An Investigation into the Overseas Expansion of Small Asian-Owned U.K. Firms

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ABSTRACT. This paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge in international entrepreneurship by reporting on a qualitative empirical investigation into the overseas expansion processes of small Asian (originating from the Indian subcontinent)-owned firms operating in the U.K. clothing industry. The key decision makers within these firms frequently identified themselves as an active, and important, influence upon the actual activities of their firms as international operators. For some firms though, a more passive approach to internationalisation could be identified, whereby the receipt of unsolicited orders had an effect on some firms' timing of overseas market entry. The balance between the nature of opportunities, that frequently derived from cultural networks, and the constraints of a limited resource base with which to exploit those opportunities, also had a major impact on the direction and pace of certain firms' overseas expansion. The findings suggest a general tendency to adopt an incremental approach to internationalisation within this mature trade sector. The cultural and business experience of managers, however, was found to have an effect on the pace and direction of the overseas expansion. Recommendations on the likely efficacy and effectiveness of public/private sector interaction within the area of international entrepreneurship involving entrepreneurs from Asian backgrounds are offered.

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1. Introduction

Concentrations of particular ethnic minority groups in business have a significant impact on economic development, with the rate of self-employment amongst certain ethnic groups – particularly Asian – often exceeding that of indigenous groups (Dana, 1991; Sanders and Nee, 1996; Ward, 1991). As a result of this, one element of multi-cultural policy, which has been on the agenda of a number of governments since the 1980s, has been to improve economic performance through capitalising on business activities within relatively large ethnic minority populations (Stanton and Lee, 1995). This has entailed active business support policy measures for ethnic businesses. In the U.K. the issue of support provision has been criticised, for policy makers' inability to meet the needs of ethnic minority businesses, because of poor marketing of support programmes, and a lack of focus and consistency in provision (Marlow, 1992; Mitra et al., 1991). Problems have also arisen from an absence of detailed, continuous information on trends, levels of participation in government schemes and programmes, size, barriers to growth and the like (Mitra and Pawar, 1992).

An important form of assistance involves measures to promote the internationalisation of business activities. Crick and Chaudhry (1996), however, have noted both a relatively low take-up by Asian-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of export assistance (compared with white-owned businesses), and a lack of awareness by policy-makers about whether, and how, ethnic

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minority-owned firms differ in their approach towards servicing international markets. These observations provide the rationale for the present paper: the need for a better understanding of overseas expansion strategies by ethnic minority-owned firms, in order that policy-makers can more effectively facilitate this process.

Although a wide range of studies have addressed specific practices of managers from ethnic minorities, many have concentrated on their development and operations in the domestic market (Crick and Chaudhry, 1996). This paper seeks to uncover and understand differences in the patterns, processes and pace of overseas expansion among a group of Asian-owned SMEs in the clothing industry. The qualitative research approach adopted enables us to gain an understanding of the often complex rationales for particular courses of actions, through identification, description and interpretation. Specifically, it can aid focus upon unanticipated outcomes; identification of inconsistencies and conflicts accounting for low policy take-up; and provide insights into the solutions to problems devised by business owners without policy intervention (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). These goals are unlikely to be attainable using complementary research methods which imply a less interpretivist epistemological stance (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998), such as large scale survey research accompanied by statistical analysis (De Vaus, 1996).

2. Background to the study

Previous relevant research has addressed firstly, the issue of ethnicity, and secondly, internationalisation theory.[1] The two research areas have tended to be treated separately however, and from differing disciplinary and methodological perspectives. We examine them individually in order to derive a conceptual framework for this study.

Bourdieu (1990) notes the way in which knowledge is structured by classificatory distinctions made by researchers. These frequently take the form of binary opposition. In the entrepreneurship and small business literature such distinctions form a common element of the researcher's strategy.[2] In the context of this study, a notable tendency of much previous research has been to distinguish between minority versus non-minority-owned businesses (Hisrich and Brush, 1986; Kirchhoff et al., 1982).[3] Dana (1995, 1996) further distinguished between ethnic groups in situations where they are minorities in mainstream society, and other situations in which these "minorities" are actually the majority in a given neighbourhood. Similarly, studies focusing on internationalisation have sought to distinguish, for example, between exporters versus non-exporters (Westhead, 1995). Whilst such ontological bifurcation can be used to provide useful insight into key groups, these distinctions are usually somewhat arbitrary, since such groups tend not to be definable in naturalistic terms, and are in turn interconnected with other distinctions. What is often hidden, moreover, is the nature of difference within, rather than between, groups. This is certainly the case with ethnic minority-owned businesses.

Whilst our study considers Asian-owned businesses, there are a number of points that should be made. First, a distinction may be made between race and ethnicity.[4] Second, within Asian-owned businesses, we may distinguish between immigrant groups from different countries, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and East Africa. Moreover, within these groups, further distinctions can be made. For example, Indian-owned businesses can be further categorised as Hindu, Sikh and so on. Finally, we may distinguish between ethnic businesses started by first generation immigrants and their progeny. Such distinctions are potentially significant in understanding how the cultural background of Asian-owned businesses may come to bear on subsequent internationalisation decisions, and how such cultural factors distinguish these businesses from other ethnic groups (Kim et al., 1989).[5]

Ethnicity

Entrepreneurship is a significant avenue for economic progress, both for society as a whole, and for individuals within particular ethnic groupings. Positive features include: the potential for a positive earnings advantage; upward social mobility; and investment in family futures. On the negative side, long hours, hard work and the risk of failure have been identified (Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990; Light, 1972; Min, 1987; Portes and Zhou, 1992; Sanders and Nee, 1996; Waldinger, 1986).

Three main theories have been proposed to account for ethnic entrepreneurship (see Yoon, 1991 and Dana, 1997 for a review and critique). These are:

- The theory of middleman minorities;
- Ethnic enclave theory; and
- Reactive cultural theory.

The first of these sees ethnic enterprise arising out of an orientation towards the country of origin and hostility from a native population. It suggests that businesses will depend to some extent on white suppliers and serve minority customers. Production will tend towards vertical integration, with a reliance upon ethnic finance sources and family labour (Bonacich, 1973, 1987). The second theoretical position views ethnic enterprise as a self generating process, whereby ethnic enterprise can act as a training system for new entrepreneurs through employment in existing enterprises, generating network linkages and an evolving cadre of ethnic business institutions. The ethnic enclave can support local institutions, generates a basis for informal communication of market opportunity, and provides community role models (Aldrich et al., 1989; Bailey and Waldinger, 1991; Waldinger, 1989; Wilson and Portes, 1980). The third theory suggests that ethnic entrepreneurship is an adaptation to historic and racialised labour market discrimination, whereby immigrants are forced to adopt marginal niches in the economy, using mechanisms such as ethnic sources of rotating credit. This provides a means of upward social mobility (Light, 1972, 1980; Nowikowski, 1984). Whilst all three theoretical approaches are incomplete and interrelated, and in some instances lacking in explanatory power, they serve to highlight relevant features for further investigation (Light, 1984; Light et al., 1994; Min, 1987; O'Brien and Fugita, 1982; Sanders and Nee, 1987; Wong, 1985). In particular, they suggest a need to focus upon: where resources are sourced from; what types of markets are served; what role is played by family and other ethnic resources in supporting business development; how effective ethnic networks are in co-operating with one another; and what effects discrimination has on market strategy.

