and therefore, the participants for this study were D3, D4, D5 and D6.)

Data analysis

ATLAS.ti (8) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Friese, 2014) was used to analyse the interviews transcribed verbatim. An inductive open-coding process was followed to transcend direct quotation and produce meaningful concepts (code labels in ATLAS.ti language) (Saldaña, 2016). The use of open coding provided an opportunity for the researcher to visit the data with an 'unmotivated look' (Paulus & Lester, 2016, p. 417) that allowed the data to 'speak for itself' without imposing deductive and preconceived ideas from the literature on the data. An ATLAS.ti coach acted as a co-coder to review the coding process. Throughout the analysis, the focus was on identifying those aspects in the collected narratives (albeit only a subtle hint) that could shed light on factors enabling informal microenterprise entrepreneurs to be and act as positive deviants. In sharing their experiences and perceptions, the participants also alluded to challenges and constraints that further test their endurance to the limit. However, pointing out these arduous circumstances only highlighted their positive deviancy. The 68 condensed code labels could be grouped into 14 distinct themes. These themes delineated one of two definite topics. The themes either depicted the character of the ISM-E entrepreneur or portrayed the context in which these entrepreneurs needed to operate. These topics and themes are discussed next.

Ethical consideration

Permission for the study was granted by the Humanities and Health Research Ethics Committee (HHREC) of the North-West University, South Africa. Participants gave individual permission for participation in the study.

Results

The entrepreneur interviews were rich in data and exceptionally interesting. Through inductive analysis, 14 themes were identified, clustered under two overarching topics. The first topic provided characterisation of the business entrepreneur and comprised 10 themes. Through the responses on questions (1), (3), (7), (8) and (9), a broad picture emerged of the character of the ISM-E entrepreneur. Topic 2 concerned a sketch of how these four microenterprise entrepreneurs perceived and experienced the context in which they had to earn a living. Through their responses to questions (2), (4), (5) and (6), these entrepreneurs gave a representation of their surrounding environment. Observations made by the researcher during numerous visits substantiated some of the narratives. Four themes crystallised.

Topic 1: The characterisation of the informal microbusiness entrepreneur

Ten themes highlighted the factors that enable the microbusiness entrepreneurs to be and act as positive deviants.

Theme 1: The need to fulfil the role of responsible family provider

The motivation behind the entrepreneurial ventures of the majority of the informal entrepreneurs was rooted in their perceived role as main providers for their families (D3 and D4, in particular). Their reasoning was that one had to devise a definite plan to earn money and fulfil one's duty as a responsible adult when facing unemployment.

Theme 2: A value system based on ethical conduct and acceptance of responsibility

In virtually all accounts of experiences shared, it was clear that participants strived to lead life in an honest, caring and responsible manner. The principle applied here was that, to ensure a livelihood for the family, engaging in hard and honest work had to be the way and definitely not crime or to simply wait patiently for a job to arrive (D3, D4, D6). Furthermore, participants emphasised that a person had to take responsibility for personal business failures. One ought not to blame God or bewitchment or foreign traders for one's failures. This finding is in accordance with the finding of Potts's 2008 study reporting that: '... people must work – if the formal sector cannot provide, self-employment is the answer' (p. 157).

Theme 3: Strong work ethic

The interviewees attributed their entrepreneurial success to hard work, diligence, dedication, commitment and perseverance. D6 expressed it in the following way:

'... because I was taught to work for anything and everything that I wanted. So that's how I was raised, that's what I've learnt and that's what I'm sticking with. I work 13 hours a day. I work Monday to Sunday.' (D6, participant, 14 October 2015)

This subscription to a strict work ethic was also prominent in the responses of the interviews of especially D3. D3 stated that:

'You have to work your way up with a struggle before you get to where you want to be.' (D3, participant, 27 September 2015)

Theme 4: The need to be financially independent

These informal entrepreneurs expressed a definite need to be self-sufficient, autonomous and independent. They did not want to be in a position where they had to rely on others for assistance (D3, D4, D6). D3 expressed this need particularly strikingly when saying:

