Facilitating and Maintaining Research Access into Ethnic Minority Firms

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One of the many problems facing researchers aiming to carry out research into ethnic minority firms is the issue of gaining access; as a result it is often the case that a considerable amount of time is spent on this task (Blackburn et al., 2005). Lee (1993: 120) states that “fieldworkers are the kinds of people who can put up with constant and dedicated hard work, loneliness, powerlessness and confusion, and quite possibly, some suffering at the hands of those being studied”. However, the literature does not cover this issue in much depth and as stated by Gummesson (2000) the hurdles related to gaining access are often neglected or seen as merely a tactical issue. In addition, most previous studies related to gaining access to firms are written by well-known scholars such as Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (1988), Burgess (1984) and Gummesson (2000) who provide a list of suggestions most of which are not always appropriate for every research situation, including the ones of ethnic minority research. Having identified this gap, this paper reflects on the experiences of the authors in facilitating and maintaining access into Turkish and Chinese ethnic minority firms in London.

Researchers face major difficulties in this endeavour, as organizations are dynamic and complex places and therefore managers and employees do not always welcome researchers into their firms, particularly asking what might be perceived as sensitive and awkward questions about their firms and managerial actions. They may be skeptical about the role of researchers and/or may not value academic research (Laurila, 1997). Buchanan et al (1988) propose a four-stage access model: getting in, getting on, getting out and getting back. For the first stage – ‘getting in’ – it is suggested that researchers should be clear about their objectives, time and resource requirements. They should use their existing contacts, assure confidentiality and offer a final executive report. During the research process – getting on, it is implied that researchers should develop personal relationships and communicate well with the members of the firm. In terms of ‘getting out’, it is suggested that a deadline should be set and the researcher should present her/his research findings in the form of a written report and presentation. Finally, the researcher may need to get back to the firm to collect additional data or get permission for publication of the research findings.

This paper reports on the experience of gaining access to eighty Turkish and Chinese ethnic minority firms. The paper recognizes the key characteristics of the ethnic minority firms such as their reliance on informal networks and the ethnic enclaves and discusses the influence of these characteristics on the research design. In particular, the paper evaluates the implications of access difficulties for the researchers’ choice of different data collection methods, sampling and the fieldwork. Knowing the sensitive nature of the research areas, some degree of difficulty was expected in gaining access to all ethnic minority firms. However, it was never envisaged how exhausting and challenging this process could be. Although some of the recommendations given by Buchanan et al. (1988), and Gummesson (2000) were found to be relevant and helpful, they did not really seem to reflect the complex side of gaining access into ethnic minority firms. In
our experience, these four stages overlapped and it was difficult for us to separate one stage from others. The researchers often found themselves continuously negotiating and re-negotiating access with community representatives, accountants and even with the relatives and the friends of the business owners. However, achieving an agreement with the representatives of these informal networks did not always mean access. Even when the firm owner agreed to participate in the research, this did not necessarily guarantee reaching and getting relevant and essential data for the project. Gaining access to relevant data required that in addition to having good interpersonal, interview and observation skills, the researchers had to have a clear understanding of the participant firm’s owner’s cultural background, family structure and its influence on the management structure of the firm and the dynamics of the competition within the ethnic enclave. This paper expands these arguments further and highlights the need for ethnic minority researchers to consider the implications of cross cultural research (Jameson, 1994; Usunier, 1998). We recommend that researchers should pay more attention to the cultural differences and diverse management practices within various cultures (i.e Turkish-Turkish Cypriot, first and second generation immigrants) in doing research with ethnic minority firms.

References:


