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Muhibul, Haq and Davies, Julie  (2023) 'The person with maximum knowledge will win the race': conceptualizing knowledge in micro-businesses. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 61 (2). pp. 295-321. ISSN 0047-2778

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2020.1768799>

**Publisher:** Taylor & Francis

**Version:** Published Version

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## “The person with maximum knowledge will win the race”: Conceptualizing knowledge in microbusinesses

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To cite this article: Muhibul Haq & Julie Davies (2020): “The person with maximum knowledge will win the race”: Conceptualizing knowledge in microbusinesses, Journal of Small Business Management, DOI: [10.1080/00472778.2020.1768799](https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2020.1768799)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2020.1768799>



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Published online: 11 Aug 2020.



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# “The person with maximum knowledge will win the race”: Conceptualizing knowledge in microbusinesses

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of knowledge and the process of knowledge sharing in ethnic minority microbusinesses remain neglected in contemporary debates even if their role for economic development is recognized. Drawing on a culturalist view, we explore how knowledge is defined and shared in a local niche market. Thematic analysis of semistructured qualitative interviews with 32 owner-managers and 11 employee-managers reveals that, contrary to studies on larger firms, local knowledge creation and sharing narrowly based on ethnic strengths are valuable sources of competitive advantage. Our study has implications for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in exploring, supporting, and integrating ethnic minority microbusinesses.

## KEYWORDS

Knowledge; knowledge sharing; microbusinesses; South Asian ethnic minority; West Yorkshire

## Introduction

Extant scholarship privileges knowledge as one of an organization’s most important strategic resources (Altinay et al., 2014; Bojica et al., 2017; Ipe, 2003). Scholars from multiple domains, including business and management (Barney et al., 2011; Maritan & Peteraf, 2011; Nyberg et al., 2014), strategy (Hatch & Dyer, 2004), strategic human resource management (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Wright et al., 1994), psychology (Crook et al., 2011), economics (Becker, 1996; Blaug, 1976; Machlup, 2014), and small business management (Amoako et al., 2020; Liu & Yang, 2019; Pérez-Luño et al., 2016; Taura & Radicic, 2019), agree that knowledge is vital for organizational sustainability and competitive advantage.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 58) define *knowledge* as “a dynamic human process of justifying personal belief toward the truth.” According to Davenport and Prusak (1998, p. 4), knowledge is “a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information.” Ipe (2003, p. 340) explains that “knowledge is created when the flow of messages [also referred to as information] interacts with the beliefs and

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commitments of its holders.” Ipe (2003, p. 340) further explains, “Knowledge is a function of a particular perspective, intention, or stance taken by individuals, and therefore, unlike information, it is about beliefs and commitment ... [it] is always about some end, about action ... it is context specific and relational and therefore it is about meaning.” From an organizational perspective, knowledge is the productive use of information that is based on and justified by belief systems (Armstrong, 2006; Wang & Noe, 2010). It is this last conceptualization of knowledge as a productive resource that we are interested to explore in the context of microbusinesses (MBs).

While the value of knowledge for organizational success is undisputed, scholars have hitherto overlooked how small business owner-managers and employee-managers perceive knowledge as a source of sustained success and competitive advantage. Indeed, many scholars have neglected MBs (1–9 employees [Altinay et al., 2014]) outright in any scholarly investigation, ostensibly believing that they generate poor research data (Lussier & Sonfield, 2015; McKelvie & Davidsson, 2009). The few scholars who have investigated or explored the role of knowledge in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have typically ignored MBs (Brunswick & Vanhaverbeke, 2015; Pérez-Luño et al., 2016), even though they make up a large majority of SMEs (Gherhes et al., 2016). According to ONS (2018), 96 percent of all private sector business in the UK is MBs. This neglect exists although “small firms are not just scaled down versions of large ones” (Burns, 2007, p. 14); MBs “go about their business in a number of fundamentally different ways” (Lobonțiu & Lobonțiu, 2014, p. 553) from SMEs and large organizations. Therefore, “there is the need for more extensive research to investigate if and how small and micro companies manage their knowledge” (Zieba et al., 2016, pp. 292–293). A few studies have included MBs. For example, Bojica et al. (2017) included 16 (8.84 percent) MBs in their sample (out of 181) to illustrate how SMEs acquire knowledge through external networking. Altinay et al. (2014) included 114 (85.1 percent) MBs (out of 134) to explore the influence of culture on trust judgment in customer relationship development. Kevill and Analoui (2018) included three MB owner-managers and four employee-managers (out of 13) to explore the process of knowledge sharing in MBs and small businesses.

We aim to explore the meaning of knowledge in MBs through the lens of owner-managers and employee-managers. To conceptualize our aim, we ask this central research question: *How do ethnic minority microbusiness owner-managers and employee-managers perceive the importance of knowledge and knowledge sharing?* Our research aim is driven by two motivations. First, MBs in general play an important role for economic development (Brunswick & Vanhaverbeke, 2015; Heilmann et al., 2020, *in press*); they therefore merit scholarly attention for conceptualizing different aspects, including the role of knowledge for their continued survival and sustainable competitive advantage. Secondly, the UK’s social

and economic landscape in particular is increasingly becoming superdiversified (Vertovec, 2007), with some ethnic minority groups, such as South Asians, potentially playing a disproportionately important role as entrepreneurs and workers (Haq, 2015; Ram et al., 2017). We focus on the *South Asian ethnic minority* business community and define South Asians as descendents living in the UK from countries known as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Husainy, 2011; Jaspal & Coyle, 2010; Robinson, 2005). We review relevant literature in the next section.

## Literature review

### *The importance of knowledge*

We begin this literature review by highlighting the role of knowledge for organizational continued survival and sustainable competitive advantage. Organizations become successful and remain competitive when they have access to, generate, manage, and utilize useful knowledge (Denicolai et al., 2014; DeNisi et al., 2003; Du Plessis, 2007; Felin & Hesterly, 2007). This perception is perhaps more relevant now, and is likely to remain so, than ever before because business environments are increasingly becoming knowledge-intensive (Felin & Hesterly, 2007; Ritala et al., 2018). Knowledge exists in explicit and implicit (also called tacit) forms (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Pérez-Luño et al., 2016). The former can be gained through education including formal training, whereas the latter is acquired through experience and informal training (Ipe, 2003; Toomer & Elgort, 2019; Wang & Wang, 2012). According to Jasimuddin et al. (2005), while explicit knowledge can be widely available and characterized as factual and measurable, tacit knowledge is hard to measure because it is shaped by experiences and belief systems and characterized as existing in our heads. In other words, tacit knowledge represents what we are able to do but unable to explain because “we know more than we can tell,” and that we know something or how to do something but cannot explain it (Polanyi, 1967, p. 5). However, according to the socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization (SECI) model presented by Nonaka (1994), both tacit and explicit knowledge are convertible into each other. Thus, all knowledge is originally tacit (Polanyi, 1967) and is situated within individuals (Hislop et al., 2018; Rechberg & Syed, 2013). This tacit knowledge, nevertheless, can be converted into explicit form through learning as a group activity and a way of creating new knowledge in that social interactions are more important than cognitive processes (Brown & Duguid, 2001). In other words, it is groups made by individuals that create knowledge and attribute meaning to works, actions, and artifacts (Wenger et al., 2002). Irrespective of the nature of knowledge, one particular type of

knowledge that is perhaps highly valued in business environments is knowledge about customers and products.

### ***Knowledge about customers and products***

According to Gibbert et al. (2002, p. 459), business decisionmakers realize that the proverbial “if we only knew what we know” also includes “if we only knew what our customers know.” Altinay et al. (2014) found that knowing the customers and products leads to developing organization-specific competences, skills, and knowledge that are necessary to address expectations of customers. Zanjani et al. (2008) argue that businesses attain customer knowledge to better understand targeted customers and to deliver products effectively and efficiently. Others have posited that in today’s competitive business environments, businesses that have knowledge about, and understand, their customers gain competitive advantage (Kumar et al., 2006; Pérez-Luño et al., 2016) through providing products that customers need, which leads to improved customer relationship management, customer satisfaction, and loyalty (Anderson et al., 2007). According to Neneh (2019), successful businesses, specifically in the MB retail sector, are those that have sufficient knowledge of the customers’ needs and the prevailing products that the customers are willing to buy to meet their needs. Polo Peña et al. (2016) argue that successful businesses are those that design and implement customer-oriented business strategies. Strategies, according to Khoza (2019), ensure long-term business success and increase customer value. Past research also indicates that organizations that have a customer-oriented behavior in new product development are more productive than those that do not involve customers (Gao & Bernard, 2018).

### ***Knowledge creation through sharing***

Organizations and individuals create new knowledge and accumulate existing knowledge through research and development (R&D) (Shrestha et al., 2018), training and development (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Kevill & Analoui, 2018), and drawing on organizational history (Sarina, 2018). Since R&D is expensive for knowledge creation, it is adopted typically by knowledge intensive large organizations (Inkinen et al., 2015; Nurmi, 1998). While formal training and development are commonly available (Fitzsimons, 2017; Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Schultz, 1961), experiential learning is at the heart of creating new knowledge. This is facilitated through reflections on our past experiences and sense making of the world around us (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Cunliffe, 2004). Organizational history is evident in procedures, systems, knowledge depositories (for example, databases), and new knowledge that individuals create (Hedberg, 1981; Hislop et al., 2018).

