

Supporting black businesses: narrative analyses of support providers in London¹

Purpose: This paper provides narrative discourses of business support providers in framing entrepreneurial knowledge in the form of understandings and meanings, focusing business support in relation to black entrepreneurialism. It reveals the assumptions and values associated with business support from the point of view of the providers – who themselves are categorized as ‘black’.

Methodology/approach: A collaborative narrative approach is adopted to locate knowledge of business support within the ‘life-world’ of black business support providers. The research was conducted at two levels: focus group and narrative interviews.

Results: The paper highlights out the ways in which dominant discourses guide as well as constrain the representation of black businesses. Low take-up of business support is contested. Public funded business support programmes are perceived as unwholesome, unwieldy and inherently inadequate in meeting the strategic development needs of black businesses.

Implications: Focusing actual engagement rather than content aspects of the business support policy framework reveals a need for more dialogic research to explore more deeply whether, and to what extent, alternative and new perspectives on supporting black businesses are needed.

Originality/Value: The novelty of this paper lies in attempting to unravel the complex processes of business support provision in the context of black entrepreneurship by decoding the narrative discourses used by support providers who are themselves categorized as ‘black’. Such intrinsic examination of views and beliefs is relatively unique and provides an interesting platform for further research.

Key Words: Black business, black entrepreneurship, business support, professional advice, narrative analysis, London.

Introduction

The contribution of black businesses to London’s economy is significant and set to impact the region’s economy far more profoundly than is currently the case (Greater London Authority, GLA, 2004; London Development Agency, LDA, 2005). Until fairly recently, not much was known or written about black businesses in terms of characterisation, size and scope of activities (Blankson and Omar, 2002). There is now a deeper level of awareness about the steady growth of black-owned business start-ups. For example, the number rose by 30% between 2000 and 2004, warranting the description as the ‘fastest mutating phenomenon in London’ (Nwankwo, 2005). However, despite the steady growth in numbers, those who have studied black entrepreneurship in London have consistently observed higher levels of sustainability crises among black business start-ups than the norm (e.g. Ekwulugo, Nwankwo and Madichie, 2005; Ekwulugo, 2006). Apart from the hackneyed ‘ethnic penalty’ considerations (Carmichael and Woods, 2000), it is suggested that black entrepreneurs in general do not sufficiently avail themselves of professional business support (Barclays, 2005; Comrie and Adeluwoye-Adams, 2008). Astonishingly, when considered alongside the plethora of agencies delivering business support to SMEs in London, an inverse relationship begins to emerge between the numerical growth of black businesses on the one hand and the degree of engagement with business support interventions on the other. Nwankwo (2005) indicates that this,

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in part, explains the perennial failure crises and disproportionate high mortality rates which black (especially African-owned) business start-ups tend to suffer.

Whilst evaluation evidence exists on the inadequate state of business support targeted at London's ethnic minority-owned SMEs in general (e.g. LDA 2006), relatively little research has been done to develop new perspectives or offer new explanations of the underlying issues why black businesses in particular exhibit low tendency to engage mainstream business support provisions. Accordingly, this paper aims to problematise the issue. First, it tacitly acknowledges the separation between business support deliveries (i.e. direct delivery of support services to businesses) from engagement (i.e. raising the demand for business support, LDA, 2006). With this as a point of departure, we focus on the processes through which narrative discourses produce entrepreneurial knowledge in the form of understandings and meanings (Jones, Latham and Betta, 2008). Specifically, we seek an understanding of the discursive strategies used by black support providers to promote and deliver business support, the beliefs, assumptions and values underpinning their entrepreneurialism. This line of inquiry responds to the call for greater attention to the social constructionist approach to entrepreneurial research, popularly referred to as the 'fifth movement' (Fletcher, 2003) and which Jones, Latham and Betta (2008) recently applied in their study of an Australian 'refugee support centre'. In this paper, black business is used synonymously with black-owned SMEs. Mindful of the fact that 'black' is a contested term in research and susceptible to multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations (Aspinall, 2002), it is applied here not as a 'political signifier' but as 'self-identifier' (Maylor, 2009) in order to achieve a more precise meaning, e.g., as a descriptor in the UK's national population census (Office for National Statistics, ONS, 2001) and applied in related studies (e.g. GLA, 2004).

Black Business

As an analytical category, contemporary discourses of black entrepreneurship in western economies gained force in the mainstream business literature fairly recently, probably starting with Allvine (1970). Since then, isolating and specifically focusing black businesses has gained impetus especially in the USA (Green and Pryde 1990; Bates, 2006; Martin et al, 2006; Bonds, 2007; Boston, 2007; Fairlie and Robb, 2007) and UK (Wilson and Stanworth, 1986; Blankson and Omar, 2002; GLA 2004; Nwankwo, 2005; Ekwulugo, 2006). Despite the recently growing interests, there is little consistent historical data on the actual size of black businesses in the UK. Official statistics, especially those issued by the Regional Development Agencies are generally deemed unreliable and accordingly contestable. In London, for example, it is estimated that there are over 10,000 officially recorded businesses owned by people of Black origin (4% of all London businesses), with a turnover

of approximately £4.5billion and providing around 70,000 jobs (LDA, 2005). Contradictorily, the frontline network organisation for promoting black entrepreneurship in London, *Africa Caribbean Business Network*, ACBN, estimates aggregate business turnover to be in the region of £12billion. Such discrepant estimations belie two important points. First, there are known methodological problems in the study of black entrepreneurship in the UK, including inadequate census protocols for measuring the actual size of the black economy (Nwankwo, Ekwulugo and Madichie, 2005). Second but complementarily, the size of the ‘informal’ black economy (especially the self-employed) is huge but often escapes capture in official statistics (Nwankwo, 2005). Contextually, ‘informality’ does not depict underground illicit activities but encompasses those enterprises where “some or all their transactions are not declared to the state for tax collection and social security purposes” (Williams and Round, 2009, p.96).

Although there is evident under-representation of black enterprise in London’s economy (i.e. when compared with the proportion of white- and Asian-owned enterprises or the proportion of London’s population that is black), rapidly growing entrepreneurial interests and activities in African and Caribbean communities are well noted (Okonta and Pandya, 2007; GLA 2004). Black entrepreneurship is reported to be growing at a much faster rate (80% in the past decade) when compared with other ethnic groups (e.g. white 4%, and Asian 45%) (LDA, 2005). This is consistent with previous reports (e.g. GEM, 2002; Small Business Service, SBS, 2003, 2005) which indicated higher levels of *entrepreneurial activity* among the UK’s black population. The SBS Household Survey of 2003, for example, revealed that almost one third (31%) of the black population in England wanted to start their own business compared with 9% of White and 21% of Asian populations. Re-echoing the trend, the Household Survey (SBS, 2005) noted that the level of entrepreneurial intent was high among Black Caribbean (25%) and Black African (27%) in comparison to the white (11%) and other ethnic sub-populations (e.g. Indian 15%, Pakistani 13%, and Chinese 15%). What these surveys seem to suggest is that the proportion of ‘would be entrepreneurs’ is higher among black than other ethnic sub-groups. Paradoxically, this high proportion (i.e. people wanting to start their own business) does not appear to materialise into actual business activity – start-up figures tails down to 8% in Black Caribbean and 11% in Black Africans (SBS, 2005). Thus, there is a stark contradiction in the percentage of Black population that want to start and own a business (*thinkers*) and those that have been successful in so doing (*doers*).

In general, since 2000 when the government set itself the objective of making the UK “the best place in the world to start and grow a business” (Department of Trade and Industry, DTI, 2004), considerable progress has been made in promoting a more dynamic start-up market and raising the quality of

services to SMEs. However, this global picture is somewhat misleading when attention is focused generally on the government's key strategic priorities for building an enterprise culture and more particularly black-owned SMES (CBI, 2005). This means that government's targets for scaling-up black entrepreneurship are being missed. Partly accounting for this are issues around the quality of business support "the ability of this support to reach some communities" (CBI, 2005). Essentially, despite the objective to make services "more coherent, accessible and of better quality" (DTI, 2004), business support framework is beset by fundamental implementation failures, (Akuniru and Nwankwo, 2005) – resulting in the conclusion that "... support is not as widely used as it could be. Businesses continue to struggle to find out what support is available to them, and then have problems accessing that support" (CBI, 2005, p.7).

Business support services

The framework for business support in the UK, generally, has received significant attention in the literature (e.g. Berry, Sweeting and Goto, 2006; Bennett and Robson, 1999). As a result, there is now a rich and substantial body of literature on the mediating role of business support in securing the growth and sustainability of SMEs in general (Dyer and Ross, 2007; Boter and Lundstrom, 2005; Mole, 2002) and the UK's black businesses in particular (Berry, Sweeting and Goto, 2006; Meager, Bates and Cowling, 2003). Equally, research on the usefulness of business support for SMEs has grown over the years (Smallbone et al, 1993; Wren and Storey, 2002; Bennett, Bratton and Ronson, 2000; Bennett and Robson, 1999; 2005). Whilst some studies (e.g. Bennett and Robson, 1999) have estimated business support take-up to be as high as 90% generally, those that focused black and ethnic minority businesses indicated that businesses support services have only had a limited effect on business success, with take-up rate from mainstream providers falling well below 10% in some instances (London Business Support Network, 2003; Ram and Smallbone, 2003). However, empirical evaluation of business support take-up has continued to be problematic due partly to the widely diverse nature of SMEs.

Structurally, forms of business support are varied (emphasis here is on the 'small firm policy' in relation to public provision of business support services, Mole and Keogh, 2009). The evident multitudinous structural arrangements have inadvertently created a problem of duplication and fragmentation. Although the scale of the problem is now relatively appreciated (Bennett and Robson, 1999; Dyer and Ross, 2007), "business support organisations that exist to chiefly fill gaps in the market provision of external advice and information services to businesses have been much less studied" (Bratton, Bennett and Robson, 2003, p.730). This is complicated by the fact that, "frequently, support organisations have been set up as networks of local offices, community

association, to provide locally-based services to businesses, particularly to small businesses and start-ups” (ibid, p730-731).

With particular reference to black businesses, a wide range of business support providers is involved, often with overlapping service bundle. These can be broadly categorised into three:

- Private sector suppliers – these comprise the majority of the market both in terms of number and volume of service offerings. This category further divides into:
 - *Professional all-purpose advisers*: Comprising all-purpose private agencies; largely private companies which may be owned by one or more individuals.
 - *Professional specialists*: These are specialised agencies, (registered under the DTI Enterprise Support Act and/or operating under the Enterprise Agency Act); includes companies limited by guarantee and dedicated solely to the course of providing business support to target groups in particular geographic zones (e.g. Haringey Business Development Agency, Brent Business Venture, Reform Corporation). Another variant of professional specialists include solicitors, accountants, banks, etc (see for example, Bennett and Robson, 1999).
- Collective/local associations: This category includes local/community associations, diaspora networks, cultural associations, faith-based organisations and other forms of social network organisation.
- Public service providers: encompasses intermediating agencies (e.g. London Development Agency, Business Link for London).