All three theories draw upon a distinction between the relative advantages of human and social capital in accounting for the success of ethnic business (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991; Bates, 1989; Bates and Dunham, 1993; Borjas, 1990; Boyd, 1990; Evans, 1989). Central to the development of social capital has been the role of the family (Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990), embedding business practice within a moral order,[6] and becoming increasingly important over time as ethnic communities fragment through further immigration and social integration (Sanders and Nee, 1996). For immigrant groups, human capital endowments, through schooling and education in their country of origin, are frequently not valued as highly as investment in human capital in their new environments (Light et al., 1994). As a result, constraints in labour markets may mean that self employment becomes a relatively attractive proposition for a given level of human capital (Bates, 1994). Additionally, for middle class immigrants, it has been found that initial class status is important in determining access to financial capital from both relatives and ethnic lending sources, and contributing towards business success (Portes and Zhou, 1992; Sanders and Nee, 1996). However, whilst ethnic resources have been identified as an aid to business start-up, it has been suggested that continuing reliance may hinder long term development of a business, with lower profitability and higher failure rates associated with reliance upon ethnic social support networks (Bates, 1994; Yoon, 1991).

One of the more interesting aspects of ethnic business concerns the changes likely to occur over time in the relative advantages of different types of resources. A tension has been noted between factors promoting benefits arising from social solidarity and a more self interested rationality based around the individual entrepreneur and his/her family. It has recently been argued that over time, greater civil rights, legitimacy and opportunities have been afforded to ethnic groups, which should diminish the long term significance of ethnic resource dependence and mechanisms of social solidarity (Sanders and Nee, 1996). This is significant in the context of the present research, in that it suggests that firms engaging in international activities that started their internationalisation early may have faced different issues than those engaging more recently in international activities.

A growing body of empirically-grounded literature exists to explain selected aspects of the practices of ethnic minority-owned businesses in the U.K. (for a recent discussion see, for example, Basu, 1991; Krcmar, 1987; Nowikowski, 1984; Ward and Jenkins, 1984; Okoronkwo, 1993; Pardesi, 1992; Patel, 1989; Rafiq, 1988; Ram and Deakins, 1996). People from ethnic and non-ethnic minority backgrounds tend to move into self-employment because of the need for "independence" and "autonomy" (Blackburn, 1993; Storey, 1994). Nevertheless, specific problems with racism and unequal gender relations have been highlighted (Ram, 1992; Ram and Sparrow, 1993), whilst debate on financing of ethnic minority-owned business (see Jones et al., 1992; Deakins et al., 1992) has questioned whether problems are business-related (Curran and Blackburn, 1993), or race-related (Deakins et al., 1995). These tensions are significant in explaining the strategic development of ethnic businesses (Ward, 1987). As a result, Blackburn (1993) highlights the importance of appreciating the prohibitive factors in ethnic business development in specific trade sectors, together with their likely treatment by external organisations such as banks and insurers, and the subsequent impact on potential for growth.

In terms of business practices, Werbner (1990) suggests that "social networks" are a major determinant of success for ethnic minority enterprise. However, the utility of operating within networks has been questioned. Dana (1993) has noted that while some groups make use of ethnic networks, others avoid them. Crick and Chaudhry (1996) have suggested that the concentration of ethnic minority businesses in marginal areas of economic activity is mainly due to historical disadvantage and intensive utilisation of members of the ethnic community. This is particularly true in the clothing industry (Ward et al., 1986). Crick and Chaudhry (1996) point out that constraints resulting from such circumstances have often resulted in the initial establishment of ethnic minority enterprise within the particular community itself, leading to the formation of a market niche with high levels of uncertainty and competitiveness. The competitiveness of these firms is greatly affected by the ability to utilise internal cultural resources, such as family labour and specialist knowledge, to be able to satisfy the requirements of their own ethnic community (Jones et al., 1993). Ram and Hillin (1994) have suggested that the unwillingness or inability of ethnic minority entrepreneurs to attract custom from outside the local ethnic community is a key constraint on business viability. They argue that sustainability, and perhaps growth, can only be predicted with any confidence by the ability to "break-out" and tap into "majority" markets. This might be either within the U.K. or overseas (Crick and Chaudhry, 1996). The importance of policy-makers understanding the practices of ethnic minority-owned firms, to assist in achieving "break-out", arises from differences in both business activities and utilisation of assistance that have been shown to exist.

Internationalisation theory

Although a considerable body of literature exists on the export behaviour of SMEs, the international activities of ethnic minority businesses is still a somewhat neglected area of study (see, for example, review papers such as Aaby and Slater, 1989; Bilkey, 1978; Miesenbock, 1988). In reviewing the literature, the diversity of potential forms of international operations needs to be stressed (Hymer, 1976). One useful distinction amongst many is between internationalisation approaches concerned only with exporting, and those which involve other forms of market entry within international business activities. Indeed, Bell and Young (1998) suggest that the managerial perspectives in decision-making are quite different, whilst Jones (1998) notes that the conceptual approach to the research is different too.

Various studies concerning internationalisation have proposed models to explain firms' increasing commitment to overseas markets, including those which are perceived to have a more cultural or psychic distance (Bilkey and Tesar, 1977; Czinkota, 1982; Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; Cavusgil, 1984), ranging from non-exporters through to those with a high international marketing involvement. Even so, such models have been the subject of considerable debate (see, for example, Andersen, 1993; Leonidou and Katsikeas, 1996), arguably with the focus mainly being on exporting rather than more committed forms of market entry.

In the case of export internationalisation models, Andersen (1993) argues that models have invariably fallen into one of two categories. These are: first, "establishment chain"; and second, "innovation-related" models. In the latter case, the term "innovation-related" is taken from the work of Rogers (1962), whereby the internationalisation decision is believed to be an innovation for the firm. Pragmatically, Andersen (1993) points out the similarity of the models, with differences being in the number of stages[7] and the terminology used to describe them. A summary of the major internationalisation models is shown in Figure 1.

Although the stages models of the internationalisation process have received a great deal of support within the literature, and indeed, have been shown to be used by policy makers (Crick, 1995),[8] they have also been subjected to criticism. For example, Buckley et al. (1978) suggest that firms do not necessarily adopt consistent organisational approaches to internationalisation, while Cannon and Willis (1983) highlight the superficial treatment of time in classifying stages of internationalisation, with a presumed "step-wise" progression and forward motion of the models. Mascarenhas (1997) argues for the need to consider both the scale of entry into international markets and the order in which activities occur, in relation to the size of firm. Furthermore, Turnbull (1987) points out that while proper classification is necessary for both descriptive and analytical purposes, existing classifications provide scope for potential confusion. Recent studies of one such classification – "international new ventures" (McDougall et al., 1994; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; McDougall and Oviatt, 1996) – have shown rapid internationalisation processes by firms. Even the categorisation of non-exporters within models has been subject to debate. For example, Morgan and Katsikeas (1995) argue that models have tended to classify non-exporters too generally. In doing so, they suggest that the single broad stage of "non-exporters" could be further differentiated in order to classify firms with particular degrees of commitment towards engaging in future export activities.

Researchers have stressed the importance of industry characteristics in determining internationalisation processes (Boter and Holmquist, 1996; Preece, 1998). In a study comparing the internationalisation processes of firms in both low-tech and high-tech U.K. trade sectors, Bell et al. (1998) found some support for the stages approach within those firms operating in low-tech sectors while the reverse was true within the high-tech firms where issues such as limited domestic demand and client followership influenced managers to internationalise more rapidly. Consequently, it appears that the stages approach may be more suitable for firms in mature industries. Indeed, after reviewing recent studies on firms' internationalisation strategies, Coviello and McAuley (1996) found varied results which "ranged from support for the traditional view of incremental internationalisation (perhaps including inward internationalisation as a first step); to a redefinition of "stages" in the context of industry and market characteristics, or non-linear relationships in terms of stages and mechanisms employed; to direct challenges to the internationalisation process model".

The contrasting empirical evidence has led Coviello and Munro (1997) to conclude that: "while some recent small firm findings support the view that firms follow an incremental process of internationalisation in terms of increasing knowledge, commitment and investment (as postulated by Johanson and Vahlne, 1977), others do not". It seems apparent that a contingency approach to categorising firms' internationalisation may be appropriate (Luostarinen, 1980; Reid, 1983; Woodcock et al., 1994; Yeoh and Jeong, 1995; Kumar and Subramaniam, 1997). This might consider the nature of strategic entrepreneurial opportunities (Harvey and Evans, 1995), together with an understanding of how different cognitive mechanisms of individual entrepreneurs may affect the potential for exploitation of opportunity (Baron, 1998). In addressing this issue, Bell and Young (1998) suggest that excessive attention has been paid to the merits of competing theories and that the nature and pace of internationalisation is conditioned by product, industry and other external environmental variables, as well as by firm-specific factors. As a result, they propose a holistic approach, since at any given point in time, firms will be in a "state" of internationalisation which will be subject to both backward and

Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul (1975)	Pavord & Bogart (1975)	Bilkey & Tesar (1977)	Wiedersheim-Paul et al (1978)	Wortzel & Wortzel (1981)	Cavusgil (1982)	Czinkota (1982)	Barrett & Wilkinson (1986)	Moon & Lee (1990)	Lim et al (1991)	Rao & Naidu (1992)	Crick (1997)
	STAGE I No activity	STAGE I No interest in exporting/Not even filling an unsolicited order	STAGE I Domestic oriented firm/ No willingness to start exporting/ Limited information collection and transmission		STAGE I Pre-involvement/ Selling only in the home market/ No interest in export related information	STAGE I Completely uninterested firm/ No exploration of feasibility to export	STAGE I Nonexporters who never considered exporting			STAGE I Nonexporters indicating no current level of export nor any future interest in exporting	STAGE I Nonexporters who never considered exporting
	STAGE II-III Passive/minor activity	STAGE II Passive exploration of exporting/ possible filling of an unsolicited order	STAGE II Passive nonexporter/ Moderate willingness to start exporting/ Moderate information collection and transmission		STAGE II Reactive involvement/ Evaluation of feasibility to export/ Deliberate search for export related information	STAGE II Partially interested firm/ Exporting is desirable but uncertain activity	STAGE II-III Nonexporters who investigated exporting, and previous exporters		STAGE I Awareness/ recognition of exporting as an opportunity STAGE II Interest in selecting exporting as a viable strategy	STAGE II Non exporters who would like to explore export opportunities	STAGE II-V Non exporters who investigated exporting and previous exporters
	STAGE IV Aggressive strategy	STAGE III Management actively explores the feasibility to export	STAGE III Active nonexporter/ High willingness to start exporting/ Relatively high information collection and transmission			STAGE III Exploring firm/ Planning for export and actively exploring export possibilities			STAGE III Intention to initiate exports		
STAGE I No regular export activity / No resource commitment abroad		STAGE IV Experimental exporting to some psychologically close country		STAGE I Importer pull/ Foreign customer orders STAGE II Basic production capacity marketing	STAGE III Limited, experimental involvement/ Limited exporting to psychologically close countries	STAGE IV Experimenting exporter/ Favourable export attitude but little exploitation of export possibilities	STAGE IV Current exporters with no direct investment abroad	STAGE I Lower stage of export involvement	STAGE IV Trial and adoption of exporting	STAGE III Sporadic involvement in exporting activities	STAGE VI Marginal exporters
STAGE II Exporting psychologically close countries via independent reps/agents		STAGE V Experienced exporter / Optimal export adjustment to environmental factors		STAGE III Advanced Production capacity marketing STAGE IV Product marketing channel push	STAGE IV Active involvement/ Systematic exporting to new countries using direct distribution methods	STAGE V Semi-experienced small exporter / Favourable attitude and active involvement in exporting		STAGE II Middle stage of export involvement		STAGE IV Regular involvement in exporting activities	STAGE VII Active exporters
STAGE III Exporting to more psychologically distant countries/ Establishment of sales subsidiaries		STAGE VI Exporting to additional countries psychologically more distant		STAGE V Product marketing channel pull	STAGE V Committed involvement/ Allocating resources between domestic and foreign markets	STAGE VI Experienced large exporter/ Very favourable export attitudes and future export plans		STAGE III Higher stage of export involvement			STAGE VIII Overseas sales receive the same emphasis as domestic sales

Adapted from Leonidou and Katsikeas (1996)

Figure 1. Review of export development models.

forward momentum, rather than progressing through "stages".