'I want to try harder until I am okay and no need for anything. I don't even expect my husband to give me money, I don't like being a beggar. I am used to doing things for myself.' (D3, participant, 27 September 2015)

Theme 5: The need to be purposefully engaged

The participants were unanimous in their view that being idle and waiting for someone or something else to improve one's situation was unacceptable. They emphasised the importance of constructive occupation:

'It is not right to stay not working.' (D4, participant, 10 October 2015)

Theme 6: An altruistic mindset

Each of the respondents displayed a selfless concern for the well-being of others. Every narrative proved that the interviewee served the community in one way or another. All four interviewees mentioned how they took responsibility for their community and how they extended a helping hand to others in the community. It was evident that their goals with their entrepreneurial undertakings were not only self-preservation but also an altruistic outreach to others. A definite sense of care and sharing – a typical 'ubuntu' (compassion and unity in the community) attitude – was noticeable in their narratives.

Theme 7: Perseverance

These entrepreneurs persevered, seemingly because they realised that they possessed the grit to stay afloat in the uncertain world of informal entrepreneurship. D5's business had been burgled on three occasions, resulting in losing everything every time. Instead of giving up, he decided to

change his business from a fruit and vegetable stall to a car wash service:

'I just told myself I must just pull out and look for another business.' (D5, participant, 22 September 2015)

Theme 8: Being creative and innovative with a positive attitude

The narratives of each of the four individuals demonstrated the application of innovative and creative ideas to overcome challenges in the context and environment around them. Each of these shared accounts of their daily endeavours as entrepreneurs revealed how committed, industrious and innovative they were. They used positive words such as 'hope', 'inspiration', 'winning', 'motivation', 'innovation', 'passion' and 'respect'.

Theme 9: A religious mindset

Three of the four township entrepreneurs distinctly voiced their firm belief in the influence of some form of divine power at work in their lives. According to them, this could be either God or their ancestors through an inyanga or a sangoma (traditional healer) (D3, D4, D5). Three of the entrepreneurs (D3, D4, D5) communicated that they found solace in the belief that they were protected from evil by a much greater power than themselves. These entrepreneurs were all of the opinion that God and prayer, or the ancestors or both, assisted them in their businesses. D4 shared the following:

'When you slaughter [to make a sacrifice to the ancestors] there is that belief that more will be coming [goats/sheep/cattle]. When you slaughter one animal this year, maybe next year there'll be more than five. Some will tell you, you waste your cow, but when you are focused on the belief, you do what has to be done, and you will see the results at the end.' (D4, participant, 10 October 2015)

Theme 10: Constraint – Financial and knowledge deficit

Finances were identified as a crucial resource in running and growing an effective business. According to the participants, an additional perceived obstacle was a lack of knowledge and skills. None of these entrepreneurs had any relevant training and had to learn through experience. How successful entrepreneurs and business people would leave the township as soon as they became financially affluent was mentioned. This left the upcoming and start-up entrepreneur without mentors and role models to consult with and learn from.

Topic 2: The surrounding setting of the informal microbusiness entrepreneur

The surrounding community is extremely important to entrepreneurs, as it forms their client base and the source from which their employees come. It can also play a role as a social support base or resource that can help in times of trouble.

Theme 11: Supporting allies in the close circle surrounding the entrepreneur

This aspect of the context in which the entrepreneur had to function was the only aspect that could be seen as an asset and not a liability for the microbusiness. All four respondents reported some form of support in their entrepreneurial endeavours from family members or a close associate. D3, a female entrepreneur, divulged that she received substantial emotional support from her husband. D4 identified a sibling who helped him with sharing the burden of household expenses. D5 described how an affluent business person had given him an opportunity to receive training and coaching and that this 'big brother' had become his role model and inspiration. Whilst their communities were described as potential negative spaces, D5 and D6 reported that there were still individuals in the community who they found truly supportive. Their experience was that some in the community acknowledged their hard work. D5 revealed that:

'Someone come wash a car and then he is going to give me more than the money that I expect. I am washing his car for R55.00 and then he will give more money because he is happy with the service.' (D5, participant, 22 September 2015).