Problematising business support

Consistently, reports have indicated that “Black and minority ethnic-owned businesses generally had more problems than white-owned businesses” (GLAEconomic, 2005) and much of these tend to revolve around inadequate initial preparation and business support (Nwankwo, 2005). At a broader level, it was estimated that in the 12 months leading up to the landmark LDA’s (2006) survey, 80 per cent of businesses had used some kind of external advice and out of this aggregate figure, the most popular source of advice was from the private sector and informal sources such as colleagues, friends and relatives. Bennett and Robson (1999) suggested that up to 95% of businesses that used external support relied on sources from the private sector, professional and technical specialist, social networks etc (see also Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003). Significantly, the Leverhulme study of African-owned businesses in London (Nwankwo, 2003) revealed that, apart from contacts with accountants, less than 20 per cent used the services of professional business advisers. A related study (Ekwulugo, Madichie and Nwankwo, 2005) provided further empirical substantiation but took a

dimmer view of support take-up by black businesses. It concludes that inadequate professional guidance has continued to holdback ambitious black-owned businesses, particularly those with the potential to move into the next growth phase. As a result of poor access to quality and targeted business support, black businesses are having difficulties in accessing finance (especially start-up equity and growth finance), mainstream contracts and markets and suitable business premises.

Overall, the extent to which the myriad of small business support networks in London effectively engage black businesses remains a very open question and an issue of continuing public policy concern. Evidently, there are lacunae in both the literature and policy arena and these seems more confounding when considered alongside the fact that black-led business support organisations and networks have grown tremendously over the past two decades. From anecdotal evidence, the relative growth in the number of black business support advisers is inferred to outstrip what is observable in other ethnic minority population sub-groups. Therefore, it is paradoxical that the black population that seemingly records higher growth rate than any other ethnic minority group, judging by the sheer number of black-led business advice/support agencies, is believed to be the most disinclined to instigate or accept professional business support. It may well be the case that the underlying issue is less of the availability of business support infrastructure but more of establishing points of identification (and or alienation) between the provider sector and the target population. This is why the black business support sector serves as an interesting study focus and a legitimate contextual base.

Based on available evidence (e.g. Comrie and Adeluwoye-Adams, 2008; Nwankwo, 2003), two issues are important in seeking a preliminary understanding and therefore problematising black business support take-up; structure (of black businesses) and attitude (to business take-up).

Structure of black businesses: Businesses in different sectors face different market conditions and require different kinds and levels of support (Ram and Smallbone 2001; Curran and Blackburn, 1993). In the same way, entrepreneurs from different population sub-groups require different kinds of support. Although it has been suggested that sectoral trends and forces are more important than ethnic grouping in determining business' needs (Rutherford and Blackburn, 2000), the characteristics and needs of black businesses are still poorly understood and consequently ill-served by mainstream business support. Nevertheless, regardless of sector and market condition variabilities, a trail of evidence from targeted reports consistently allude to the distinctive needs of black businesses. For example, driven by unique socio-economic imperatives which are not altogether favourable (e.g. labour market and access-to-finance disadvantages), black-owned start-ups are more likely to locate

in 'vulnerable sectors' (along the 'drown and bull frogs' characterisations by Nwankwo, 2005) and therefore require a great deal of hand-holding to secure their sustainability.

Far from being concentrated in a few niche markets, black businesses are spread across all areas of the economy. The main sectors - by number of businesses- indicate a more visible concentration in three major areas; (i) business and professional services (including business support and advice centres, accountancy, legal/solicitors, financial advisory, hair dressing and barbing saloon, training and consultancy firms; (ii) wholesale & retail services (including logistics/ freight forwarding, cab offices, cosmetics and fashion, auto mechanics and electrical repairs and electronics trades) and (iii) food sector (including agribusiness, hotels, restaurants and general catering services). The reasons suggested for poor engagement with business support varies according to industry structure and nature of business. For example, those businesses that operate more deeply in ethnic niche markets (e.g. food, fashion/clothing, hair-dressing and general retailing) show a higher level of disinclination to professional business support (Nwankwo, 2005). However, support needs for businesses that have relatively achieved a 'break-out' into the mainstream growth sectors (e.g. creative industries, ICT, service/consultancy/health & social services) are different, revolving around how to cope with the stress of entrepreneurship, strengthening and deepening the value chain, achieving quality accreditation and miscellaneous issues around access to finance and public procurement.

Attitude to business support take-up: A review of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) owned businesses by the London Business Support Network (LBSN, 2003) revealed the key obstacles to business support effectiveness to include:

- failure of business support agencies to market services effectively
- lack of cultural awareness and understanding by business support organizations
- BME owned businesses tend to be more heavily concentrated in some non-priority sectors (e.g. retailing) for business support organizations
- Weak resource base of BME businesses to pay for business support services, whether privately supplied or publicly funded.

Subsequent reviews (e.g. LBSN, 2006; LDA, 2006, 2004; CBI, 2005) further highlight a range of militating factors that include poor awareness of support availability, poor positioning of mainstream business support (i.e. support services not tailored or designed to match the needs and aspirations of black businesses) and tardy mechanisms through which aspects of business support systems are communicated. Furthermore, Nwankwo (2005) finds three major interlocking factors that combine in different degrees to underpin the attitudes of black entrepreneurs to business support. Drawing data from London's African entrepreneurs, he outlines these to include: (i) person-specific factors, (ii)

factors relating to the operating environment and (iii) factors emanating from the institutional environment.

Methodology

The chosen methodology is informed by the understanding of knowledge and knowledge creation with respect to the research participants' worldview (Boulding, 1972; Mahoney, 2007; Down and Warren, 2008). Boulding's framework, for example, depicts knowledge as locating a person in time, space, personal relationships, the world of nature and the world of subtle intimations and emotions (see also, Byrch et al 2007). It shares similar epistemological stance to Mahoney's (2007) 'collaborative story telling methodology' and DiMaggio's (1995) "theory as narrative", i.e. seeking 'the answers to queries of why', providing an explanation which itself "is a story that describes the process, or sequence of events, that connects cause and effect" (Pentland, 1999). From this epistemological position, 'knowing' involves the (subjective) interpretation of meaning to create a context for a deep and emotional understanding of the research participants' 'life world' (Habermas, 1987) and in a manner that helps not only to unmask truth claims but also locate the key informant in the process and production of the narrative (Mahoney, 2007). Drawing from this position, this paper is not intended to measure or assess the extent of the imbalance between business support and take-up rate or the usefulness of business advice/advisors (Dyer and Ross (2007). It is firmly located in the 'context of discovery' rather than the 'context of justification' (Cope, 2005) – i.e. more to do with 'exploring' the support providers' narratives and providing the opportunities to construct new sites of meaning and frame new explanations of the phenomenon of business support for black businesses.

To be able to explore the idiosyncratic and sometimes inter-subjectively created discourses of business support by black businesses, the research protocol identifies and builds on typical 'narrative as data' features (Pentland, 1999; Barthes, 1977) such as:

- Focal actors: using black business support providers as principal characters or key informants, without making any assumptions about 'what is or is not real' (Cope, 2005).
- Narrative voice: reflecting the specific point of view of support providers in the context of their relationship with their audience (i.e. how a research participant - support providers - interpret an experience constitutes an essential part of the experience itself).
- Canonical frame of reference: using the research setting to unpack subterranean assumptions and how these may impact support provision
- Other indicators of content and context: probing for sources of ideas, attributes of contexts (e.g. specific events, actions and consequences which informed views and assumptions)

Research protocols: The research was conducted at two broad levels between October 2006 and June 2007. The first level involved two focus groups (mixed groups) conducted under the auspices of the *Black Business Observatory for London*. The groups' function was to generate initial ideas that were further explored in narrative face-to-face interviews and to discuss research conclusions. The second level involved face-to-face interviews conducted at two sub-levels:

(i) Face-to-face, individual narrative interviews with three senior personnel each selected from the strategic bodies involved in supporting black business development in London (London Development Agency, London Learning and Skills Council and Business Link for London).

(ii) Problem-centred narrative interview (Scheibelhofer, 2008) with 10 black business advisors, selected from the directory of *Black Business Observatory* on a 'sample of convenience' basis. Interviews were conducted to ensure that they cover particular areas, but allowing considerable scope to follow feedback idiosyncratically so as to explore more particular meanings with the research participants (Burck, 2005). Each participant was interviewed three times over a period of nine months. Participants were required to tell their stories, on each occasion, from three different positions:

- reminiscences about their identities prior to setting up in business
- retrospections about how and what they have changed; reflections upon their current identities as business support providers and
- imagining their identities and business support provision in the future, dynamically changing nature of their relationships with strategic groups.

Drilling down from this tripartite domain, questions were posed in ways that led the respondents to contextualise their role in shaping entrepreneurial processes - simultaneously enabling us to ferret out the ways in which dominant discourses guide as well as constrain the representation of black businesses. Specifically, the key lines of probe were as follows:

- How is the narrative around business support constructed by support providers?
- How is the mainstream business support infrastructure evaluated? What functions, structure and processes are in place? How are these perceived by the providers themselves?
- Are there gaps between the policy environment and practice environment? If there are, how do the research participants perceive themselves as capable of bridging any such gaps?

We also sought to understand how the businesses support providers themselves came into the 'business advisory' business; motivations for engagement and extent of prior of training. The interviews were recorded with permission and then transcribed for further analysis. The analyses of the transcripts and verbatim used led us to schematise the various issues that evolved from the narratives. Findings are thus reported in a 'connected narrative' approach (Misler, 1990).

Findings and Analysis

Issue of legitimacy

Targeting black businesses for specific intervention resonated strongly positively in the narratives:

Look at the LDA statistics ... even the government ... they are basically saying that black businesses are behind; they've got less representation in terms of overall business population in the UK. I have been to a number of conferences that they have said precisely that. And so, to actually address the imbalance, there's got to be a focus and substantial provisions made to be able to address the situation... there is a lot of interest among black community in terms of starting and running a business but there isn't the support. I mean, if you don't have access to capital, ... necessary infrastructure, information support, etc you are not going to go anywhere ... you wouldn't go too far in terms of setting up and running your business”.

Probably unsurprisingly, research participants demonstrated real awareness of the underlying statistics and major reports on the disadvantages of black entrepreneurship in the UK. They also exhibited a great deal of passion and conviction for public policy intervention targeted at black businesses.

“Government is responsible for creating an enabling environment ... basically developing and implementing selective interventions ... Government and government agencies cannot runaway from their responsibilities ... If they are saying that they want to see more black businesses, then they must create an enabling environment for that to happen”.

“It is one thing to talk about under-representation but it is another thing to put something in place to address the problem. The system they are proposing to adopt (re: rebalancing of business support portfolios from GOL to the LDA and its principal contractor agency), does not recognise the situations facing black businesses or driving forward a black business agenda ... it is a universal systems, you can call it mass marketing”.

“First of all, I think they have to recognise that the community is here to stay and the contributions that the black community are making and continue to make ... and the difference that they could make if well supported to set up and run successful businesses. If you are faced with specific problems, you have to come up with specific strategies to be able to address those problems. They have to be able to establish specifically what the real issues are. Why are black people really lagging behind? ... they have to go down to the people who are affected on daily bases ... it is not a question of somebody sitting down somewhere and say, ok, I know what you need, I know what your problems are, so I'm going to address these problems”.

Consequently, the rationale for funded support for black business “comes from a position of lack of finance and disadvantages in formal employment”.

“Traditionally, black people find it difficult to access finance ... I am not generalising but talking about an average. Some people do succeed but generally majority do find it difficult. Reasons ... there is this stereotyping ... not being a business-oriented community ... lack of trust, not sure whether the business will work out”.

“Black people tend to do business on shoe-string, therefore they are always looking for funded support ... if you lack finance, you can make do with getting a service that you don't necessary pay for but need... Different communities have different support structures, most of which are less dependent on government support. In some other communities, for example, when you haven't got

money and people know what you can do, there is the tendency that somebody will come up with the funds – that is not common with the black community because of lack of community capital”.