However, small businesses and MBs typically lack sufficient resources (Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007; Pérez-Luño et al., 2016) to invest in knowledge acquisition mechanisms (Staplehurst & Ragsdell, 2010). Microbusinesses, in particular, do not have the luxury of allocating special budgets and executing knowledge-creating activities (Staplehurst & Ragsdell, 2010). But informality is abundantly present (Ram et al., 2001; Wapshott & Mallett, 2015) that facilitates knowledge creation through sharing via close contact and face-to-face conversations between employees (Livingstone, 1997; Staplehurst & Ragsdell, 2010). One mechanism that is highly dependent on social interactions between individuals and groups of individuals, and therefore potentially accommodates knowledge creation through informality, is the SECI model (Nonaka, 1994). This model explains that by adopting various formal and informal mechanisms, individuals and organizations can acquire knowledge internally (experience-based knowledge or know-how) or externally (task-based knowledge or know-what). The former refers to knowledge sharing between individuals and business units within a firm, whereas the latter refers to knowledge sharing between a firm and its external alliances that may include businesses and individuals (Brunswick & Vanhaverbeke, 2015; Ipe, 2003; Liu et al., 2010).

Once acquired externally or internally, knowledge has to be disseminated to individuals and groups within/across firms because tacit knowledge in the hands of individuals is the raw material that has to be “processed to a higher level of knowledge in order to create added value” (Nurmi, 1998, p. 31). Moreover, it is the shared knowledge between an organization and its members that enhances existing knowledge repositories and stimulates new ideas (Taura & Radicic, 2019; Zhou & Li, 2012). Furthermore, it is the shared knowledge that leads to human capacity development and affects firm-level efficiencies such as reducing production costs, faster completion of activities, improved team performance, increased innovation, and sales growth (Pérez-Luño et al., 2016).

### ***The process of knowledge sharing***

Lee (2001, p. 324) defines *knowledge sharing* as “activities of transferring or disseminating knowledge from one person, group or organization to another.” Haq (2016, p. 278 in Ipe, 2003) conceptualizes that “knowledge is created through a process called knowledge sharing where the knowledge owner shares their knowledge with others through a form of messages or practices that are understood/matched by belief systems and experiences that people hold.” Knowledge sharing is considered as playing an important role in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage (Noe et al., 2014). According to Hsu and Chang (2014, p. 119), knowledge sharing “can enable ... [organizations] to strengthen innovation ability, raise performance, and sustain competitive advantage.” Nonaka’s

(1994) model provides a good example of knowledge sharing between individuals and organizations. It explains how tacit knowledge can be transferred into explicit knowledge and vice versa, and how individual knowledge can be transferred into organizational knowledge and vice versa (Hislop et al., 2018; Nonaka et al., 2000). For example, tacit knowledge is transferred from one individual to another through socialization and from individuals to organizations through externalization. Similarly, explicit knowledge is transferred from organizations to individuals through internalization and from organizations to organizations through combination. According to Wang and Wang (2012), knowledge possessed by individuals and groups is converted into organizational/collective knowledge through externalization and combination, whereas knowledge possessed by the firm is transferred to groups of individuals through internalization and socialization. Zhou and Li (2012) refer to this process of converting and sharing knowledge as internal and external knowledge integration mechanisms. Although Nonaka's (1994) model is widely cited, it is based on the Japanese concept of "ba" (place, situation, context). It may only be grounded in Japanese culture (Glisby & Holden, 2003) with epistemological assumptions that are irrelevant in other contexts (Gourlay, 2006).

Generally, knowledge sharing happens when individuals are personally motivated, feel safe (Rechberg & Syed, 2013), and find opportunities to share it with others (Ipe, 2003). Benefits of knowledge sharing include expected personal rewards such as enhanced status, job promotion, and intrinsic financial rewards (Hislop et al., 2018). However, knowledge sharing can be time consuming and disempowering (Hislop et al., 2018; Rechberg & Syed, 2013). Individuals hoard knowledge to protect their self-interest and bargaining power (Bavik et al., 2018); however, this can hurt "a team and an organization by hindering their functioning, mobilization of resources, and fundamental survival" (Bavik et al., 2018, p. 323). Individual-level factors, such as education, interpersonal relationships, and value systems, influence the degree of knowledge sharing.

### **Education**

To what extent does education facilitate knowledge sharing? Wang and Noe (2010) argue that highly educated employees are the most ready to share knowledge, particularly with their well-educated and well-remunerated peers (Viswanath, 2005). Clearly, knowledge sharing facilitates learning. In an extensive literature review, Noe et al. (2014, p. 245) found that "learning based on formal training and development programs, informal learning, and knowledge sharing influences the development of human capital resources" and competitive advantage.

To our knowledge, there is no explicit evidence in the literature to suggest that low or poor educational levels reduce knowledge sharing. However, self-



confidence, enhanced by formal education (Marron, 2014), is linked to knowledge sharing (Anand et al., 2019). Additionally, conscientiousness encourages knowledge exchange (Borges, 2013).

### ***Interpersonal relationships***

According to Schierjott et al. (2018), employees tend to rely on their relationships with peers to accumulate knowledge. Others argue that trust in interpersonal relationships (Chen et al., 2014; Khoza & Pretorius, 2017; Lu et al., 2006) facilitates knowledge sharing (Taura & Radicic, 2019) and motivators to share knowledge (Holste & Fields, 2010). Nonaka et al. (2000, p. 28) note the importance of “strong love, caring and trust amongst organisational members.” Trust defines “the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of the words, actions, and decisions of another” (McAllister, 1995, p. 25). It creates a culture where colleagues behave confidently, openly, ethically, and honestly toward each other (Bavik et al., 2018; Rechberg & Syed, 2013). The obverse includes interpersonal conflict, lack of incentives, and a poor culture of learning that discourages knowledge sharing (Buckley, 2012; Cook & Cook, 2004). This is exacerbated by fear of losing power (Amis et al., 2018; Hsu & Chang, 2014; Taura & Radicic, 2019) and of being punished (Ipe, 2003), and lack of expected rewards.

