

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY NETWORKS AND ETHNIC MINORITY BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF THE UK VIETNAMESE NAIL SHOP

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ABSTRACT

It is generally acknowledged that social and family networks have an important influence on business development, particularly in the context of ethnic minority entrepreneurship. However the networks of refugee entrepreneurs have received scant attention in the literature. This study explores the role that transnational networks play in the start-up and operation of UK Vietnamese nail shops in London. The research involved in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 10 owner-managers, and 4 key informants. The analysis draws on concepts of “strong” and “weak” network ties (Granovetter, 1973) and “mixed embeddedness” to explain why the Vietnamese continue to enter such a competitive sector. The results highlight the importance of transnational family networks within all aspects of the business and suggest that in general an over-reliance on these “strong-ties” inhibits “break-out”. Networks, which include better educated, and/or innovative family members, could however, be important in encouraging diversification. This suggests that there is a need to support Vietnamese entrepreneurs in developing more diverse networks as a means of encouraging business diversification. Trusted community members with links to the wider community are essential for brokering these links.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; Vietnamese; networks; “break-out”

INTRODUCTION

Social and business networks are generally thought to be good for the economy and policy has frequently sought to “implant a culture of competitiveness through co-operation (Huggins 1998:814). Networks are seen as a ‘resource’ through which small business managers gain access to important social and cultural resources, information and capital (Birley 1985, Aldrich and Zimmer 1986, Curran and Blackburn 1991) and research has confirmed the importance of personal networks for company performance (Ostgaard and Birley 1996). So vital is networking thought to be that Business Link, the UK’s nationwide agency for business support has recently been promoting ‘Speed Networking’ events, in which businesses can “meet a new business contact every three minutes allowing you to really explore the diverse nature of the many businesses present and make the right business connections”. Whilst a recent study for the UK government’s Small Business Service has further emphasised the importance of networks and recommended that business advisers would benefit from a greater understanding of them. (Blundel and Smith 2002)

In the case of ethnic minority firms Ram (1993) notes that it is the ‘family and the ‘community’ which lie at the heart of ethnic firms social networks. Family and community resources have been shown to be important to the establishment, development and ‘competitive advantage’ of ethnic minority businesses (EMBs). With globalisation there is an increasing tendency for families to be widely dispersed, and this has led to an increasing number of EMBs with a transnational economic organisation and networks. However, research in this area has tended to focus on larger and more established communities such as the Chinese, and those who have migrated out of choice or chosen to operate as transnationals (Li 1998, Tseung 2002). The role transnational networks play in the development of micro businesses run by smaller, ethnic groups, and in particular refugee entrepreneurs, has been largely neglected in the literature. Similarly, few researchers have explored the role of the family in the networks of those starting a business (Greve and Salaff 2003).

A particular concern with respect to ethnic minority enterprises in the UK is their continuing concentration in a few, generally lower order sectors (Ram and Jones 1998). The concern of policy makers and enterprise support programmes has been to encourage such businesses and new entrepreneurs from these communities to “break-out” of traditional sectors and diversify or move into higher order areas where markets are not so competitive. This paper is concerned with the role that networks play in this process.

The paper focuses on the UK Vietnamese business community, a relatively new group of ethnic minority entrepreneurs who have only been establishing businesses in significant numbers during the last 5 years. The nail shop sector is chosen to provide a case study of a new type of ethnic minority business that is emerging in the UK, which unlike traditional EMBs is not based on serving the local ethnic niche market, and which has developed as a result of economic restructuring, and with the support of transnational family networks. The Vietnamese have owned nail shops in the US for over 10 years, having taken over businesses from the Koreans, but it is only during the last 3-4 years that a sizeable number have been established in the UK. As the fastest growing UK Vietnamese business sector it now accounts for over half of all Vietnamese businesses in London (Bagwell et al 2003). The paper explores how family networks, both within the UK and abroad, influence business ideas, and the start-up, operation and development of the business. It draws on theories of social capital and mixed embeddedness to explain why the Vietnamese continue to enter such a competitive market. The paper focuses on two key issues:

- How do Vietnamese businesses in the nailshop sector make use of their networks?
- What role might these networks play in facilitating or hindering break-out?