Theme 12: An uncondusive physical space

As far as physical space was concerned, all four participants portrayed the township environment as uncondusive to business growth because of physical unattractiveness, poverty and social ills such as crime and drug abuse. (D5 and D6 were particularly vocal about this issue.) Being an entrepreneur in a community struggling to meet basic needs could be a major challenge to the entrepreneurs. Limited economic power in these poor communities limited the variety and revenue value of products or services that the entrepreneur could offer. Furthermore, crime could pose a threat to businesses thriving. (A case in point was the three burglaries that D5 had to endure.) The interviewee narratives sketched a picture of the township space in which the township entrepreneur needed to be creative and innovative as a 'dirty' (D5) space where '10- and 11-year-old children ask for cigarettes' (D6).

Theme 13: An uninspiring community with a lack of social cohesion

The participants described the mindset and attitude of community members as 'lazy', 'don't-care' and 'choosy about what job they will accept' (D3, D4, D6). Such an uninspiring environment and collective unengaged and passive mindset had the potential to subdue all creative and stimulating energy.

The reality of life in the township was further outlined by the interviewees as one in which no social cohesion and no 'ubuntu' (humanity towards others) existed (D5, D6). Respondents reported that they experienced no caring and that a helping hand was seldom extended. The interviewees conveyed that their divided community displayed a general

mentality of distrust, gossip, jealousy and aversion towards one another. A picture was sketched of a community where members would closely observe, judge and evaluate others in the community in terms of what they possessed and bought (D6). Gaining financial success was a goal everyone wanted to achieve.

On the one hand interviewee D3 explained how community members would be disrespectful towards her, but on the other hand they would be quick to expect help from her. D3 shared how community members would cause her unhappiness by being rude to her; yet when they needed products on credit, they were friendly and approached her for help. A further conflicting situation that could be a challenge to the township entrepreneur related to the appointment of employees. The entrepreneur was obliged by convention to appoint community members, but they failed to recognise the business owner as a superior because he was a 'home boy' (D6). This last mentioned phenomenon is discussed in the work of Kilby (2003).

Theme 14: Lack of political will and knowledge to assist the informal township entrepreneur

The narratives of interviewees clearly and explicitly showed that informal township entrepreneurs experienced the government as extremely ineffective and unwilling to remove obstacles they faced. The participants perceived the government as ineffective in addressing the entrepreneurs' challenges such as initial registration costs, unnecessary 'red tape' in labour laws, the unfair competition of major chain stores in the township and the lack of training initiatives and support programmes (D5). Moreover, participants seemed to experience a lack of political will to invest funds to enable township entrepreneurs to excel in their ventures. They felt that various government departments had to work together in order to encourage and accommodate the township entrepreneur. The opinion was raised that government did have some initiatives in place to aid entrepreneurs; however, the officials did not understand what exactly entrepreneurship entailed.

Furthermore, according to the participants, there is little proof that spoke of a positive regard and an attitude of serious consideration of care for the welfare and protection of township entrepreneurs. In the words of D4:

'We live empty lives ... councillors are not helping us. They need to take care of us sometimes.' (D4, participant, 10 October 2015)

The entrepreneurs also revealed that government officials and local government councillors were inaccessible and unsympathetic (D4, D5, D6). Assisting initiatives and programmes turned out to be fraught with empty promises, ineffective execution and/or the intention to enrich the councillor rather than to aid the entrepreneur (D5). Nepotism and corruption were also mentioned by interviewees (D5), with reflections on specific incidents from their past experiences.

Discussion

As mentioned, this study aimed to use the narratives of the ISM-E entrepreneurs to deduce what aspects in their context or their behaviour, attitude and/or perceptions (characterisation) could explain their apparent success in earning a living through entrepreneurship in seemingly uncondusive environments (positive deviance). The innovative, creative and industrious way in which these ISM-E entrepreneurs dealt with the complications and drawbacks that their context forced them to face illuminated their singularity even more. Therefore, even when relating a story of how they experienced an issue as negative, they found a means of negotiating their way around the difficulty.