### ***Ethnic culture and value systems***

Since culture is represented by a set of values and norms that include “commonly experienced language, ideological belief systems (including religion and political belief systems), ethnic heritage, and history” (House et al., 2004, p. 15), it distinguishes different groups (Hofstede, 1993) and alienates outsiders (Thomas, 2003). Norms represent “standards or rules that tell members of a group or society how they should behave” (Schwartz, 2012, p. 16). Debates in the knowledge management field are divided about the role of culture. Religion, as a constituent of ethnic culture (Guiso et al., 2006; House et al., 2004), is believed to promote knowledge sharing because certain fundamental outcomes in life are predestined (Choudhry, 2001; Keyes & Daniel, 1983). Several scholars (such as Bavik et al., 2018) believe that knowledge sharing is a voluntary generous act of donation. Religious belief systems are linked to voluntary charitable actions (Graham & Haidt, 2010), promoting humility (Hook & Davis, 2014), and discouraging arrogance (Gregg & Mahadevan, 2014), which facilitate knowledge sharing (Anand et al., 2019).

In contrast to religion, a caste system (another constituent of the overall ethnic culture) discourages knowledge sharing because it is inherently built on inequality (Amis et al., 2018), which means that individuals share knowledge with carefully selective people (Guiso et al., 2006). Within caste or tribal

systems, the higher echelons remain isolated from ordinary people, leading to higher power distance and knowledge hoarding (McAdam et al., 2012). Existing research indicates that knowledge sharing is less widely practiced in Eastern than in Western cultures where there is relatively higher competitiveness among employees (Ardichvili et al., 2006). Competition between employees can impede knowledge sharing (Lu et al., 2006) in a work culture (Ipe, 2003), especially for ethnic minorities.

While knowledge as a strategic resource and knowledge sharing as an organization's capacity-building process are highly valued and extensively researched, knowledge management in ethnic minority MBs has been underresearched. This is surprising given the current and predicted dominance of ethnic minority MBs such as Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani in the UK. Nine percent of UK ethnic minority MBs belong to Bangladeshis, 46 percent and 18 percent are owned by Indians and Pakistanis respectively, which is much higher than other ethnic minority groups (Haq, 2015, p. 499). These high numbers justify our rationale for conceptualizing knowledge and knowledge sharing among a group of regional South Asian ethnic minority MBs from the viewpoints of owner-managers and employee-managers.

## Methodology

Since our selected topic is underresearched, we chose purposive sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Saunders et al., 2016), which is widely adopted in qualitative research (Polo Peña et al., 2016; Shinnar & Zamantılı Nayır, 2019). Our case includes South Asian ethnic minority micro retail businesses that sell garments, fabrics, footwear, and accessories in West Yorkshire, UK. We analyzed qualitative data collected from 32 business owner-managers and 11 employee-managers in face-to-face semistructured interviews. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed almost verbatim using Dragon Naturally Speaking Software (Smit, 2018). We thematically analyzed the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019; Edhlund & McDougall, 2019) in three interactive and iterative phases (Bell et al., 2019).

For the initial coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we recorded nodes in NVivo (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019) and reached saturation with 32 interviews. Subsequent data assured the trustworthiness of our data analysis (Appleton, 1995; Patton, 1990; Shenton, 2004). In the second phase, we clustered the initial codes based on their perceived meaning or potential value. In the third phase, codes were regrouped again. Self-correcting, as a data coding quality measure (Mays & Pope, 1995; Morse et al., 2008), was adopted at every stage to enhance the credibility of the findings (Polit & Beck, 2008). An audit trail (Appleton, 1995; Carcary, 2009; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993) supported the

overall trustworthiness of our findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Finally, we discussed the main categories and codes with five participants for respondent validation (Burnard et al., 2008).

## Findings

Two types of applied knowledge, characterized by what people know they do instead of what they know they have (Blackler, 1995), emerged from our data analysis. These are product knowledge and customer knowledge. With reference to the process of knowledge sharing, three aspects emerged that apparently inform individuals' knowledge-sharing tendencies. These are education, interpersonal relationships, and ethnic culture. Table 1 shows illustrative and exemplary quotes from the interview data. In the following section, we discuss knowledge and knowledge sharing and corresponding subthemes.