It argues that by developing a better understanding of the role networks play in ethnic minority business development policy makers and enterprise support agencies will be better able to develop interventions which are more likely to encourage ‘break-out’, and it concludes by making some suggestions regarding the shape these interventions should take.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Networks can be described as referring to the relationship between the firm or the individual and the myriad of links with organisations and other individuals in the wider environment. Networks have been studied at the firm level, for example, business clusters and industrial districts, and the level of the individual entrepreneur. Networks may also be formal, defined as intentionally formed groups of companies, generally operating in close proximity to each other (Kingsley and Malecki, 2004) or consist of an informal collection of organisations and individuals who have an interest in or links with the firm and/or its owner.

The network approach to entrepreneurship is based on the hypothesis that founders use their personal network of private and business contacts to acquire resources and information they would not (or not as cheaply) be able to acquire on markets (Witt 2004). Several studies have highlighted the importance of networks to business development (Witt 2004). For example Davidsson and Honig (2003) found that nascent entrepreneurs who were members of a business network such as a Chamber of Commerce were more likely to have more rapid start-up.

Social or personal networks, defined as being made up of the family, friends and personal contacts of the entrepreneur have also been found to have an important influence on the business by providing access to resources not available internally. (Ostgaard and Birley 1996). These personal networks are important not only for providing information and access to important physical and financial resources, but also for accessing human and social capital. (Johannisson (2000). The central proposition in the social capital literature is that networks of relationships constitute, or lead to resources that can be used for the good of the individual or the collective. (Dakhli and de Clercq 2004).

However not all network ties will be of equal value to the entrepreneur. Granovetter (1973) developed a model of strong and weak ties within the network. Family and friends are defined as strong ties, which were seen as being reliable, but not able to offer such reliable information as weak ties. Ultimately friends and family are likely to hold similar views, beliefs and problems solving techniques. In contrast Granovetter (1973:1367) claims that weak ties act as “bridges” to information sources not necessarily contained within an entrepreneur’s immediate (strong-tie) network. Thus dependence on family members may restrict the network from which the entrepreneur seeks a wide range of complementary resources when planning or establishing a business (Greve and Salaff 2003). Whilst a network of loosely coupled acquaintance offering skills, knowledge and insights will reduce the importance of family members (Renzulli et al 2000)

FAMILY NETWORKS AND ETHNIC MINORITY ENTERPRISE

Social and family networks have been found to be particularly important to ethnic minority enterprises. (Light et al, 1993; Waldinger, 1995). These networks enable the ethnic minority entrepreneur to draw on unique cultural resources or social capital not generally available to the mainstream, including cheap family labour, pooled savings and access to trusted networks which facilitate trade and provide access to information, thus providing a particular competitive

advantage (Coleman, 1988). These informal networks have also been found to be important as a means of mobilising resources and generating sales (Fadahunsi et al 2000)

However research has also suggested that an over-reliance on the family and co-ethnic community can be a constraint on business development (Flap et al 2000). In a study of a number of different BME groups in north London (Bieler, 2000) found that whilst social capital provided some advantages, it could also be limiting as the co-ethnic group is not necessarily the best source of information, and the social constraints of the community could inhibit break-out. Groups with the strongest co-ethnic ties tend to be weakly connected with outside agencies thus missing out on the information and support such agencies could provide.

Similarly cross cultural-studies suggest that certain cultures tend to be characterised by networks with stronger ties than others. In nations with a highly collectivist perspective strong tie networks are likely to be based exclusively on kinship and friendship ties (Drakopoulou and Patra 2002:12). Whilst these tight knit networks offer benefits of resource leverage and strong levels of support and trust their lack of diversity limits access to information and advice and can inhibit innovation (Tiessen, 1977). Differences in the networking behaviour of entrepreneurs from different countries have also been found, with entrepreneurs from more collectivist family orientated cultures such as Greece tending to spend longer on maintaining their strong-tie network (Drakopoulou and Patra, 2002)

TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS AND ENTERPRISES

Most network studies have assumed that networks are based on relationships with those in close proximity, but as Light and Gold (2000) note the transnational social ties of migrant families can play an important role in shaping ethnic economic arrangements. Links to family members overseas provide resources for importing or exporting goods and/or capital, and networks bring in workers with needed skills as well as those willing to accept low-level jobs. "Transnationals can be very innovative, introducing new products and ways of doing business in countries of origin and settlement" (Light and Gold 2000:152). Globalisation, and in particular the availability of cheaper air travel, long-distance telephone, fax and electronic mail has led to an increasing number of EMBs with a transnational economic organisation and networks. Transnational businesses have been defined as those with locations in more than one country and the transmigration of the owner in order to operate it (Wong and Ng (2002).