Black businesses tend to concentrate within their community in terms of market. Many black people see business as a way of escaping unemployment. Therefore, government intervention will always be needed (stresses the policy thrusts of intervention). However, the nature of intervention needs to be studied further ... I know, as somebody who owns a business support structure and also as somebody who runs a private business, there are certain things that are unique to black community. And also as somebody who is privileged to be educated to a level to understand these things, I can reflect much deeper on what is going on. But the point is; there is a need to study this and identify these different elements. .. Generic business support doesn't work (stresses the point) for black community ... black community is most disadvantaged in terms of doing business in this country.

Structure: patterns, processes and problems

There was a very strong consensus among research participants that the framework for business support, as it stands, is ‘patchy’, inconsistent’ and, accordingly, inadequate as a means of effectively engaging black businesses. The consensus of views was that the structure of business support framework is “*over-generic and over centralised*” with an undercurrent of bureaucracy which makes it doubly difficult both for the intended recipient businesses that need the support and the support providers themselves.

“Many black people see a lot of business support events as a waste of time, not that support is not going to be useful but involves a lot of time wasting”. The LDA, as the main funding body, was perceived negatively:

‘Dealing with the LDA is like dealing with Goliath – try and call them on the phone ... it's very off-putting ... they are too big, too powerful ... faceless and almost like ‘a one-way street’. It's a one way communication – they don't make themselves available ... they only call you for some useless conferences where there are not less than 350 people in a massive hall ... they will tell you that they cannot deal with individuals cases – you have to ask general questions ... what's the point? You might as well stay in your house and read it off the internet”.

The bureaucracy and regulatory complexity was pointed out to be a definite hindrance.

“The way support services are structured, positioned and funded has meant that people are not only excluding themselves but the structure also excludes them... the structure comes with a lot of red tape ... over centralisation ... Now the business model they are adopting will make things even more difficult. A case in point is the new (names a private organisation that is taking over the role of the Business Link) ... How they are going to penetrate black businesses is a mystery. Business Link tried but failed woefully ... not to talk about an organisation whose prime responsibility is for their shareholders... It is one thing to talk about under-achievement and another thing to do something about it. Both the government and the LDA talk about black businesses not doing very well but there is nothing in place to drive forward an agenda to address the problem. Now, the system they are proposing does not necessary recognise that ... it is not going to affect positively black businesses trading as small private enterprises.

“For business support to work, there is a need for synergy ... requires a partnership arrangement ... delivery and associated provisions need to come together. There is no synergy...”

“There is the perception that support services are spotted around and they are not well coordinated but then again, from our point of view, that’s not a bad thing... you have to understand how the whole thing originated ...it originated from a desperate need from our clients’ point of view to access these support provisions which have continued to elude them. So, the so-called mainstream coordinated provisions have not been delivering to the intended recipient groups. And this is how black support services started ... bridging the gaps. And from service users’ point of view, the mainstream provisions are not culturally appropriate to their needs... they are not responsive to their needs, they talk above them, they talk at them, they don’t understand them...so, in terms of black support agencies, they are there to fulfil an important need ... there is very little recognition of the level and dynamics and the strength of these black service providers and that manifests itself in the deplorable level of governmental support to black service providers... lack of funding is a big problem”.

“...if you look at the structure of the Business Link when it was first created, it was more client-focused and a lot of black businesses had access to its services ... it was highly decentralised and a lot of people went to the local areas and advisers with whom they were familiar. Once they changed the structure to a more centralised approach, the momentum was lost because everything was computerised. ... You call one telephone number and you get tossed from one point to another. Oftentimes, you get signposted to places you don’t really like”.

“Where we are now, we see clients from all over London. In some cases, clients come from outside London to see us. When we conducted an evaluation to understand why; some say because they believe we will understand them and appreciate the position from where they are coming, that we will hand-hold and all is not just ticking of the boxes”.

In the last 10 years, as a result of targeting that clientele, we have developed a pool of black businesses that are generating a level of income that the white organisations will never get to accomplish. We assist them to set up, we assist them to raise funds, we assist them to operate as organisations whether they are operating as voluntary or SME outfits.

Coming across strongly in this line of narrative is the linking of effective business support engagement to service climate factors (e.g. convenience and accessibility) and positioning – all of these are, in turn, linked to the identity and credibility of the provider, i.e. the idea that in seeking to engage black businesses, who delivers the service is as crucially important as the service itself. Importantly, providers’ authenticity is negotiated along three axes: race/skin colour, emotional connection, self-identification (i.e. internal ethnicity).

Nature of Intervention

The generic nature of the business support framework has meant that support interventions are standardised regardless of the peculiar needs of black entrepreneurs. Consequently, the extent to which the ‘blanket approach’ will help to move forward the strategic development needs of black businesses was considered doubtful.

“The approach is pretty much a one size fits all ... support intervention is not customised based on any thorough evaluation and understanding of the needs of black businesses, the stage of

entrepreneurship development with the black community, capacity development needs in terms of enabling infrastructure, skills and competences”.

The much talked about issue of low take up rates and slippages in performance levels are probably an indication that a more robust and customised approach is called for. Accordingly, there is a need to look more closely at the definition of ‘business intervention’ and what it is intended to achieve for a target population. It seems that the strategy process (analysis, formulation and implementation) is heavily top-down, with little or no involvement of those who are likely to be affected by the strategy. It was fascinating to note that apart from the highly choreographed and routinised information-giving events organised by different governmental agencies, none of the black providers had been involved in any consultation forum prior to framing any policy initiative on black entrepreneurship. The sort of dialogue that should take place to help bridge the chasm between policy formulation and implementation is not happening and this has in no small way contributed to the apparent negativity and stoicism towards the whole institutional agenda for black enterprise promotion.