The differences in the perceptions of the entrepreneurs and the unemployed regarding their fate and position in a precarious situation were striking. The unemployed people and the ISM-E entrepreneurs inhabited the same community under the same government; yet, their actions and reactions to their situation differed. The ISM-E entrepreneurs perceived themselves as relatively successful because they succeeded in being actively involved in providing a family income. In contrast to their favourable perception of themselves, ISM-E entrepreneurs saw community members as passive and waiting for others to provide a solution to their unemployment problems. From their view point, their own internal strength enabled them to persevere in their small businesses because they were proactive, autonomous and self-sustaining, 'self-responsible and self-activating' (terms used by Spyridakis, 2013, p. 43). Why were especially those four individuals so different in their behaviour and mentality compared with the vast majority of community members?

The interviews with the ISM-E entrepreneurs were an uplifting, inspiring growth experience for the interviewers. Based on findings from a previous study on unemployed people in the same two communities (Du Toit et al., 2018b), and observations spanning more than 4 years, we contend that these four individuals are extraordinary. The tremendous effort needed to find South African-owned entrepreneurial ventures in these townships substantiated the premise that these individuals were indeed positive deviants, as positively deviant cases constitute only 1% to 10% of the population (Bhattacharyal & Singh, 2019; Marsh, Schroeder, Dearden, Sternin, & Sternin, 2004). Another well-established model to ascertain whether a case can be classified as PD is the criteria developed by Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004): the PD's success did not happen by chance, but was planned and intentional; PDs are under no obligation to behave or think as they do (it is a self-determined task and not coerced); their actions are undaunted and altruistic; their behaviours and mentality are distinctively different from the community norm; the PDs achieve an unexpected outcome given the context; and their actions are honourable, virtuous and praiseworthy.

From the previously discussed themes, the four study participants could definitely be considered PDs, as they

clearly matched all of the given criteria. They succeeded in utilising aspects in their context and/or themselves to craft a living for their families in an under-resourced community. This solution to adverse circumstances – albeit temporarily in their opinion – seemed relatively sustainable because these ISM-Es had all been in existence for 2 to 5 years.

The results indicated that the community and the government were perceived as the main obstacles in their constant struggle to keep their businesses alive. In their context, they pointed to only one positive aspect: the 'supporting allies in the close circle surrounding the entrepreneur'. We contend that this is a crucial aspect in the arsenal of assets that enable PDs to achieve solutions to their socio-economic challenges. Regarding the characterisation of ISME entrepreneurs, every aspect appeared to have a positive impact on their lives, except the 'financial and knowledge deficit'. This deficit accentuated how positively deviant these individuals were from their township co-inhabitants. Yet even without substantial financial assistance and a specific skill set, these individuals succeeded in earning some income.

The results and their own accounts clearly showed that the ISM-E entrepreneurs possessed a close 'support group' and character assets (investment in family, a healthy value system, altruism, religion, a strong work ethic, a need for autonomy and purposeful engagement, the ability to persevere and creativity and innovation).

We postulate that the ISM-E entrepreneur could possibly report on these positive characteristics because of sufficient encouragement from a close support circle, perhaps originating in childhood. This 'support group' could have ignited a flame or acted as a safety net or bridge to develop courage and self-confidence to start an income-earning endeavour. Because entrepreneurship is not generally held in high esteem, these entrepreneurs must not be deterred by ridicule or gossip. Furthermore, as they are occupied by some form of significant task, are active and have a specific identity, they enjoy enhanced psychological well-being and can see themselves positively (Jahoda, 1982). A literature review by Du Toit, De Witte, Rothmann and Van den Broeck (2018a) pointed out the importance and value of a support group to buffer people in precarious situations.

The actual functionality of the PD framework is to arrive at context-appropriate solutions to a challenge and develop context-appropriate interventions. The rationale behind this is that, if some community members already have solutions to contextual challenges, others in the community should be assisted to also succeed by using the same strategies as the PDs. If a support group could encourage and protect people, making them more engaged in their own destiny and in the community, this could result in them being more active and creative. This could improve psychological well-being, in turn enhancing employability.