The Chinese are frequently cited as an example of an ethnic group with strong global networks in which shared ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties underpin the development of transnational economic links (Douw and Huang 2000, Tseng 2002). For example Wong and Nga (2002) describe the transnational actors of small Chinese firms in Canada who rely on the extended family networks of Chinese families straddling different societies. Sometimes one member of the family runs the operation of the business in Canada whilst another spends several months of the year overseeing operations in China. However, research in this area has tended to focus on larger and more established communities such as the Chinese, and on economic migrants rather than refugees.

BREAK-OUT AND MIXED EMBEDDEDNESS

Whilst family networks have been shown to play an important role in the operation of EMBs others have argued that an over emphasis on ethnic resources can mask the influence of the external political and economic environment (Barrett et al 2001, Ram 1993). Racism and lack of alternative sources of employment it is argued account for the greater propensity for many ethnic groups to enter self-employment and their concentration in a few key sectors of the economy. Recent theories have advocated a more interactive framework of “mixed embeddedness” in which the internal ethnic resources and cultural milieu of the ethnic entrepreneur interact with the external influences of the wider economic and institutional environment (Kloosterman, 1999). In the case of the UK Vietnamese, their history of migration as refugees, their skills and experience, and the economic context in the UK determined the job and business opportunities that were available to them. Whilst cultural influences such as strong collectivist and family values interact with the former to influence business practice. Thus whilst the focus of this paper is on the role family networks play in business start-up and development an attempt is also made to understand the wider context which also contributes to the business entry decision.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology involved a mixture of qualitative methods, including in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 8 nail shops owner managers, a former nail shop owner now running a Japanese restaurant, and the main Vietnamese nail shop supplier in London. Interviews were also held with a Vietnamese business advisor and three key informants from the Vietnamese community in order to obtain an overview of the Vietnamese business community as a whole and the key issues (cultural and structural) facing it. The interviews with the owner managers took place in the nail shops, enabling observations of the business to be made.

There is no general database of Vietnamese businesses in the UK, however an earlier mapping study of Vietnamese businesses in London conducted by the author (Bagwell et al, 2003) provided the population from which the individual business interviews were selected. The sample was designed to be broadly representative of the geographical distribution of nail shops in London.

Two Vietnamese-speaking research assistants helped with the recruitment of business participants and enabled the interviews to be conducted in Vietnamese where necessary or preferred by the owner manager. They and their contacts in the community provided vital access to the businesses, which would have otherwise been difficult to secure. The interviews concentrated on the key stages of business development: start-up, operation and development of the business, and who had provided support and information at each stage. The interviews were taped and transcripts were analysed for emergent themes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Networks and Support for Start-up

It is important to place the business entry decision within the context of the wider economic environment in which the Vietnamese community were operating. Many of the older nail shop owners arrived as refugees in the 1980s, with few skills or qualifications relevant to the UK job market. Most came from rural areas in North Vietnam and had little prior experience of business, in contrast to the US Vietnamese who tended to be from the more business orientated South. They eventually found work in the clothing sector, a major source of employment for the Vietnamese community in London until its demise in the mid 1990s. As work in this sector diminished alternative sources of employment were sought. The success of the Vietnamese in the nail care sector in the United States, where the fashion for manicures and false nails was already well established, provided the inspiration. The willingness of the Vietnamese to work long hours for low wages, and the use of a faster more automated process, enabled them to provide the service quicker and cheaper than traditional beauty parlours, thereby making it affordable to a much larger customer base. A further attraction of the nail sector was its low entry costs. Basic equipment and supplies can be brought for about £7,000, an amount that is relatively easy to raise from within the extended family. A special 'start-up kit' for new nail shop owners, together with advice on licensing requirements, which was available from the supplier, also facilitated start-up. It is not surprising therefore that so many Vietnamese perceived nail shops as being an attractive business proposition.

Three of the businesses interviewed – the supplier, one nail shop owner and the former nail shop owner had learnt the trade working in the US, and had run businesses there for some time before spotting the market opportunity in the UK and bringing the business idea over. As the niece of the nail shop owners explained,

“My aunt and uncle used to live in California and it was them that set up this business. They had two over there but she got homesick and they came back and set up here. ... I manage it. They are back and forth all the time.”

These two businesses were the early pioneers who displayed many of the characteristics of transnational businesses. They maintained strong family and economic ties in more than one country, which they relied on for running various aspects of the business. They travelled regularly during the course of their business and tended to be more open to new ideas.