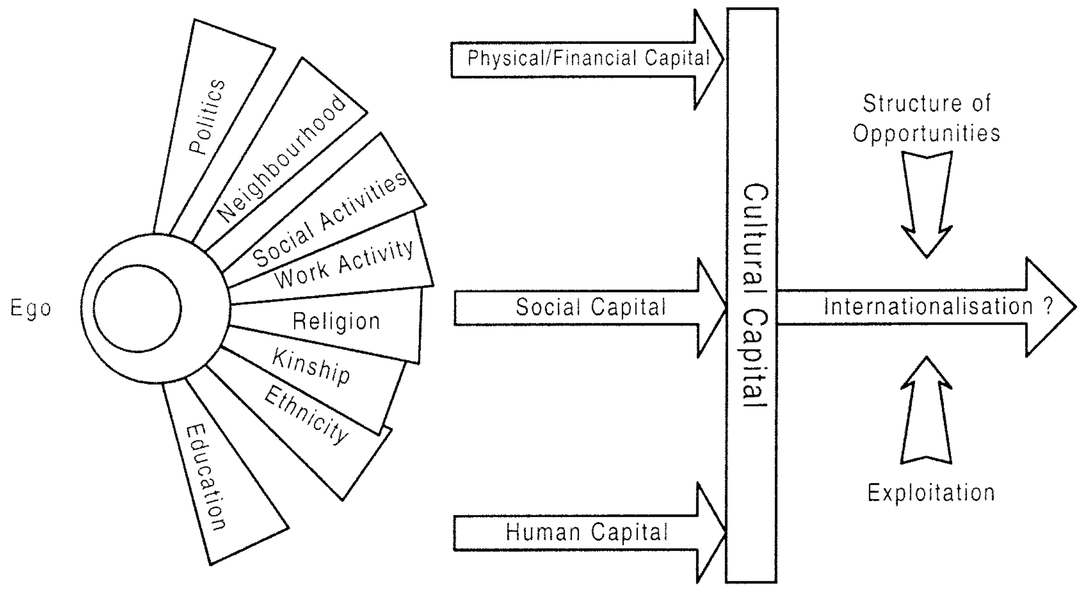
A heuristic framework for empirical study

Summarising the themes from the literature, we have noted potential significance of the following in explaining the likelihood, and manner, of an unfolding process of internationalisation amongst Asian businesses:

- Recognition of differences within (as well as between) ethnic groups;
- The importance of firm size, industry, and maturity of trade sector;
- The influence of ethnicity on resource sourcing;
- The effectiveness of ethnic networks;
- Types of markets served (including overseas markets with a high psychic distance); and
- Different types of internationalisation.

Drawing these together, we derive a heuristic model encapsulating many of the issues to be addressed in our empirical work. The purpose of the model *is not* to generate a set of (nomothetic) testable hypotheses. The purpose *is* to highlight the variety of (idiographic) themes that our discussion suggests may have an impact on, firstly, the initial decision to internationalise and, secondly, subsequent processes. In an attempt to explicitly address the "synoptic illusion" (Bourdieu, 1990) of a logical, structured coherence in the accounts of their actions given by respondents, and the interpretations placed upon these accounts, we do not make any presumptions *a priori* about the likely primacy of any of these factors, nor do we consider the model to be a complete ontological picture of what we expect our methodology to be able to produce knowledge about. The model is advisedly heuristic. No rigid causal links are specified, as the research method is designed to uncover interconnections and processes. A basic presupposition of the model, however, is that firms' internationalisation decisions are made in a holistic manner, i.e. incorporating a number of issues (Bell et al., 1998).

In an attempt to simplify our theoretical account, the model incorporates two theoretical building blocks, not so far discussed, in a diagrammatic representation of our framework for analysis, presented in Figure 2. These are Boissevain's (1974) usage of types of network influences in his theory of entrepreneurial bro-



Adapted from Boissevain (1974, p. 29), Diagram 2,2.

Figure 2. Elements of a heuristic framework for understanding ethnic businesses' internationalisation processes.

kerage, and Bourdieu's (1990) conception of the influence of cultural/symbolic capital, arising out of an individual's human and social capital. These are used to bind together the elements so far discussed. In addition, by highlighting the issues of networking and capital, stressed in the literature, they provide an epistemological context for interpreting our findings. Briefly, while both highlight the role of network influences on the development of the individual and the potential for social action, Boissevain stresses the enabling feature of diverse social roles creating opportunity,[9] whilst Bourdieu emphasises the constraints placed on social action by social position (the "habitus"). Boissevain stresses the need for potential entrepreneurs to be actively and consciously willing to exploit and manipulate relationships and situations. In opposition to this, Bourdieu points to action frequently occurring in a non-conscious, unplanned manner, constrained by his/her cultural/symbolic capital. The left hand side of the diagram uses Boissevain's many bladed hand fan metaphor to highlight the range of potential network influences on an individual. These may or may not be overlapping. In turn, these may form the basis for the generation of three basic types of capital, which come together to form an individual's cultural/symbolic capital. Internationalisation processes will be expected to unfold dependent upon: the network influences; the relationships between different types of capital; the nature of entrepreneurial opportunities; and the ability and desire of entrepreneurs to exploit these opportunities.

These theoretical tensions highlight several important features. First, the influence of ethnicity on the structure of entrepreneurial opportunities (e.g. by providing ethnic markets and/or ethnic sources of finance), including their limitation through discrimination and the like (Waldinger et al., 1990). Second, changes in the composition of opportunities – such as access to international markets – as changes in social and human capital modify culturally acceptable modes of behaviour (both within and outside of ethnic groups). Third, the influence of entrepreneurial opportunities on the route taken towards internationalisation, together with the fact that this might occur in very diverse ways, not in accordance with the path dependency of many stage models. Finally, how the socially generated cultural capital influences the propensity to act to exploit opportunity, whether in a planned or unplanned manner. This latter point is especially important for our empirical work, in that interviewees may typically be expected to ascribe motives *post hoc* to particular decisions providing *ergo prompter hoc* explanations. Indeed, we would stress the situational, often tacit, frequently intuitive, and only partially conscious decision making of our respondents (Bourdieu, 1990).

3. Research focus and method

The internationalisation processes of a sample of Asian-owned SMEs are investigated. As discussed, the study explicitly addresses how ethnicity can impact on the patterns, processes and pace of overseas expansion among the firms. Two basic issues were empirically investigated in depth: first, firms' initial business strategy and international orientation including the rationale for initial market selection and mode of market entry; and second, their subsequent internationalisation decisions. Within the research design the investigation sought to avoid what Kamath et al. (1987) refer to as a "dominant use of logical-empiricist methodology" which has "bedevilled" export research, in order to address "why" and "how" type research questions, consistent with the holistic approach of Bell et al. (1998).

