

Hear the Heroes: Agri-Entrepreneurial Progress of Sub-Saharan Africans Ten Years After a US
Fellowship Exchange Program

Lisa K. Taylor, Ph.D.
University of Nevada, Reno
P.O. Box 841
Carson City, NV 89702
(405-448-0663)
lktaylor@unr.edu

Joyce K. Nabisaalu, Ph.D.
The University of Mississippi
P. O. Box 1848
Oxford, MS 38677
(405-589-6654)
jknabisa@olemiss.edu

Jessica Gallo, Ph.D.
University of Nevada, Reno
3115 William Raggio Building/ Mailstop 280
1664 N. Virginia St.
Reno, NV 89557
(775-682-7874)
jgallo@unr.edu

Hear the Heroes: Agri-Entrepreneurial Progress of Sub-Saharan Africans Ten Years After a US Fellowship Exchange Program

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Amidst the push for innovation and resilience in Africa's agricultural sector, stakeholders stress the pivotal role of qualitative, longitudinal research in illuminating the pathways to success for aspiring entrepreneurs (e.g., Devine & Kiggundu, 2019; Sriram & Mersha, 2010). With few exceptions, international longitudinal studies of entrepreneurial fellowships are scarce and obstructed by barriers, including difficulties in accessing global entrepreneurs, costs, and lack of valid, published data (Thomas & Mueller, 2000). Thus, the purpose of this study is to assess the long-term impact of entrepreneurship exchange programs on entrepreneurial behaviors and experiences of African fellowship participants. We draw from the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) which posits that intentions to perform various behaviors can be predicted by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control; and these intentions, together with perceptions of behavioral control, explain actual behaviors.

In this case, Sub-Saharan African *Heroes* were those who attended a five-week US Department of State-sponsored Agri-entrepreneurial fellowship exchange program in 2014-2015 at Oklahoma State University (OSU). Our relationships with its Agri-entrepreneurial fellows (AEFs), related research resources, and peer-reviewed, published data (Taylor, 2017) inspired our commitment to connect with fellows to study the program's long-term effects in Spring 2024. This research was informed by the 2017-2023 AAAE Goal One and one key outcome: "Build a more inclusive culture within the society" (AAAE, 2021, p. 1) via AAAE membership pursuits reflecting a broader, inclusive discipline through coordinated responses to social science concerns affecting agriculture and its related sciences. By documenting four Agri-entrepreneurs' experiences, our study offers actionable insights for global agricultural education leaders to learn how to unlock the transformative potential of smallholder farmers and agribusiness purveyors.

Methodology

Our qualitative multiple case study was guided by Stake (2006), Saldaña (2013), and Tracy (2010). The study received IRB approval, the authors provided no reciprocation for AEFs' participation, and our data collection began after we obtained AEFs' consent. The four fellows answered the same 12 questions during Zoom interviews in March 2024. Taylor recorded interviews using two devices, resulting in recordings that she transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was sent to fellows for *member-checking* (Stake, 2006), after which pseudonyms replaced all AEF identifiers. One AEF provided changes to their interview transcript.

Researchers conducted data analyses using two coding methods to identify emergent themes: Taylor conducted initial, axial, and selective coding using NVIVO software (QSR, 2016; Saldaña, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and Nabisaalu conducted categorical "themeing [of] the data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 259). Next, we discussed similarities and probed incongruencies of the transcriptions separately, then compared our findings and integrated the information into an interpretation of the overall results (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

Limitations of our analyses were our perspectives due to our roles during the 2014-15 OSU Fellowship, a Stillwater, Oklahoma-based grant-funded exchange program (Taylor, 2017). Taylor was one of the fellowship leaders who conducted a related doctoral multiple case qualitative study. Nabisaalu, one of the four AEFs in this study, recognized that some of her

perspectives were not objective due to her primarily positive mentorship experience, leading to a Master's and Doctoral degrees at OSU earned after the fellowship. We examined associations between the codes and critical themes and the definition of missing connections we predicted would emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) based on notes in our reflexive journals and holding each other accountable for findings when we voiced our biases.