## Knowledge

According to our participants, "having knowledge is very important to be successful in a business" (owner-manager). They explained: "If you do not

**Table 1.** Exemplary quotes representing knowledge, knowledge sharing, and corresponding subthemes.

<b>Knowledge</b>
<p><i>Product knowledge</i></p> <p>"In our business design changes very quickly, in 2 to 3 weeks' time ... you need to buy these products before your competitors do and that is only possible if you have knowledge"; "If you do not have knowledge of what items you are selling obviously you won't be able to deal with customers effectively"; "If you do not have [product] knowledge ... then the customers will not have confidence in you and in your product and they will go somewhere else."</p>
<p><i>Customer knowledge</i></p> <p>"Knowledge about customers makes easier to deal with any situation"; "You need to know what your customers want and what they are ready to spend because then ... you can show them only those products and services which interest them ... by doing this you can save time for yourself as well for your customers"; "Based on my experience, sometimes I can judge people when they walk through the doors that if these people are seriously after something ... if I have that knowledge to guess their behavior ... I will deal with the customers accordingly."</p>
<p><b>Knowledge sharing</b></p> <p><i>Education</i></p> <p>"If somebody is more educated then they will have more knowledge ... compared to uneducated or less educated people"; "Educated people understand that ... if they share knowledge with other people, then other people will use that knowledge in their own way"; "Less educated people cannot put their words in front of an educated person ... because they don't have that (self)-confidence."</p> <p><i>Interpersonal relationships</i></p> <p>"If people have good relations, then they will trust in each other and they will be not reluctant to share their knowledge with each other; "Having close relationships with each other will always feel more comfortable talking to each other"; "When people do not get on well within a team they will be less likely to share knowledge with each other."</p>

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued).**Knowledge***Ethnic culture (including caste system and religion)*

"The typical Asian thinking is, if I share too much knowledge with others I might lose power or prestige"; "Even if they are living in the same house as a family ... they just wait for other people to make a mess and then have a laugh at them"; "The caste system in Asian culture ... prevents knowledge being shared between people"; "Religion always encourages people to share their knowledge with each other because you want to empower other people ... so that people could make informed choices."

know you cannot run any business" (owner-manager); "If you do not have ... knowledge then you will keep making mistakes" (owner-manager); "Without ... knowledge you cannot sell a product and cannot make a deal" (employee-manager). They linked knowledge to business success in these words: "Without ... knowledge you will not be able to run any business successfully" (owner-manager); "I think knowledge possessed by our members of staff makes our business successful"; "Your profitability actually depends on the level of knowledge you have" (owner-manager); "If you have more knowledge your business will grow more and will be more profitable" (owner-manager).

These owner-managers and employee-managers seem to understand knowledge in the literal sense as "knowing," typically confined to what they sell and who they sell to. They felt that "knowing is a blessing ... if you know something you need to describe it to somebody properly and then present it properly" (owner-manager). Several participants explicitly highlighted this "knowing" as: "customer knowledge and product knowledge is very important" (owner-manager); and "know[ing] what you are selling and know[ing] the background of your items ... is very-very important in our type of business" (owner-manager).

**Product knowledge**

Our participants did not link product knowledge only to making a net profit, but also to business survival. They seemed to value those (potential) employees highly who have product knowledge because having product knowledge apparently boosts sales and leads to improved communication with customers. For example, an owner-manager reflected on two recent experiences where two of his customers who had problems in buying footwear took his advice and made informed purchases. Similarly, an employee-manager described how, by knowing various characteristics of the products, sales assistants manage to sell more. These managers used the term *full product knowledge* frequently in referring to how a product is manufactured, the quality of the material that is used in making the product, and after-sale care "because this

kind of product [garment] you cannot sell to the customer by only showing [it] ... you need to explain the product,” as an owner-manager typified.

Moreover, knowing also applies to competitors' products. An employee-manager sent two of his colleagues to one of the bazaars<sup>1</sup> in Bradford to gather competitor intelligence. This information helped him and his team to sell more products because of price adjustments and greater confidence in their own products. His perception is that “once you have confidence the customer gets convinced” and makes the buying. In addition, many participants perceived that “knowing” the product leads to good procurement. In contrast, not “knowing” can lead to poor sales or even unethical practices such as misleading the customer due to ignorance, potentially resulting in customer dissatisfaction and lost integrity and business.

### ***Customer knowledge***

Our participants understood that “knowing the customer” makes their customer service effective and eventually leads to competitive advantage. Highlighting the importance of customer knowledge, an owner-manager stated: “The person with maximum knowledge will win the race and will be a successful person in the business.” The participants felt that knowing the customer means knowing and meeting their needs, which potentially translates into tangible benefits such as customer loyalty and repeat business. Overall, our participants indicated that customer knowledge can lead to greater sales, sustained success, and competitive advantage. However, what is more interesting in our findings is that the understanding of knowledge is limited to “knowing” as a form of applied knowledge that is underpinned in their own personal learning and experiences within these and/or other similar businesses. Moreover, our participants felt that knowledge is not an absolute end product. It rather is an activity that creates value if performed in a particular context. The context in our study, as frequently manifested by the participants, is to deal with coethnic South Asians and the activity is “knowing,” often products and customers.