In determining an appropriate methodology towards data gathering, three main problems with a quantitative approach to the subject matter are apparent. The first problem is one of sampling. Previous studies have encountered problems in locating a suitable sampling frame of Asian-owned firms within particular industry sectors and, subsequently, obtaining a satisfactory response rate (Pardesi, 1992). These problems generally entail a non-probabilistic approach to sampling, whereby the representativeness and generalisability of findings cannot be ascertained (De Vaus, 1996), thus negating the validity of usual canons of positivist evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1998; King, 1994). Second, as Stanfield II (1998) argues, since theories within management and social science have largely been developed within a "white" context, it cannot be assumed *a priori* that they are appropriate for addressing issues concerning race and ethnicity. Third, whilst quantitative approaches are useful for uncovering (synchronic) features of structure, they are less able to address (diachronic) process-based issues concerning why events happened and how they unfolded over time (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). As a result, to explore the underlying (subjective) reasons for managers' particular decisions, which in some cases were undertaken over a number of years, it was decided that a semi-structured qualitative approach would be more appropriate (King, 1994). This would enable key topic areas to be covered but in a way that allowed executives to tell their own particular account of the way in which events materialised and a rationale to account for them.[10]

The main strengths of our approach include: efficiently obtaining expansive, contextualised data in a naturalised setting; discovering the complexity of interconnected themes; taking account of cultural nuances; providing background context on events and behaviours; focus on subjective interpretations of internationalisation processes; providing a flexible basis for later development of hypotheses and triangulation; and achieving co-operation from respondents through face-to-face encounters. Key potential weaknesses include: the possibility of misinterpretation of collected data; possible bias arising from the effect of the researcher on the interviewee; reliance upon the honesty of the interviewee; potential bias from using key informants; and ensuring validity of the knowledge generated (Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Phillips, 1981).

In order to minimise the potential weaknesses, clear evaluation procedures need to be adopted in qualitative research. Whilst various techniques to assess reliability and validity in qualitative work have been proposed (King, 1994; Peräkylä, 1997), we use the evaluation criteria appropriate for constructivist/critical theory approaches suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1998). These are, briefly: taking due account of the nature of the research; trustworthiness of the research (credibility, dependability and confirmability); and authenticity of the research.

Interviews were undertaken with 20 Managing Directors of Asian-owned SMEs started by first generation immigrants.[11] All of the Managing Directors were male enabling us to reduce bias from gender-related issues, though this arose out of sampling limitations rather than research design. All of the firms were located in the West Midlands in the U.K., and employed between 10–50 employees. The choice of region was determined both by practical considerations in undertaking the interviews, as well as theoretical considerations. For example, ethnic enclave theory, as discussed previously, entails geographically clustered cadres of ethnic businesses, with the composition of the enclave having an effect on the business strategies pursued. Within the U.K., the West Midlands has one of the highest concentrations of ethnic businesses (Ward, 1991; Table I). In addition, by concentrating on one region, we are able to partially control for differing domestic economic environments facing firms in different regions. Similarly, with regard to size, by concentrating on a narrow size range, we are able to partially limit the effects of different organisational/managerial structures that occur within different sized firms (Storey, 1994). Additionally, as Table I shows, this size range has an over-representation of clothing firms in the West Midlands compared with the U.K. as a whole, highlighting the significance of the sector in the context of the local economy. The choice of a single mature sector was considered important to avoid trade sectoral bias and the clothing industry was considered appropriate due to previous related research work on this sector and the large concentration of Asian-owned firms in comparison with other areas of manufacturing (Waldinger, 1986; Ward et al., 1986; Krcmar, 1987). Practical considerations also came into play in that the firms were known to the authors through participation in a previous related study.[12]

Using an existing sampling frame allowed firms meeting the sample requirements to be easily identified and it was considered more likely that accurate accounts of events would be forthcoming within the interviews based on the level of trust developed between the interviewer and interviewees. We explicitly recognise the possibility of bias this introduces and were careful to address this in interpreting our findings. An additional potential source of bias, which we also paid close attention to, arises from power and knowledge asymmetries between the researcher and interviewee (Heritage, 1997).

The number of firms to be interviewed was

TABLE I
Background data on: (i) male Asian self employment in the West Midlands; and (ii) the size distribution of clothing firms in the West Midlands

% of economically active		Total (all ethnic groups)	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Other Asian (excluding Chinese)
Part one: Male Asian Self Employment (1991 Census)						
West Midlands Metropolitan Count	**All self employed**	**11.2**	**16.5**	**11.8**	**11.5**	**12.8**
	of which:					
	with employees	3.6	7.9	3.7	8.8	6.4
	without employees	7.6	8.6	8.1	2.7	6.4
Other West Midlands	**All self employed**	**16.6**	**21.9**	**20.4**	**26.4**	**8.8**
	of which:					
	with employees	5.9	11.7	5.8	24.6	4.8
	without employees	10.7	10.2	14.5	1.8	4.0
Great Britain	**All self employed**	**15.4**	**21.4**	**18.3**	**14.1**	**10.1**
	of which:					
	with employees	5.1	9.6	7.1	10.6	4.6
	without employees	10.3	11.8	11.2	3.5	5.5

Notes: Figures are calculated from total persons resident in the area aged 16 and over; female self employment is excluded, since the sample we use comprises of only male entrepreneurs.
Source: Adapted from *1991 Census: Economic Activity Great Britain (Vol 1)*, London: Government Statistical Service. Table 2.

Part two: Male Self Employment in the West Midlands as a Percentage of Total Great Britain Male Self Employment Within Ethnic Groups

	Total	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Other Asian
West Midlands Metropolitan County	3.3	12.1	11.0	7.6	4.7
Other West Midlands	5.2	2.2	2.3	1.9	1.1

Notes: Figures are calculated from total persons resident in the area aged 16 and over.
Source: Adapted from *1991 Census: Economic Activity Great Britain (Vol 1)*, London: Government Statistical Service. Table 2.

Part three: The Economically Active in the West Midlands as a Percentage of the Total for Great Britain

	Total	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Other Asian
West Midlands Metropolitan County	4.5	15.7	16.7	9.8	3.5
Other West Midlands	4.9	2.1	2.0	1.0	1.2

Notes: Figures are calculated from total persons resident in the area aged 16 and over.
Source: Adapted from *1991 Census: Economic Activity Great Britain (Vol 1)*, London: Government Statistical Service. Table 2.

Part four: Size Distribution of Clothing Firms in the West Midlands (by employment sizeband)

	1–9	10–19	20–99	100–499	500+	Total
West Midlands	610	170	155	30	0	965
	(63.2)	(17.6)	(16.1)	(3.1)	(0)	(100)
Total (U.K.)	6390	1120	1145	350	15	9020
	(70.8)	(12.4)	(12.7)	(3.9)	(0.2)	(100)

Notes: Figures refer to standard statistical regions, using SIC 1992 Division 18 (wearing apparel; dressing & dyeing of fur); figures in brackets are the percentage of total.
Source: Adapted from *PA 1003 Size Analysis of United Kingdom Businesses (Data for 1997)*, London: Office for National Statistics. Table 9.2.

based on the desire to be able to collect in-depth information permitting us to understand individual firms' strategies, but also to be able to compare individual firms with other, similar firms. We were also aware of the ethical issues, in terms of the imposed time-cost to respondents of being researched, that may arise in the context of qualitative research (Punch, 1998). Given resourcing constraints, a pragmatic decision was, therefore, made to attempt to balance a desire to collect an increasing amount of information from any individual firm against the advantages of collecting information from a number of firms. A sub-sample of twenty firms from the existing database, which exhibited the previously mentioned requirements, were identified and all agreed to be interviewed. The relatively small number of firms permitted us to carefully check for systematic patterns of response, as a means of validating the data, as well as searching for idiosyncracies requiring further examination and interpretation. A number of common findings were observed suggesting that an increased sample size may have resulted in diseconomies in terms of time and cost from gathering new information of a significant nature.[13]