Whilst valuable insights were gained through this exploratory study, further research is needed. A follow-up participatory action research study in Orange Farm is in the planning stage. It will be designed and executed in different phases, using the wisdom and experience of the four ISM-E entrepreneurs as a pivotal resource.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

As this was a qualitative exploratory study, the aim was a nuanced, deep understanding of the lived experiences of a group constituting 1% to 10% of the Orange Farm and Boipatong population. The number of cases was deemed appropriate given the minority group targeted. The study satisfied the criteria for quality qualitative research in terms of rigour (sufficient time, effort and thoroughness), sincerity (openness, honesty, transparency and authenticity), credibility (presenting a reality that is credible or seems true) and resonance (the reported data are relatable and identifiable) (Tracy, 2013). However, two important limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, given the relatively few cases, data gathering through semi-structured interviews could have been complemented through additional methods for a deeper exploration of the phenomenon. More structured observational procedures or a focus group session with the ISM-E entrepreneurs could have been added. Triangulation might have facilitated a more multifaceted view. Secondly, a follow-up interview to confirm certain narrative aspects would have contributed to heightened understanding of certain subtleties shared in the first interview.

The study results highlighted the need to acknowledge the exceptional resourcefulness and innovation of the township entrepreneurs who employed themselves, thus largely circumventing the negative consequences of unemployment. This human excellence is a valuable, but untapped, resource in impoverished communities. The positive deviants displayed behaviour and a mindset that could point to possible context-appropriate solutions to dire socio-economic difficulties. Additionally, prominence should be given to supporting these ISM-E entrepreneurs to persevere and be less challenged by constraints.

As the advantage of a close supporter circle was emphasised, it is recommended that ISM-E and very small-enterprise entrepreneurs be organised in support groups to afford them the opportunity to learn from one another and to voice their concerns as a collective force. In addition, these informal entrepreneurs who have triumphed through entrepreneurship could be organised to act as mentors of unemployed community members to inspire and guide them towards possible self-employment. Finally, grouped together, the informal entrepreneurs could form a lobby group to advocate for improved government support. Various researchers (Hartnack & Liedeman, 2017; Rakabe, 2017; Strydom,

2017) have argued that government should improve its implementation strategies to assist the informal entrepreneur.

Conclusion

This study offered a view of the lived experience of people who had escaped the negative consequences of unemployment by starting their own small-scale entrepreneurial businesses. Through their creativity and industrious nature, these positive deviants curtail deficient well-being which are often associated with long-term unemployment (Du Toit et al., 2018b). In the words of Ezzy (2001), '[u]nemployment is an institution that is impoverishing, restricting, baffling, discouraging and disempowering' (p. 22). Individuals, shown to be positive deviants, who have manifested courage, perseverance, a strong value system to overcome various obstacles could direct social scientists to context-appropriate solutions to complex challenges in under-resourced communities. To date, the potential of this wealth of experience and knowledge remains untapped and underutilised. Furthermore, informal entrepreneurs avoiding unemployment through operating their small businesses under very difficult circumstances are not acknowledged and supported sufficiently by their communities and government.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Flemish Interuniversity Council – University Development Cooperation (VLIR-UOS) for awarding funding that enabled the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

M.D.T. planned and executed the study and wrote the manuscript. S.R., H.D.W. and A.V.d.B. planned the study, served as supervisors and assisted in writing and editing the manuscript.

Funding information

This study was funded by the Flemish Interuniversity Council – University Development Cooperation (VLIR-UOS).