In addition to “knowing the products” and “knowing the customers,” a minority of participants indicated that “knowing” the suppliers is also important, but they did not elaborate on this viewpoint. We do not have sufficient data to explain what “knowing” means for suppliers to these MB owner-managers and employee-managers. Next, we discuss how this “knowing” is facilitated within these businesses to create organizational-level knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup>One of the four market places in Bradford that comprises market stalls selling Asian clothing, fabrics, and related accessories.

## ***Knowledge sharing***

Pointing to their collectivistic group characteristics, our participants stated that “sharing knowledge is of course very important” (employee-manager). They believed the aim of “sharing knowledge is ... to empower ... people” (owner-manager). Their motivation to share their knowledge with colleagues is, perhaps, informed by the desire to place the firm in a better position in that customers’ needs can be met effectively. The perceived win-win situation for those who share knowledge and those with whom knowledge is shared, as an outcome of knowledge sharing, was exemplified by an employee-manager as: “We need to share our ... knowledge with each other ... to take the company further ... if the business develops we will develop with the business as individuals.” We identified three distinct factors that influence the propensity for knowledge sharing: a personal cognitive factor, called education; a social factor, referred to as interpersonal relationships; and a cultural factor, the South Asian ethnic culture (including caste and religion).

## ***Education and knowledge sharing***

Our participants believed that education levels determine people’s tendencies to share knowledge. They felt that educated people are more knowledgeable, articulate, and self-confident than uneducated or less educated people.<sup>2</sup> In other words, referring to education in its literal sense (formal academic qualifications), our participants characterized educated people as knowing more and better, and being able to share their knowledge in more effective ways than their less educated counterparts. Moreover, they maintained that since educated people tend to be more confident in themselves and in their capabilities, they are more open-minded and do not feel threatened to lose power or prestige due to sharing knowledge with others. Alternatively, they felt that education increases the amount of knowledge and self-confidence, therefore reducing the risk of the perception of losing a job or position and thus increasing the propensity for knowledge sharing.

That said, we found a degree of implicit contradiction in our data vis-à-vis the relationship of education with knowledge and knowledge sharing. That is, while our participants valued knowledge highly, they referred to applied knowledge or “knowing,” which they felt is gained through experience in the same or similar organizations and not typically through education as in reading books, in attending courses, and through mentoring. In contrast, our participants tended to believe that people with greater levels of education are more knowledgeable, are better communicators, and have greater self-

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<sup>2</sup>Participants did not explicitly make it clear what they meant by more or less educated people. However, there are indications in the data that they refer to (more) educated people as having college- or university-level education.

confidence leading them to share knowledge more openly and effectively than their uneducated or less educated counterparts.

### ***Interpersonal relationships and knowledge sharing***

Our participants felt that friendly interpersonal relationships boost the possibility of knowledge sharing among employees because such relationships increase interpersonal trust and reduce interpersonal tension. Highlighting the role of interpersonal relationships in knowledge sharing, an employee-manager said: “We need to understand each other as we are working together like a big family.” An owner-manager confirmed that “if your staff [is] not happy, you cannot be successful.” This is perhaps because attracting and maintaining talented and reliable staff takes priority over cost-cutting or other control measures in ethnic minority MBs (Ahmad, 2008). Developing and encouraging friendly interpersonal relationships seems to be a way of achieving this objective in addition to creating a friendly working environment leading to enhanced knowledge sharing. Therefore, our findings suggest that “knowing each other” is equally, if not more, important as “knowing the product” and “knowing the customer.”

### ***Ethnic culture and knowledge sharing***

According to our participants, “Asian culture is very competitive”; hence, it creates interpersonal rivalry and jealousy leading to the prevention of knowledge sharing among fellow coethnics. Their belief is, perhaps, informed by three mutually interconnected sociocultural value systems. These are: knowledge is linked to power; Asian people are jealous of each other; and the caste system encourages social segregation – all potentially leading to knowledge hoarding.

With regard to knowledge being a source of power, an owner-manager stated: “Knowledge is power in the culture where they [South Asians] come from.” Others commented that “knowledge brings a certain amount of power and prestige, because of [this] the Asian culture discourages knowledge sharing” (owner-manager) or “leads them to not share their knowledge openly” (owner-manager). While discussing knowledge as a source of power and thus not being shared, a third-generation British-born family business owner distanced himself from his workforce implicitly blaming them for not sharing knowledge with each other that apparently affects his business negatively. Several other owner-managers in relatively established businesses belonging to the same ethnicity shared his concerns. They maintained that knowledge not being shared with others is a coethnic cultural phenomenon and implied that, while they share their knowledge with their employees, the employees do not share knowledge with them and with each

other. An owner-manager expressed his frustration in these words: “We transfer our knowledge as a family very openly but then we find that the employees are not doing the same, it’s a constant struggle.” However, this viewpoint was not shared by the employee-managers, which perhaps indicates a contradiction in our data that is based on the role of the managers in the business. That said, our findings do not further explain why this apparent difference exists, but potentially lead to further research. What is abundantly clear from our data, however, is that ethnic culture inhibits knowledge sharing among employees in our chosen ethnic minority MBs.