Cultural Appropriateness

Probably as a result of the inadequate integration of black business support providers into the strategic decision processes, there was an overwhelming concern about ‘cultural appropriateness’ in relation to how support services are positioned and how black businesses are connected to the service environment. It was felt that:

“The mainstream providers are not tailoring their support programmes to the cultural needs of the black community”.

As one provider expressed:

“They are not talking the language we are talking – we will understand where they (i.e. black entrepreneurs) are coming from... I have clients who have been to 5 organisations but did not get much assistance ... they’ve got only mental business plans and nothing written on paper ... and may not understand the terminologies used on them ... we use Africa proverbs, phrases etc to communicate technical information. When they approach the mainstream providers a couple of times those providers quickly give up on them ... classify them as timewasters and move on to other people because they cannot take more time than was allocated in the contract. Here, we follow through ... we have some forums where we meet to discuss these things”.

“What we have decided to do here from the onset is to move away from workshop approach to one-to-one approach in providing services. With one-to-one, there is no faking... What we have discovered is that it is very unlikely for somebody to sit in front of you for an hour and say nothing whereas in a workshop situation, they can sit all day and not raise their hands or contribute and it is highly difficult to pitch at a level that addresses everybody’s issues. In our culturally sensitive way, we tell them; ‘sit here, tell me all your concerns, worries – how your grandma is sick- how your children are there to be born- and how this whole thing fits into the equation’. At the end of the session, they will walk away feeling that somebody has listened to them ... and they will come back, emotionally satisfied and confident that their business idea is not being stolen by anybody.

Many cultural idiosyncrasies were highlighted (ranging from case histories around ‘cultural safety’ in childcare arrangements, refreshments, premises, modes of interactions and feedback) throughout the interviews wherein black business support providers felt that ‘their’ service was more value-loaded than checklist/target oriented and, therefore, able to penetrate the target population at various other levels (see table 2).

Table 2: How Black Support Providers differentiates ‘self’ from ‘others’

Themes	Others: What ‘they’ do	Self: What ‘we’ do
Definition of beneficiary	Focus on business as detached from individuals	Focus on ‘total individual’
Inclusivity/selectivity	Greater level of selectivity in who receives support – statutorily eliminates certain people (e.g. students, refugees and the huge sections that are usually missed out by official statistics)	Greater level of inclusivity - much more sensitive to different strata of the population, therefore able to penetrate the hard-to-reach groups & the informal sector
Flexibility/convenience	Inflexible – e.g. you must turn up at 10 am for a workshop	Flexible – we sometime hold workshops at 9pm if that time better suits the business owners
Climate factors	Stricter adherence to ‘textbook’ protocols of engagement, e.g. serving tea and biscuits (often to the derision of the target audience).	Idiosyncratic protocols which can only come from those who share similar cultural backgrounds, e.g. offering cuisine from black providers to make the target group feel more relaxed and therefore engaged.
Holism	Provide advice for the business alone	Provide help and advice for all add-on issues (e.g. housing & accommodation, sundry family matters).
Relationship	Officious: business relations detached from any other type of relations, therefore officious	Personable: business-like relationships are as important as social relationships.
Network and referral	Uses formal networks and almost oblivious of informal networks – more dependent on formal networks to reach targets.	Deep appreciation of informal networks – more use of informal networks to reach targets
Service ethos	Emphasis on ‘teaching’, ‘couching’, ‘intervening’ – signifying systems of power and control.	Empathise, trust and relationship – underlying the importance of the entrepreneurs as individual.

Funding

A strongly held but dominant view was that funding support arrangements for SMEs have not been altogether favourable to black businesses. There is apparent over-centralisation in how these are managed and more poignantly; *“there is no funding regime that has been ring-fenced to support black businesses”*. The attitude of the fund providers to black business support providers mirrors the broader access-to-finance difficulties which black businesses tend suffer. Funding regimes are considered highly regimented, lacking in effect and innovativeness.

“They claim to have spent a lot of money supporting black businesses ... First of all, who have they spoken with? ... hopeless ... they are hopeless... They still go about replicating the same thing ... you have to think the way they think, you have to produce what they recognise, anything new they do not recognise is not going to get funded. They cannot promote diversity if they continue to think in the same line all the time – they have to take risks ... risk to invest in us – commission us to do work - that’s what business is about”.

“They are thinking stereotypical ... you have to say the things they want to hear ... they want you to repeat the wheel but repeating the wheel is not delivering value to our client group ... it is easy for me to replicate – the same as the mainstream providers are doing – but then again, if I get contract, I won’t be happy because I know that I am not delivering what the people need”. “They need to commission more ethnic minority providers – yeah, they need to support them on longer term ... giving a minimum of 5 years contract because it takes that length of time to produce materials, review them and apply new knowledge and then monitor”.

“They are commissioning the wrong people, who are not producing the goods. Secondly, the people who produce the goods are funded to fail because they fund you for the project but don’t fund the support mechanism that goes with it. Those are the big problems ...every black person that comes here is very keen to make a living, get their business up and running and support their families. They want to be successful but they cannot be successful if you keep sending them to the people they are avoiding ... forcing them into marriages that they don’t want”.

The model for funding business support at the recipient level has meant that the service providers are not capacity-built to deliver the quality service which black entrepreneurs need. Some providers described such limited, short term time-bound funding as largely ‘*funding to fail*’.

“If you fund an organisation to fail, it’s bound to fail. If you fund it to succeed, it will succeed”. “Ok, there is an increase in number of service providers to the black community but how well funded are they? They are given short term contracts, a lot of them on annual basis – you can’t plan like that. ... Ok we have European funding for 3 years, half way through they reduced their intimation rate from 44% to 28% ... and ‘it’s take it or leave it’. From that same source, they pick up the phone and call other people and say: ‘we have an under-spend, please come and take it’. Yet we go through the same monitoring system ... but they don’t trust you enough to invest in you”.