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Affordable Land and Housing Data Centre. (2012). *Suburb profile: Orange farm*. Retrieved from http://www.alhdc.org.za/static_content/?p=1342
- Bhattacharyal, S., & Singh, A. (2019). Using the concepts of positive deviance, diffusion of innovation and normal curve for planning family and community level health interventions. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 8(2), 336–341. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc_392_18
- Bradford, W.D. (2007). Distinguishing economically from legally formal firms: Targeting business support to entrepreneurs in South Africa's townships. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 45(1), 94–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-627X.2007.00201.x>
- Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. London: Sage.
- Donaldson, R., & Du Plessis, D. (2013). The urban renewal programme as an area-based approach to renew townships: The experience from Khayelitsha's central business district, Cape Town. *Habitat International*, 39(2013), 295–301.
- Du Toit, A., & Neves, D. (2007). In search of South Africa's 'second economy': Chronic poverty, economic marginalisation and adverse incorporation in Mt Fretre and Khayelitsha. *Africanus*, 37(2), 145–174. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1629206>
- Du Toit, M., De Witte, H., Rothmann, S., & Van den Broeck, A. (2018a). Contextual factors and the experience of unemployment: A review of qualitative studies. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 21(1), a2083. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v21i1.2083>
- Du Toit, M., De Witte, H., Rothmann, S., & Van den Broeck, A. (2018b). Unemployment experiences in context: A phenomenological study in two townships in South Africa. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 28(2), 122–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2018.1454575>
- Ezzy, D. (2001). *Narrating unemployment*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2010). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Fourie, F.C.V.N. (2011, June). *The South African unemployment debate: Three worlds, three discourses?* Department of Economics, University of the Free State SALDRU Working Paper, Number 63. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Friese, S. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS.ti* (2nd edn.). London: Sage.
- Frith, A. (2011a). *Boipatong: Main place*. Retrieved from <https://census2011.adrianfrith.com/place/760011>
- Frith, A. (2011b). *Orange farm: Main place*. Retrieved from <https://census2011.adrianfrith.com/place/798034>
- Fury, B. (2010). *Social enterprise development in South Africa: Creating a virtuous circle*. Tshikululu Social Investments Report. Retrieved from https://static1.squarespace.com/static/_research_social-enterprise_2010.pdf
- Hartnack, A., & Liedeman, R. (2017, January). Factors contributing to the demise of informal enterprises: Evidence from a Cape township. *ECON3x3*. Retrieved from <http://www.econ3x3.org/article/factors-contributing-demise-informal-enterprises-evidence-cape-township>
- Huffman, T.P., Tracy, S.J., & Bisel, R.S. (2019). Beautiful particularity: Using phonetic, iterative, and heuristic approaches to a positively deviant case. *Communication Research and Practice*, 5(4), 327–341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2019.1676632>
- Jackson, T. (2016, January). What is the significance of the informal economy? World Economic Forum Article. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/what-is-the-significance-of-the-informal-economy>
- Jahoda, M. (1982). *Employment and unemployment: A social-psychological analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kilby, P. (2003). The heffalump revisited. *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, 1(1), 13–29. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023282115703>
- Kingdon, G.G., & Knight, J. (2004). Unemployment in South Africa: The nature of the beast. *World Development*, 32(3), 391–408. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2003.10.005>
- Ligthelm, A.A. (2006). Size estimate of the informal sector in South Africa. *Southern African Business Review*, 10(2), 32–52.
- Manyaka, S.J. (2015). Social entrepreneurship: A solution for transforming the disadvantaged community of Nellmapius. *Theological Studies*, 71(3), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2821>
- Marsh, D.R., Schroeder, D.G., Dearden, K.A., Sternin, J., & Sternin, M. (2004). The power of positive deviance. *British Medical Journal*, 329, 1177–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.329.7475.1177>
- Mazzarol, T. (2013, March). Let's stop wasting peoples' time: Entrepreneurship as a new form of management. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/lets-stop-wasting-peoples-time-entrepreneurship-as-a-new-form-of-management13132>
- Morris, M.H., & Pitt, L.F. (1995, January). Informal sector activity as entrepreneurship: Insights from a South African township. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 33(1). Retrieved from <https://www.questia.com/read/1G1-16787413/informal-sector-activity-as-entrepreneurship-insights>