Besides business owners, our data suggest that affiliation to the upper echelon of the social class is perhaps also due to income levels. For one of the owner-managers, having an unequal social status and lower income level precludes knowledge sharing even among family members. This narrative illuminates a belief that was also exhibited by several other participants in that the tendency to share (or not to share) knowledge with others is deeply rooted in class differences even among people who are born and bred in an open society like the UK. This perceived impediment in knowledge sharing caused by a difference in the level of income perhaps indicates that income is a crude class resource that has the potential of creating boundaries between people even if they belong to the same ethnicity or family. Alternatively, this type of typical behavior ostensibly gives rise to “ego and jealousy,” which make them “keep hiding” good things, such as knowledge, from each other even if they are living under one roof and belong to the same family by kinship.

Moreover, we found that interpersonal rivalry and jealousy ostensibly lead to culturally induced aggrandizement as people let each other suffer for the sake of proving their own worth. For example, an owner-manager explained his relationship with his father, the only person senior to him in their family business, in these words: “I will let him make the loss and then say ha-ha and the next time correct him saying that I knew this already.”

Besides the overall ethnic culture, a minority of our participants (two out of 43) mentioned that the caste system also creates bias and mistrust among people and undermines knowledge sharing. However, the majority of our participants considered that religion enhances knowledge sharing and that it is everyone’s responsibility to “spread knowledge as widely as possible” (owner-manager) so that “everybody will be knowledgeable ... the whole community will benefit and nobody will be a loser” (owner-manager) or left behind.

Most of our participants linked the propensity to share knowledge with their own coethnic culture, including the caste system and religion along with a number of personal traits. However, a minority of them perceived that the propensity to share knowledge depends on organizational factors unrelated to coethnic cultural value systems. For example, a non-Muslim employee-manager asserted that “what is important is a working culture within the organization” that determines the propensity of knowledge



sharing. Another non-Muslim employee-manager agreed with this line of argument. Thus, it seems that a degree of contradiction exists in our data based on the belief systems of the participants. However, we interviewed only five non-Muslims compared with 38 Muslims.

## Discussion

Knowledge is characterized in the literature as being based on previous experiences, values, contextual information, and insights that match new experiences and information (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Wang & Noe, 2010). Participants in our study exhibited a similar, but narrow, understanding of knowledge. They used the term *knowing* frequently to refer to knowledge, often about products and customers. Knowing the products means understanding market forces, responding to market dynamics, and remaining up-to-date with prevailing fashion. Knowing customers appears to enhance the understanding of these factors in addition to procuring sellable products. This knowing is characterized by a pragmatic approach that is more important for businesses to know what they can do with the knowledge they have instead of knowing what they have (Blackler, 1995). Moreover, this knowing is important because it represents a means of acting and thinking that perhaps allows ethnic minority MB owner-managers and employee-managers to attend to their business goals (Schwandt, 1994). Furthermore, it is perhaps through this knowing that businesses are able to understand customers' realities and make sense of customers' motives, actions, and intentions so as to offer them meaningful products and services (Saunders et al., 2016).

Since this form of *knowing* is attributed to experience typically within our sample MBs although it is highly valued by the owner-managers and employee-managers, it might represent only their personal opinions. For example, the assertion that knowing the customer and knowing the products contribute to business success may be highly contextual and based on a shared understanding of what shopping means and how it is carried out in their particular coethnic cultural setting. The narrow perception of knowing can potentially create uncertainty and ambiguity with regard to whether or not such a type of knowledge is applicable to a customer base beyond the MBs' environment that we studied.

Regarding knowledge sharing as a way of knowledge creation and management, self-confidence emerged as the most important personal trait that leads the knowledge bearer to share their knowledge widely and openly, in addition to being linked to increased sales (Li et al., 2006). Lack of self-confidence apparently creates a barrier to knowledge sharing because it perhaps potentially leads to narrow-mindedness and fearfulness of losing status or job or position as a consequence of giving away knowledge, an important source of

power (Khoza & Pretorius, 2017; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Wang & Noe, 2010). Self-confidence was regarded as the outcome of education and interpersonal relationships. However, there is a contradiction in our analysis about the role of education. On the one hand, education along with interpersonal relationships and religion seems to shape knowledge sharing behaviors among work colleagues. On the other hand, our participants rejected the conventional wisdom that knowledge development takes place over time through formal education; that is, through reading books, attending courses, and mentoring (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Soriano & Castrogiovanni, 2012).

Our findings show that religion not only encourages knowledge sharing but also obliges followers to share their knowledge with others. This represents a charitable gesture (Bavik et al., 2018), high levels of morality (Graham & Haidt, 2010), and community empowerment that is similar to Karma in Hinduism and Buddhism and predestination in Islam and Christianity (Barro & McCleary, 2003; Levering, 2011). That is, the outcomes of certain events in life are predestined and how these events would unfold cannot be altered by our actions or inactions (Choudhry, 2001; Keyes & Daniel, 1983). More clearly, sharing knowledge with others will not affect our position, job, prestige, and power in any way because whatever has been predestined will come to pass whether or not we share our knowledge with others.