The other businesses interviewed, having observed the success of these early pioneers decided to copy them. The availability of relatives already running nail shops in the US meant that they could learn the trade in salons there before returning to start-up their own business in the UK. The following scenario was fairly typical.

“Nearly 5 years ago I went there to see my family over there. I've got a cousin there and I heard about nails over there and I stayed there for a year and went to college, I was there for about a month. After that I worked in a salon over there to get experience.”

With this group the presence of relatives in the US provided a useful source of training at the start-up phase, and one or two went back to learn new techniques once their business was established, but the family networks of these businesses tended not to incorporate economic arrangements in the same way as those operating on a more transnational basis.

With the increasing number of nail shops being set up in London later entrants to the market were able to learn the trade from friends and family running nail shops in the capital rather than travelling to the US.

As research with other ethnic groups has found (Fadahunsi, 2000; Ram and Smallborne, 2003), the Vietnamese tend to rely on their own social and trusted community networks for business advice in preference to mainstream business advice agencies. With a couple of notable exceptions, which are discussed later, advice for start-up was mainly obtained from family or friends working in the sector or the Vietnamese nail shop supplier. The latter played a pivotal role providing advice on licensing arrangements, new designs, and brokering on the job training arrangements with existing businesses for those wanting to enter the industry. He claimed to have 900 Vietnamese customers who had all found him through word of mouth – demonstrating the strength of the community network. The interviews confirmed the importance of informal networks based on tight-knit family and community ties. There are no Vietnamese business associations, and none of the businesses belonged to Chambers of Commerce or other business associations. The long hours worked by the businesses, often 10-12 hours a day, 7 days a week, coupled with a lack of trust of outsiders, meant that there was little spare time or inclination for developing new contacts outside their existing network.

Employing Staff

Family networks tended to be used initially for staffing the business and a number of nail shops had sponsored various members of their family to come over from Vietnam to work for them. One owner explained that his staff were:

“All family members, cousins, nieces, nephews. .. I want to offer the opportunities to members of the family first. If there is still vacancies I would offer it to other people. ..There is an obligation to do it. I have a responsibility to find them work” (male nail shop owner).

This sense of responsibility towards the family is deeply embedded within Vietnamese culture and has been shown to still have a strong influence on the business practice of younger, UK educated business managers (Bagwell 2004). Thus a reciprocal arrangement operated within the family network in which businesses could obtain cheap loyal labour, and employees obtain work that they might have found difficult to secure elsewhere. However the strength of these network ties sometimes prevented the family members involved in the business from entering more profitable business or employment areas. It was often easier and less risky to stay employed in the family business than start up on your own. The manager of one business, a 29 year old woman, who was the owner’s niece, and who had grown up and been educated in the UK, explained the dilemma she was in.

“... people have asked me to go and work for them or set up on my own...European as well. But because it’s family I have to be quite loyal to them. They’d probably feel

betrayed if I left them. Because it's family you are inclined to put 110% into what you are doing. If everything comes down to you, you sort out all the problems and sort out all the paperwork, but I'm quite lucky in that I have a stable job where I know the people, you are quite flexible if you need time off."

Where family members were not available or had moved on to establish other nail shops, local community networks provided a source of employees. As one nail shop owner explained:

Interviewee: It's all Vietnamese people, they get together in one place and they know each other

Interviewer: Where do they get together?

Interviewee: In a restaurant or in a bar or a pub. There is one famous pub in Mare St, full of Vietnamese people

Interviewer: So that's how word of mouth gets around?

Interviewee: Yes and you get employees from that

Most employees worked on a part-time self-employed basis handing over a commission from their earnings to the nail shop owner. This highly flexible employment arrangement was ideally suited to the growing pool of informal Vietnamese labour entering the UK as students or by other means.

Diversification and Development

Five of the businesses interviewed had expanded by opening up new branches in other areas with different family members taking responsibility for their management. For example one business owned three nail shops and the owners' friends and family had a further seven trading under the same name. For these businesses the ability to expand depended partly on the availability of members within the close-knit network who could be trusted to run the new branch.