4. Main research findings

In summarising particular issues of importance within this investigation, Table II details selected characteristics of the case study SMEs. In order to maintain anonymity, the firms are represented by letters ranging from "A-T". Background characteristics are then summarised, including their foundation date, their ratio of international sales to total sales, and, size is shown by both their number of employees and turnover. The date in which firms commenced cross-border activities is subsequently included to allow comparison against their foundation date, indicating the rate and mode of internationalisation. Additionally, details of whether firms' entry into direct exporting were influenced by the receipt of a solicited or unsolicited order are provided to indicate the proactive or reactive nature of early internationalisation. Three forms of market entry are presented in Table II since these were the only activities in

TABLE II
Summary of the case study SMEs' selected characteristics

					Date Commenced Cross-Border Activities			
Firm	Founded	Int ratio	Number of employees	Turnover	Indirect export	Direct export	Solicited order	Subsidiary
A	1973	c75%	c40	c£750k	–	India (1973)	Yes	India (1989)
B	1973	c35%	c28	c£500k	1977	Holland (1979)	Yes	–
C	1973	c70%	c26	£400k	–	Tanzania (1974)	Yes	–
D	1977	c70%	c21	c£300k	–	Kenya (1977)	Yes	Kenya (1988)
E	1978	c30%	c12	c£100k	1981	Holland (1983)	Yes	–
F	1978	c70%	c15	c£100k	–	Tanzania (1979)	Yes	Tanzania (1990)
G	1979	c60%	c22	c£300k	–	Uganda (1980)	Yes	–
H	1980	c60%	c35	c£650k	–	Kenya (1981)	Yes	Kenya (1989)
I	1982	c30%	c20	c£250k	–	Germany (1987)	No	–
J	1984	c30%	c18	c£200k	1987	Holland (1989)	Yes	–
K	1984	c20%	c20	c£300k	1987	France (1989)	Yes	–
L	1984	c10%	c25	c£200k	1987	Holland (1989)	Yes	–
M	1985	c15%	c28	c£250k	–	France (1991)	No	–
N	1985	c25%	c20	c£200k	–	Germany (1992)	No	–
O	1986	c15%	c18	c£200k	1989	Holland (1991)	Yes	–
P	1987	c20%	c15	c£175k	–	Germany (1992)	No	–
Q	1988	c15%	c22	c£200k	–	Germany (1993)	No	–
R	1988	c10%	c30	c£250k	–	Ireland (1994)	No	–
S	1989	c10%	c20	c£200k	1992	Holland (1994)	Yes	–
T	1989	c10%	c15	c£175k	–	Ireland (1994)	No	–

which the case study firms were engaged; indeed, either direct or indirect exporting was the primary mode of market entry in which firms were engaged with only four firms investing in an overseas subsidiary.

In addressing the objective of this study, that is, to uncover and understand differences in the patterns, processes and pace of overseas expansion among the Asian-owned SMEs, the interview schedule followed a similar approach to that adopted by Bell et al. (1998) where particular key factors were investigated, although the issue of ethnicity was not addressed by Bell et al. (1998). These were: first, firms' initial business strategy and international orientation including the rationale for initial market selection and mode of market entry; and, second, subsequent internationalisation decisions.

Firms' initial business strategy and international orientation

Key decision makers had a major influence on the nature and pace of the SMEs' internationalisation. It was interesting to observe that, several firms (A, C, D, F, G, and H) were started by executives with experience in the clothing sector within their country of origin. In other words, countries such as India, Kenya and the like were originally the domestic market for these managers and as such, they had built up a great deal of experience in operating within them. Existing trade sectoral experience had been brought with managers as they emigrated to the U.K. and it was natural to them to continue in this line of business maintaining contacts with networks. Indeed, the relatively low entry costs in the clothing industry together with resources gathered from family members and the low wages paid in respect to their subsequent employment meant that manufacturing operations could be initiated both quickly and inexpensively.

Firm "D" was started by a manager whose family operated a business in the clothing industry in Kenya. After attending university in the U.K., a decision was later made to emigrate in 1977 and a business was founded in the same year. Capital for business development was made available by family members and small scale production was undertaken utilising family and other members of the ethnic community. Contacts with businesses developed by the family in Kenya were exploited immediately and exports grew quickly in the first year of trading.

In comparison, it was equally, interesting to observe that the remaining firms were started by managers who had previously been employed by other organisations in the trade sector within the U.K. None had experience in the industry prior to emigrating to the U.K. and consequently did not believe they had the business skills to set-up their own businesses until they had developed some experience within the sector. Each had been employed at relatively low levels within their respective organisations and had developed the necessary production skills to set-up in business on their own. However, they did not have the commercial knowledge to take existing orders away from their previous employers and had to develop their own sales leads. This meant that all of these firms had started operating in the U.K. market and it was some while before overseas opportunities were forthcoming.

Although it was apparent to all of these firms that the relatively large demand within the U.K. could sustain managers' anticipated growth plans for some time, it was interesting to note that trade was primarily undertaken with other firms within the ethnic community. Several firms (B, E, J, K, L, O, and S) commenced their international activities via indirect exporting serving U.K. based organisations and it was apparent that this had provided the impetus to explore direct export opportunities. Indeed, each of these firms commenced direct exporting within two years of commencing overseas sales via an indirect route. The decision was based on research undertaken within the ethnic community (word of mouth and business advisory bodies) rather than via the assistance of government bodies. The remaining firms (I, M, N, P, Q, R, and T) commenced exporting only after the receipt of an unsolicited order. A final observation was that unlike the firms which had commenced exporting to their country of origin within a year of starting their businesses, the others commenced direct exporting after a minimum of five years following start-up and all to European countries (although some had indirect export experience prior to this).

Firm "I" was started by a manager who had been a production worker in a U.K. clothing business. After several years on the shop floor he decided that he had sufficient production skills to start his own business in 1982. Early trading primarily consisted of exploiting community contacts in the U.K. clothing industry and exporting did not commence until the receipt of an unsolicited order five years after founding the business.

The issue of serving markets that were perceived as having a low psychic distance featured as an important decision for the majority of the firms. Nevertheless, a consideration of what constituted "psychic distance" to the managers is worthy of debate. In the first instance, it was evident that managers who commenced exporting to their country of origin, i.e. within East Africa or the Indian sub-continent, regarded this as having a low psychic distance. This had a major impact on their internationalisation decision.

Firm "A" took advantage of cultural networks in India as a way of obtaining orders immediately upon commencing business activities in 1973. Little was known about the trading environment in the domestic (U.K.) market at the time the business was founded and it was natural to the owner to exploit opportunities in his country of origin in order for the business to develop. As such, India was viewed at that time more as the domestic market than the U.K.