In contrast to religion, the overall coethnic culture, including the caste system, apparently inhibits knowledge sharing perhaps because like Eastern cultures in general (Ardichvili et al., 2006), the coethnic culture of the South Asian ethnic minority in West Yorkshire is highly competitive in nature. The cultural competitiveness creates interpersonal rivalry and jealousy due to fear of losing power, status, and prestige that comes with knowledge (Hsu & Chang, 2014; Ipe, 2003; Lu et al., 2006; Riege, 2005). The contrasting perception about the role of religion and culture in knowledge sharing, perhaps, broadly implies that the desire to demonstrate spiritual piety through religious observance can coexist alongside personal rivalry to excel in material achievement.

## Implications

Our findings extend theory and practice. For example, the narrow definition of knowledge shaped by the coethnic culture implies that these MBs are not shaped by personal traits as suggested by Verheul et al. (2012). They are rather shaped by the presence of a local coethnic base that strictly adheres to the culture of their origin (South Asia). Therefore, their survival and success is embedded in the local coethnic customer base.

An implication for practice of this narrow definition of knowledge, which is predominantly embedded in their own coethnic cultural base only with almost no consideration of the wider cultural base, is that they are perhaps pursuing a myopic business strategy. Demographics of coethnic groups, including South

Asian, in the UK are changing rapidly following increasingly controlled migration over the past several years (United Kingdom Home Office, 2016). The uncertainty followed by Brexit further complicates the demographic makeup of our communities (Vasilopoulou, 2016) and endangers coethnic niche markets. Practitioners need to reflect on these changes in developing regional industrial policy; for instance, the potentially decreasing customer base and workforce and growing resentment toward ethnic minorities and migrants.

Entrepreneurship is needed more now than ever (Drucker, 2014; Ram et al., 2012) due to global competitiveness. Continued shop closures and a struggling British retail sector following the 2008 global financial crisis (Hooker, 2019; Patel et al., 2019) are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown. Initial research indicates pessimism about small business recovery in the medium term (Humphries et al., 2020) as many have failed to access government financial aid (Bartik et al., 2020) because of bureaucratic hurdles.

Finally, our findings may inspire practitioners to think and act strategically to facilitate knowledge sharing among their workforce and to explore external knowledge sources to become and remain competitive (Taura & Radicic, 2019).

## Limitations

The generalizability of our findings is limited in several respects. For example, we employed a cross-sectional qualitative exploratory research design in a specific geographical area. Future research might adopt mixed methods and longitudinal research designs in the same or other geographic areas or business communities to examine whether our findings are peculiar to this ethnic group and region. Future research may also incorporate a more diverse sample of respondents from different religions, ethnic origins, genders, and sectors. Another interesting avenue for future research is the role of education. We found that while our sample MBs did not value formal academic qualifications highly in developing individual-level knowledge over time, informal education is important for knowledge sharing at individual and organizational levels.

Finally, the perceptions that knowledge and knowledge sharing are induced by ethnic culture and cultural value systems may reflect the personal views of these MB owner-managers and employee-managers. Other stakeholders may perceive behaviors quite differently.

## Conclusion

Our exploratory research has revealed that knowledge is narrowly defined in a local niche context by South Asian ethnic minority MB owner-managers and employee-managers and that it is considered important for business survival and success. We found that MBs are ostensibly concerned with applied knowledge or “knowing,” mostly about products and customers.

They seemed to value informal internal and experiential sources of knowledge creation more highly than external formal sources.

However, knowledge sharing within MBs seems to be a complex process that depends on many factors, including context, personal beliefs, and expected outcomes. Educated people are linked to good communication skills and having greater levels of self-confidence, which enables them to share their knowledge with others openly, frequently, and meaningfully. However, coethnic culture ostensibly creates jealousy, mistrust, and bias among coethnic members, potentially leading to the prevention of knowledge sharing with each other even if they live in the same household or belong to the same family. The caste system also impedes knowledge sharing in coethnic MBs. Nevertheless, religion is seen to facilitate knowledge sharing because of the belief that it obliges individuals to share knowledge and that certain outcomes are beyond individual agency.

This empirical research illuminates how ethnic culture and cultural value systems influence knowledge sharing. Our study makes a twofold contribution to the culturalist view of ethnic minority entrepreneurship (Basu, 1998; Chaudhry & Crick, 2003; Ibrahim & Galt, 2003; Jones & Ram, 2003; Pio & Dana, 2014; Piperopoulos, 2010; Volery, 2007; Wang & Altinay, 2012). Our findings show that the presence of coethnic customers and employees profoundly affects the survival and success of these businesses. In other words, our findings indicate that the success of these businesses is contingent on the local coethnic population.

In sum, we show that intangible human factors create value in creating and sharing knowledge in ethnic minority microbusinesses (EMMBs). As US public library posters proclaimed during World War I, we argue in this article that “knowledge wins.” In the current war for small business recovery, during and beyond the current pandemic, EMMBs will remain critical for national industrial strategy and well-being. We, therefore, call for more extensive research on microbusinesses in the knowledge management field.

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