Two of the businesses interviewed had however diversified into new business areas. The female owner of two nailshops, who was of Chinese Vietnamese ethnic origin, had branched out into Chinese medicine, a trade that she had learnt from her grandfather and uncles in Vietnam. The former nail shop owner, had tried unsuccessfully to run a nail shop before nail treatments became popular, and having learnt to cook Japanese food from his siblings in the US and cousins in Germany had decided to open his own Japanese restaurant in London, in partnership with two Vietnamese friends. The daughter of his 'adopted mother' provided a lot of business advice as she was, "a professional – she has been working in England for 10 years – a lot of the big companies – so she knows about the finances, the council and everything". He had also enlisted the help of specialist market research consultants in locating a suitable area for his latest venture. Significantly, none of his nuclear family was directly involved in the operation of the restaurant, perhaps leaving him freer to pursue his personal ambitions than some of the other business owners who may have been more constrained by family loyalties. Thus these two entrepreneurs, whilst still relying on their family for business ideas and training, appeared to have a more diverse range of more innovative and better educated family members within their network than the others. They were also more likely to seek advice and information from sources outside the family and community network, and were less dependent on family members for the operation of their businesses.

The role of education in providing the entrepreneur with a wider range of resources to call on was also apparent in the case of some of the younger nail shop owners. For example, two of these had studied Health and Beauty at college in the UK and as a result were planning to offer beauty treatments in their salon. One regularly attended beauty shows as a means of seeking out new ideas and had tried a range of suppliers, whilst the other was actively researching the market and had a number of contacts – both English and Vietnamese working in this field. Both showed a greater tendency to rely on the human capital acquired as a result of their training, and, having been educated in the UK had a wider range of weak-ties in their networks.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

This small scale exploratory study has attempted to provide some insight into how Vietnamese nail shop owners in London use their informal networks to support the development of their business. The findings emphasize the heavy reliance on strong family network ties for almost everything related to the business; including the business idea, training and finance for start-up, and employees. In this respect the Vietnamese share a lot in common with many other ethnic minority businesses in the UK. In the case of the Vietnamese nail sector however, it is the international family links with relatives in America, which have played a key role in providing the initial business idea and training. Some of these transnational network ties also have an economic basis, in a similar way to transnational enterprises run by the Chinese community. Unlike the Chinese, who have been found to make use of much larger trusted networks or *guanxi*, the networks of the Vietnamese tend to be more tightly confined to a smaller group of family and friends.

The heavy concentration of the Vietnamese in the nail sector can be attributed to both economic and cultural influences. Economic restructuring has provided the push, whilst a growing market for nail care, and co-ethnic ties with the know-how provided the “pull”. Cultural values, which encourage family needs to be considered before individual desires, and even sometimes the best interests of the business, place an obligation on the individual to help the rest of his or her family. This tends to encourage family members to enter similar business sectors, as information about the business can easily be provided, training given and start-up costs are affordable. The result is the current situation in which the marketplace, in London at least, is saturated and characterised by ruthless competition. The growing number of Vietnamese nail technicians working informally from unlicensed premises is creating additional friction within the sector.

The more innovative businesses in this study tended to have a more diverse range of strong family ties than others, or were younger and better educated and more integrated into mainstream society. The presence of well-educated and more innovative members within the family network appeared to be particularly important for encouraging business diversity. With the younger UK educated businesses, greater exposure to a wider network of loose ties, including sources of information such as the internet, is as one might expect, encouraging them to consider entering other business areas, but there remains a tendency to fall back on traditional sectors in which family support is more readily available.

Previous research has suggested that human capital is positively related to innovation (Dakhli and de Clercq, 2004), and that migrants with greater levels of human capital are less reliant on co-ethnic networks or social capital (Marger 2001). The findings of this study indicate that in the case of refugee enterprises, the human capital of family members within the international diasporic network also need to be considered. Thus the findings provide some support for previous research, which has highlighted the benefits of a more diversified mix of strong and weak-ties for business start-up and development (Davidsson and Honig, 2003). However, this study also emphasises that it is the nature of these strong ties which are important, and that those that provide the entrepreneur with innovative ideas and additional human capital are more likely to encourage “break-out”.

These conclusions suggest that policy and enterprise support programmes designed to assist groups such as the Vietnamese need to be more aware of the influence that the transnational diaspora can have on business development. Strong transnational network ties can provide a fertile source of new business ideas and could be further exploited. However a diverse network of local advisors with the necessary human capital, is needed to help translate ideas into viable businesses back home. Thus new and existing entrepreneurs need to be encouraged to develop networks with a wider range of “weak-ties”/individuals outside the family network. Given the Vietnamese community’s lack of trust of outsiders it is suggested that trusted individuals from the community who can act as a “bridge” to mainstream sources of support are vital to this process.

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