The reverse was true for firms which commenced exporting some years after initiating business activities in the U.K. where other European countries were seen as culturally similar. Nevertheless, in a number of cases, exporting to these countries was on the basis of the receipt of an unsolicited order rather than a decision to actively commence exporting to a culturally similar country. For the proactive firms which initiated direct exporting after previously having indirect exporting activities, exporting to culturally similar countries had played some part in their decision. However, this was coupled with decisions based on insufficient information about how to systematically seek overseas opportunities and therefore it was more accurate to say that exporting to countries with a low psychic distance was a minor consideration with fortuitous opportunities from managers' networks having a far greater impact on decision-making.

Firm "E" had commenced indirect exporting three years after starting in business in 1978. Initially, indirect exporting provided a more convenient route to internationalisation since selling to a U.K. based intermediary meant that the paperwork and time associated with administering overseas sales were eliminated. However, within two years the firm started direct exporting to Holland after developing contacts with an Asian-owned business located there. The decision about exporting to a culturally similar country was irrelevant to the manager and the exploitation of established sales opportunities was the driving force in the internationalisation decision.

Subsequent internationalisation decisions

Since the issue of performance measurement is subjective and open to criticism (Buckley et al., 1988, 1990); also, because the gathering of indicators concerning success such as profits, etc. within ethnic minorities is known to be difficult (Pardesi, 1992; Crick and Chaudhry, 1996), managers were asked to comment on whether they believed performance was consistent with the objectives which were set although answers tended to feature the issue of export growth.

Although it was clear that managers were always hoping that things could improve further (not least of which was the notion of "making money"), it was also apparent that few managers believed they had met their major international goals. The firms which had commenced exporting within their first year's operations to East Africa and the Indian sub-continent had all achieved international ratios of 60 percent or more and believed they had met growth forecasts. Four had subsequently established subsidiaries in these countries to exploit international marketing know-how developed over a number of years.

Firm "H" had commenced direct exporting a year after business foundation in 1980 and a subsidiary was opened in Kenya in 1989. International sales now accounted for about 60 percent of total sales with the vast majority of this being sold to the East African market. The owner had recognised that a sales office was required in order to act as a regional "hub" in servicing the East African market as sales growth would otherwise be limited if he continued to operate purely from the U.K.

In contrast, none of the remaining firms who had internationalised later and started exporting to European countries, had achieved an export ratio of more than 35 percent. Furthermore, none had established subsidiary operations overseas. However, these firms had deliberately concentrated on the domestic U.K. market and had therefore met their expectations as far as growth was concerned by focusing on domestic expansion rather than export development.

It was clear that the later internationalising firms' perceptions towards overseas performance were based on an ad hoc rather than a planned strategy. While a number of firms had initially reacted to the receipt of an unsolicited order, their export business had now become viewed as a "marginal" activity, in some cases representing about 10 percent of total business. As such, repeat orders, new business from agents, and other fortuitous orders kept their export turnover at constant levels while domestic (U.K.) sales accounted for the bulk of total turnover. International sales were spread over a number of markets as orders were received and no attempt was made to concentrate efforts in dealing with only several markets in order to build on experience and penetrate them in the longer term. These were almost exclusively European markets. It was therefore thought necessary to concentrate limited managerial resources on domestic market expansion with agents based overseas being asked to find new export business.

Firm "L" considered itself to be a marginal player in overseas operations. The owner mainly employed a concentrated market servicing strategy with efforts, i.e. about 90 percent of turnover, being placed on developing the U.K. market. Nevertheless, a market spreading approach was used for the remaining 10 percent of turnover whereby markets were served on an ad hoc basis as orders were received. Little effort was placed on developing business overseas since the scale of the operations were limited (about 25 employees), as was the manager's time. Agents had therefore been appointed in several overseas markets in order to obtain orders and leave time for the owner to develop domestic operations.

The reverse was true for several firms (B, E, I, and N) which had achieved international ratios of 25 percent or more. It was apparent that while these firms were somewhat concerned with domestic market expansion, they were concentrating international efforts in serving a few key markets. Interestingly, unlike the marginal exporters, these had moved away from serving only European markets and included East African markets from where the owner/managers originated.

Firm "N" had been founded in 1985 and achieved an international ratio of approximately 25 percent since commencing overseas business in 1992. Emphasis had been placed on serving the German market having initially commencing direct exports to the country after receiving an unsolicited order. The initial order had been successful and this had led to repeat business from the same customer together with other orders from the market primarily resulting from word of mouth recommendations. Nevertheless, other countries were now being serviced outside of Europe, noticeably the East African market, whereby contacts had been made via both trade missions and through family contacts.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper provides a contribution to the growing body of knowledge on international entrepreneurship, by reporting on an investigation into the internationalisation processes of Asian-owned SMEs in the U.K. clothing industry. The study addressed an identified gap in the literature: the overseas expansion of ethnic minority-owned firms. With some regions having relatively high concentrations of ethnic minority-owned firms (Ward, 1991); the issue of multi-cultural policy featuring on the agendas of certain governments (Stanton and Lee, 1995); and, the observation that policy-makers are unsure about the business practices and assistance requirements of such firms (Crick and Chaudhry, 1996), it appears timely to uncover and understand differences in the patterns, processes and pace of overseas expansion among Asian-owned SMEs. A qualitative methodological approach was employed within this investigation to focus on two key issues and these complement the recent "holistic" perspective adopted by Bell et al. (1998). These were: first, firms' initial business strategy and international orientation including the rationale for initial market selection and mode of market entry; and, second, subsequent internationalisation decisions.

Certain findings supported the work of Bell et al. (1998). It was found that factors associated with key decision makers had an important influence upon firms' international operations and the receipt of unsolicited orders had an effect on some firms' timing of overseas market entry. Nevertheless, it was found that cultural networks balanced with resource constraints also had a major impact on the direction and pace of certain firms' overseas expansion. While the findings provided some support for the incremental approach to internationalisation within a mature trade sector, the cultural and business experience of some managers was found to have an effect on the pace and direction of their overseas expansion. Nevertheless, it should be recognised that these findings refer to a single low-technology U.K. trade sector and may not be generalisable.

The holistic perspective adopted within this study is consistent with the contingency view of internationalisation (Luostarinen, 1980; Reid, 1983; Woodcock et al., 1994; Yeoh and Jeong, 1995; Kumar and Subramaniam, 1997; Bell et al., 1998) and provides further challenges to the incremental approach by indicating that factors associated with ethnicity had an effect on the pace and direction of some firms' overseas expansion. Specifically, two broad groups of firms were identified.

In the first group, operations were internationalised within a year of business start-up and trading commenced with firms located in the owner/managers' country of origin to exploit cultural networks. This group had relatively high international ratios; concentrated efforts on several key markets; and, in some cases developed subsidiaries overseas. Networks developed in countries which were once their domestic market, were rapidly exploited upon emigrating to the U.K. and as such were quickly served on an export basis. These did not follow the conventional incremental route in their overseas expansion strategies.