Output Driven vs. Impact Driven:

The thrusts of business support provision and how they are measured featured prominently in the narratives. These aspects revealed two important issues: (a) the policy environment and (b) impact assessment. On the policy environment, concerns were expressed about the modalities of engagement. Most intervention programmes are designed to accomplish short-term goals, which sometimes underplay the strategic underpinnings of the programmes themselves. Apart from support-grants being extremely difficult to access (it costs about £5000 to put a grant proposal together and this, by itself, is a disincentive for resource-constrained support providers to be as proactive as might be expected), the usual 12 to 36 month intervention support do not sufficiently allow for a robust, long-term engagement strategy. As a result, many programmes collapse almost at the

time when they are expected to gather momentum. Thus, an otherwise successful programme is compromise because:

...it is project-driven and time-limited. Once the time is up, the money is finished ... but to actually make real impact and sustain those businesses, the services should be longer-term focused ... nobody is following up, nobody is going back to them ... they are on their own ... that is the way the system is set up to be. So, rather than capacitate the businesses long-term, they very quickly begin to suffer failure crises. That is why a great percentage of black businesses fail immediately three years after being set up.

There was also a strong feeling that the “system of assessment by targets achieved rather than impacts” has meant that support provision was becoming a numbers game – encouraging a ‘*tick-box mentality*’ among providers. The distinction that emerged between *impact orientation* and *output orientation* was fascinating. Output orientation is fundamentally oriented towards ‘a numbers game’ – where providers concentrate more on “*basic enumeration of real and imagined beneficiaries in terms of quantity and numbers - getting signatures on paper*”. However, impact orientation is about ‘*effectiveness, genuine enablement to be able to meet market demands or fill a gap in the market*’. While most of the research participants appreciate the need for a stringent monitoring system, they felt that it was more about the output rather than the impact generated or the effectiveness of support provision. Support mechanisms were portrayed to have taken a ‘sales-oriented’ approach (selling whatever is available) rather than a ‘marketing-oriented’ one (re-evaluating the service in order to meet the actual needs of the consumer). This coherent view was summed up nicely by one: “*though you want to do your best – you have to meet the numbers to be paid because the person to whom you are offering the service is not the one paying...so you are looking to get all the signatures on paper*”.

Is low take-up of business support a red herring?

Turning to the ironical situation of low business support take up by black businesses at a time of increasing numbers of black support providers, an interesting discourse was generated. Most providers said that they did not believe that take up rate is low. This contrasts with discourses promoted policy cycles. Narratives revealed a more positive disposition; debunking the general notion of low take-up of business support. Statements such as: “*not at all – they are receptive when you talk the language they understand*”; “*that is not my experience*”; “*it is where they are comfortable they go to*” suggests that actual experiences of black support providers differ markedly from those of the mainstream providers and many in the policy circle.

...Depends on who you talk to... we have about 200 black businesses on annual basis that come here to access services ... You go to those people (points out in the direction of a mainstream

organisation across the street), they may have the same number but how many of those are black? But ours is 100% black? ... yes, they are accessing support services if you pitch at a certain level, at a certain taste, with certain meaning. I was delivering a workshop one night about 9pm in an African-Caribbean restaurant and it was packed full. I noted that some of the attendees used the platform to transact businesses ... you tell me, which of those organisations hold workshops at that time? ... you see what I mean? ... we take it to them ... that is the cultural appropriateness that I am talking about

“They are receptive when you talk the language they understand. If they feel that you are another route to exposing them to unwarranted harassment, they are not likely to come to you. They will just stay away; they prefer to remain where they are rather than being inconvenienced unnecessarily”

“I think that take-up rate among black businesses is actually higher than Asian-owned businesses. We are talking about the numbers who have gone forward to set up businesses. Of course, there are other issues ... raising finance, traditional stereotyping, discrimination, etc. These are real issues. We have the experience, even as an agency (goes on to illustrate, with cases, the difficulties in attracting resources to fund specific projects aimed at capacitating black businesses).

What is important is to look at the degree of connection or disconnection between the service provider and the recipient. The type of service these client groups like to access is not being supported the way the big services are being supported.

“Take the case of ‘Support for Business Premises’ programme ... you go through tedious application and assessment ... to be able to access the grant, they want you to put down 50% of the value... from where? From the banks? At the end of 12 months, ‘London Rebuild’ is going to write a report and say that black businesses are not accessing this service ... Of course, they won’t access it”.

Introspections – looking back to see ahead

Based on exploratory interviews with the intermediating agencies (LDA, LSC, BL4L), it was suggested that some black providers operate their businesses on *ad hoc* bases and may not be altogether strategically fit for the purpose of delivering quality intervention programmes. In addition, the sheer number of mushrooming service providers appears to be stultifying the system by inadvertently creating confusion, redundant offerings and further difficulties in identifying credible providers. With nearly 3000 government programmes available to business in England, the plethora of agencies chasing these may sound exciting on the onset. However, it may be daunting and intimidating for small businesses to identify which service to choose from. In context, drawing on Iyer (2009) to explore ‘entrepreneurial identities and the problematic of subjectivity’ in support provisioning, we solicited views on two important dimensions: (a) self-representation (i.e. whether the providers are a part of the problem or a part of the solution) and (b) professionalisation (focusing skills and capabilities appropriate for the roles). This was, in part, achieved through probing the primary motivations for starting up business support outfits and goal fulfilment. The narratives revealed hybrid and ambivalent positions, exemplifying both professional constraints on the one hand and resistance, empowerment and independence on the other. Most of the support providers joined the industry rather by ‘accident’ than as a carefully planned out career path. To help check and

resolve the apparent ambivalence stances, attempts to attract a robust narrative on ‘prior training received before setting up’ were either tactically avoided or glossed over. Obviously, there was a discernible defensive mode by the research participants on this subject matter:

“They (providers) are constrained because of their understanding. They are delivering what they think is right. It is those who formulate programmes and those who decide what to be done that needs to take any blames ... “you have to be capacity-built to deliver quality service”.