- Ntema, J. (2016). Informal home-based entrepreneurs in South Africa: How non-South Africans outcompete South Africans. *Africa Insight*, 46(2), 44–59.
- Parkinson, C., & Howorth, C. (2017). The crafting of an (un)enterprising community: Context and the social practice of talk. *International Small Business Journal*, 35(4), 385–404. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242615621123>
- Paulus, T.M., & Lester, J.N. (2016). ATLAS.ti for conversation and discourse analysis studies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19(4), 405–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2015.1021949>
- Perks, S. (2010). Exploring the management abilities of spaza shop owners in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. *South African Journal of Economics and Management Sciences*, 13(4), 447–463. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v13i4.98>
- Potts, D. (2008, June). The urban informal sector in sub-Saharan Africa: From bad to good (and back again?) *Development Southern Africa*, 25(2), 151–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03768350802090527>
- Pranger, I. (2006). Informality, poverty and survival: Evidence from two cities in Southern Africa. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 21(2), 31–56.
- Rakabe, E. (2017, February). Could informal enterprises stimulate township economies? A study of two Midrand townships. *ECON3x3*. Retrieved from <http://www.econ3x3.org/article/could-informal-enterprises-stimulate-township-economies-study-two-midrand-townships>
- Ramoglou, S. (2011). Who is a 'non-entrepreneur'? Taking the 'others' of entrepreneurship seriously. *International Small Business Journal*, 31(4), 432–453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242611425838>
- Ranyane, K.A. (2015). Survivalist Entrepreneurship: An income generating alternative for the unemployed populace. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(4), 301–306. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n4p301>
- Robertson, K.T., & Choto, P. (2015). The relevance and challenges of business incubators that support survivalist entrepreneurs. *Investment Management and Financial Innovations*, 12(2), 150–161.
- Rose, A.J., & McCullough, M.B. (2017). A practical guide to using the positive deviance method in health services research. *Health Service Research*, 52(3), 828–847. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.12524>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd edn.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2011). *Qualitative research: Issues of theory, method and practice* (3rd edn.). London: Sage.
- Slabbert, T.J.C. (2004). *An investigation into the state of affairs and sustainability of the Emfuleni economy*, Doctoral dissertation. Retrieved from <https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/27369/00front.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- South Africa. (2003). *National Small Business Amendment Act of November 2003 (Vol. 461, No. 25763)*. Retrieved from http://us-cdn.creamermedia.co.za/assets/articles/attachments/01025_natsmallbusaa26.pdf
- Spreitzer, G.M., & Sonenshein, S. (2004). Toward the construct definition of positive deviance. *American Behavioural Scientist*, 47(6), 828–847.
- Spyridakis, M. (2013). *The liminal worker: An ethnography of work, unemployment and precariousness in contemporary Greece*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing.
- Statistics South Africa. (2014, August 14). *Informal business a means of survival*. Retrieved from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=3009>
- Statistics South Africa. (2020, June). *Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 1 (January to March)*. Retrieved from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2020.pdf>
- Strydom, J.W. (2017). Longevity of SMMEs in Soweto: Does marketing play a role? *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*, 9(6), 685–695. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20421338.2017.1355603>
- Tracy, S.J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- United Nations Office of the Secretary-General Envoy on Youth. (2014). *Entrepreneurship Provides an Answer to Youth Unemployment in South Africa*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2014/09/entrepreneurship-provides-answer-youth-unemployment-south-africa/>
- Willemse, L. (2013, March). Trading hope. *Africa Insight*, 42(4), 166–185.
- Woodward, R.R., Ligthelm, A., & Guimarães, P. (2011). The viability of informal microenterprise in South Africa. *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship*, 16(1), 65–86. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1084946711001719>
- Xaba, J., Horn, P., & Motala, S. (2002, August). The informal sector in sub-Saharan Africa (ILO Working Paper on the Informal Economy, 92-2-113248-X[ISBN] Employment Sector, ILO, Geneva). Retrieved from http://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/WCMS_122204/lang-en/index.htm
- Yu, D. (2012). Defining and measuring informal employment in South Africa. *Development Southern Africa*, 29(1), 157–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2012.645649>