The second group, in contrast, did not have existing contacts or the commercial know-how when starting their businesses some time after arriving in the U.K. and could not rapidly exploit networks in the same way as the first group. As such, it was apparent that these firms' strategies were more consistent with internationalisation theory taking an incremental route in market expansion. In some cases an in-direct exporting route was exploited; in others the stimuli was the receipt of an unsolicited order. A few firms had international ratios of around 30 percent, and concentrated resources on a few key markets. However, the remainder were marginal exporters; they tended to have far lower international ratios; greater concern with domestic (U.K.) market expansion; and adopted a spreading strategy covering a number of markets as and when orders were received. Unlike the first group, all of these firms commenced exporting to European countries rather than their country of origin. In short, it was clear that they were at relatively early stages of their internationalisation.

One point which the latter group did have in common with the first one was the poor utilisation of government assistance. A lack of trust in government support, and more specifically with business advisors, was apparent within both groups of firms. For the first group, emphasis was placed on exploiting existing contacts and developing a level of export experience necessary to enable them to proceed to serve other markets with some degree of confidence; the only government support which had been utilised was trade missions. This was viewed as a subsidised way of fostering existing contacts further rather than developing new ones. Even so, probing within the interviews suggested they were not aware of many forms of support which may have helped them increase export activities further. The second group also had a poor awareness of many forms of export assistance, preferring to build on word of mouth opportunities developed from their cultural network, broadly in accord with the training systems approach of ethnic enclave theory.

Our findings clearly indicate that policy-makers should take into account certain cultural factors when attempting to offer support to ethnic minority-owned firms, particularly in the way in which it is communicated. This is necessary to penetrate an identified cultural bias against outside assistance. While the employment of business advisors with a cultural affinity is one step in this direction, interviews suggested that "token Asians" with employment within large consulting bodies was not the way forward. They were perceived as having no comprehension of the business practices and assistance requirements within the Asian community. While such people may be of an Asian origin, their experience was typically restricted to large, white-owned or public limited companies. Indeed, our sample of Asian-owned SMEs tended to use networks within their community such as small Asian-owned accountants, solicitors, bankers etc. rather than the large consulting firms. It is staff from bodies such as these who would have more credibility within the community if they were used as advisors. A second and important point for policy-making in this area, is to recognise the diversity of ethnic business experience, which has been uncovered by the use of our qualitative methodology. This requires detailed case-by-case assessment of business assistance requirements, and perhaps more tailored packaging of assistance to overcome barriers arising out of specific ethnic backgrounds than has been delivered to date in the U.K.

Future research directions might seek (where possible due to cultural resistance) to employ a wider range of qualitative research methodologies to probe these issues further. For example, analysis of company documentation and meetings through tracer studies (Forster, 1994; Hornby and Symon, 1994) could provide further insight into the business logic and rationality of entering specific international markets. Stakeholder analysis (Burgoyne, 1994) may be appropriate for greater understanding and explanation of how and why cultural networks are actually used by ethnic businesses, and how different stakeholders – such as family, banks and accountants, and customers and suppliers – may constrain or engender international market opportunities. Finally, methods such as proxemics and kinesics may provide useful insight into cultural factors, such as use of personal space (for instance, where and when business transactions are undertaken) and the effect of non-verbal (as well as verbal) communication styles on business transactions (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Video-based (Heath, 1997) and ethnographic (Baszanger and Dodier, 1997; Marcus, 1998) studies of such factors may assist policy-makers in improving their ability to effectively communicate with, and assist ethnic business.

It seems clear that a number of directions are available, for future research investigations, to improve our understanding of the business practices and assistance requirements of ethnic minority-owned firms. As such, this paper provides a basis on which other academic studies can build.

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Notes

[1] There is a considerable body of research, not cited here for reasons of space, which also has a bearing on our findings. This has examined the changing structure of the clothing industry both within the U.K. and internationally.

[2] For example, to take just a few cases, distinctions are made between entrepreneurs and managers; self employed with employees and self employed without employees; high technology and traditional small businesses; growth oriented and non-growth oriented SMEs; urban and rural SMEs; and male and female entrepreneurs.

[3] It is interesting to note the differing use of language amongst researchers working in varied disciplinary and national contexts. For example, British researchers working in the area of entrepreneurship tend to refer to ethnic-owned businesses, whilst U.S. research in the same area tends to refer to minority-owned business. Much of the sociological work in this area has referred to immigrant business.

[4] Stansfield II (1998, p. 333) notes that "*ethnicity* denotes the synthesis of biological and fictive ancestry and cultural elements" and "is a critical attribute of race in that it is a basis of diversity within and between racial categories". Races, however, are socially and historically "constructed categories of populations . . . fixed and systematized through their association with phenotypical attributes".

[5] They also call into question the appropriateness of different research strategies and help to explain the efficacy of the qualitative approach to the subject that is adopted here, as will be explained in Section 3. To circumvent issues arising out of differing cultural inheritance derived from immigration in comparison with ethnic groups who were born in the U.K., this study concentrates solely on businesses started by immigrant entrepreneurs.

[6] Whilst the family has also been identified as important for non-ethnic business, distinctive observed features of family relations in ethnic business include the use of unpaid family labour and pooling of family resources (particularly financial capital).

[7] These models might more properly be referred to as category approaches, rather than stages models, since there is

no necessary logic suggesting an accretion of internationalisation activities over time.

[8] The importance of research concerning firms' internationalisation has not been restricted to academic debate. In the U.K., for example, the Joint Export Promotion Directorate (the government section with responsibility for export promotion) use a three stage model of non-exporters, passive exporters and active exporters for differentiating between firms, although the criteria are not published (Crick, 1995).

[9] In a similar vein, see also, Burt (1992).

[10] In doing so, it was also recognised that in older SMEs the key decision maker in relation to major internationalisation decisions (probably the owner/manager) would possibly not still be employed within the business with succession having taken place.

[11] Each interview lasted approximately two hours. All interviews were conducted by the second named author at the owner's business premises, and at times convenient to the Managing Director. All interviews were primarily conducted in English, though Asian languages were used where appropriate. The researcher conducting each was of Asian origin, but had lived in the U.K. for a number of years and was considered reasonably knowledgeable about Asian cultures and fluent in several languages. In the course of this investigation, this background was considered important to address cross-cultural methodological issues associated with "emic" versus "etic" factors (Douglas and Craig, 1983; Usunier, 1996; Vijver and Leung, 1997).

[12] The sampling frame had originally been developed from a number of sources such as local advisory boards and Asian business groups.

[13] Based on 1991 Great Britain Census data, our sample accounts for approximately 19% of total employment in the West Midlands in the footwear and clothing industries (source: *1991 Census Economic Activity in Great Britain* (Vol. 2), London: Government Statistical Service).

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