...not failing but not meeting the vision... they are not realising all the good intentions. I cannot accept that black providers are failing. Of course, we have different competence levels and therefore quality of outputs. These differentials are normal in a services setting. But it is not just the providers; it is also the government ... they need to understand what needs to be done.

There are two-sides to every story. As much as you want to assist people, you have you assist yourself too. .. So, you are constantly facing a lot of quality maths... including costs. At the end of the say, they have to make ends meet ... they must make a living

However, the providers proved to be generally highly qualified – most of them to a PhD level. Despite their impressive credentials, most of them struggled to get into mainstream employment. *“It is a long story ... basically something a lot of black people have experienced. My background is industrial marketing. ... when I finished my masters, I wrote about hundred applications ... my credentials were impressive but I went to the interviews, they saw the person behind the CV ... that was it”.*

We could deduce that, in addition to the “*need to fill a gap in the market*” considerations, many of the businesses were principally started as a means of livelihood for the operators - as a form of self-employment - in the face of labour market disadvantages. Consequently, there are real issues around core competencies and knowledge constraints. In some instances, the businesses are not well organised and farsighted, with a clear lack of synergy within the sector. This leads us to believe that training of business support providers is very critical in order to enable them become more competent in delivering value support services.

Speculations on the way forward provided rich insights but broadly laced with negativity. The level of nihilism was surprising especially when put alongside the optimism expressed in previous studies (e.g. Nwankwo, 2005). There was a lot of ‘them’ and ‘us’ nuances in the narratives which is probably unproductive for their own good. On whether things would improve for better, get worse or remain the same, the consensus was: *‘it is only going to get worse if something is not done about it right now’*. Nevertheless, there was no lack of opinions on remedial actions that should be taken: e.g.

- Support provision should be evaluated based on measurement of effectiveness rather than numbers.

- Commission more black and ethnic minority providers who can empathise with the target audience.
- Provide core funding (desirably, ring-fenced) to agencies rather than ‘project’ based funding – to enable providers to develop and invest in themselves (training, conferences etc.) as well as cater to the needs of their target markets.
- Create ‘a level playing field’; an ‘enabling environment’ that enhances openness, trusted, and empowerment.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper we have highlight the *tales* of black business support providers in London. In doing so, we highlighted a range of subtle issues that sheds some light on black entrepreneurialism. These include:

- There is a perception out there that business support is not well coordinated; the government framework/business model for support provision is problematic and not catering adequately to the needs of black businesses.
- Low take-up of business support among black businesses is contested and considered a ‘red herring’.
- The disconnection between mainstream business support providers and black businesses is indicative of the poor knowledge and understanding of the contexts of black entrepreneurship in the UK.
- The notion that black business support providers are being ‘*funded to fail*’ underlies a deep sense of felt-marginalisation.
- Black businesses lack effective/collective voice and strong network and therefore weak in influencing policies that directly affects them.

The central theme that emerged from all the narratives was that mainstream provision of business support is simply not hitting the target in relation to supporting black entrepreneurship. For this reason, there is a legitimate need for a fundamental re-organisation, recognising the relative nascence and strategic development needs of black entrepreneurialism. However, the perceived lack of connection between black businesses and mainstream support providers is not to be taken as an indication of negative attitude to the use of external advice. Rather, the narratives are couched in a manner reflective of “positioning through divisioning” (Jones, Latham and Betta, 2008) – producing identities based on classifications of both ‘in-group’ similarity and ‘out-group’ dissimilarity. It seems that the issue of self-identity is important for the entrepreneurs largely because it accomplishes a number of objectives; it underlies their entrepreneurial orientation, a strategy that aids them in delineating market boundaries as well as articulating market positioning, provides a philosophical

base for designing the relational contexts of their business and, above all, produces real consequences for the lives of those who are subsumed within such definitions.

Impliedly, attitudes of black entrepreneurs reflects the historical subjectivities of the UK's black population who, it would seem, are beginning to undertake critical and reflective evaluation of the broader conditions for their economic under-representation. Using the new subject positions, they are starting to promote new kinds of subjectivities based on effective economic engagement and social inclusion. In seeking to create new spaces for engagement and ultimately empowerment, they are not oblivious of the complex 'internal' factors which must be overcome in order to 'break out' as a successful enterprising group. These include paucity of resources in the community, entrepreneurial spirit of independence and avoidance of situations that interfere with their autonomy, perception that seeking external support is a waste of time, failure to market services more proactively and effectively diversifying away from 'high mortality' and those other sectors that have not been a priority for sustained funding intervention.

Policy implications

There are obvious public policy implications arising from this study – more generally, along the lines outlined in Nwankwo (2005). However, it may be argued that public policy intervention should be considered at two levels (Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003). First, business advisory service is to be considered as an aspect of market intervention (especially the strategic rather than operation services) with the overarching aim of helping to secure the growth and sustainability of an otherwise fledgling sector. Second, black entrepreneurs themselves need to be accorded a more vital role in the advisory process than is currently the case. The current arrangement exemplifies positions of power and control (i.e. clientification) – with business support providers being more responsive to grant providers (spending more time on paperwork and other forms of bureaucratic strictures) than the entrepreneurs who actually need/use their services. Very many grant providers are not making genuine efforts to evaluate the quality of service provisions (critical impacts) from the point of view of the advice-takers but rather depend on presentational and visual aesthetics (output and 'tick-box orientation' for which service providers have become adept). Further syntheses of the narratives highlight other key areas for public policy consideration. These include; longer term funding arrangements not only to enable needed forward-planning to take place but also to encourage planning to be conducted within the framework of sustainability, core funding for both projects and concomitant support mechanisms (i.e. embedding set-aside cross-cutting themes in funding arrangements to promote skills development elements as well as complementary modes of evaluation.

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