Results/Findings

We based our findings on interviews with four AEFs who were the first to volunteer for the study, a male and female pair from Kenya and another from Uganda. Their ages averaged 41, ranging from 37 to 44. They were primary owners of seven businesses, with two being agricultural consultants and two owning farms. Two attained doctoral degrees, and all four earned advanced certifications. Each AEF provided equally valuable information, resulting in 42 pages of transcripts and related artifacts, such as reflexive journal notes and Zoom videos.

Five themes that emerged were (a) Empowerment, (b) Intentional Entrepreneurial Ambitions, (c) Youth and Farmer Entrepreneurial Development, (d) Strategic Agility, and (e) Financial Constraints. A reflection of one AEF's empowerment and ambition was:

I constantly thought about what I had experienced in the US and believed that I could work at my dream of becoming a professor. I must go to graduate school and earn a PhD. I explored all the connections with the professors to see if there [were] any opportunities to do it. (P15 Interview)

Our study's findings align with TPB's tenets (Ajzen, 1991). Empowerment and intentions reflected their positive attitudes toward conducting entrepreneurial behaviors as reflected in their fellowship applications. Also, participants demonstrated development and strategic agility, exemplifying all three salient beliefs – Control, Normative, and Behavioral – defined as "prevailing determinants of a person's intentions and actions" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 189). One AEF stated, "I wanted to grow my businesses," [reflecting intentions], "so I received entrepreneur training from the past [fellowship], and we learned that you don't need to actually get physical, you establish systems here and there and hire people to help you" [subjective normative influence]. Reflecting on his behaviors, he also stated, "[Now] I go to the farm once a week on Sunday. . . . Then the rest of the stores sometimes I pass and actually don't even stop. I just drive by to see if it's open" [developed behavior] (P14 Interview).

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact on the Profession

The AEFs indicated positive outcomes from the OSU Fellowship Exchange hosted in OK and Washington, DC. However, a significant gap they identified was the need for ongoing follow-up, which could have been provided over the past ten years, focused on management, marketing, and funding. This aligns with business training research, suggesting that continued monitoring promotes sustained changes in entrepreneurial behavior, and long-term success rather than a single entrepreneurial action (Mensmann & Frese, 2018). AEFs expressed interest in contributing to a virtual conference, with two wanting longer, more intensive mentoring with a relevant, experienced entrepreneur. Overall, the results suggest that a critical aspect of a Fellowship Exchange experience should be maintenance, which refers to the extent to which the acquired training outcomes are sustained over time (Blume et al., 2010). Implementing such strategies would require further investigation, including the funding for such activities, successful global strategies, and potential results of long-term fellowship-related alliances.

References

- AAAE (2021). *American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) 2017-2023 Strategic Plan*. <https://aaaeonline.org/resources/Documents/National/AAAEStrategicPlan.pdf>
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50, 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-t](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-t)
- Blume, B. D., Ford, J. K., Baldwin, T. T., & Huang, J. L. (2010). Transfer of training: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Management*, 36(4), 1065–1105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309352880>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). Sage. ISBN-13 978-1412975179
- Devine, R. A., & Kiggundu, M. N. (2019). Entrepreneurship in Africa: Identifying the frontier of Impactful Research. *Entrepreneurship in Africa*, 115–146. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351121187-6>
- Mensmann, M., & Frese, M. (2018). Who Stays Proactive after entrepreneurship training? Need for cognition, personal initiative maintenance, and well-being. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 40(1), 20–37. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2333>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.), 259. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QR0M-08-2016-1408>.
- Sriram, V., & Mersha, T. (2010). Stimulating entrepreneurship in Africa. *World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development*, 6(4), 257–272. <https://doi.org/10.1108/204259612010000>
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford. <https://www.guilford.com/books/Multiple-Case-Study-Analysis/Robert-Stake/9781593852481>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques* (4th ed.). Sage. <https://archive.org/details/basicsofqualitat0000stra>
- Taylor, L. K. (2017). *Entrepreneurial learning and mentoring: A multicase study of the experiences of African entrepreneurs in OK and impacts on their business ventures in Kenya, South Africa, & Uganda-Appendix A: OSU Grant Proposal (1986224852)*.
- Thomas, A. S., & Mueller, S. L. (2000). A case for comparative entrepreneurship: Assessing the relevance of culture. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 31(2), 287–301. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jibs.8490906>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851 <http://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>