



Constructing economic geographies from corporate interviews: insights from a cross-country comparison of retailer–supplier relationships

Alex Hughes

Department of Geography, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK

Abstract

In the light of the significant role played by corporate interviews in the construction of contemporary economic geographies, this paper suggests that the practices of corporate interviewing in the research process demand critical reflection. These practices are reflected upon in the context of a comparative study of retailer–manufacturer power relations in the UK and USA. In particular, attention is paid to the ways in which corporate interviews actively construct knowledge of contrasting own-brand supply relationships in these national economies. To do this, the paper addresses the following issues: (i) the embeddedness of corporate interviews in a transforming economic geography; (ii) the processes of identifying, and gaining access to, own-brand supply networks in the UK and USA; (iii) the use of materials resulting from corporate interviews to produce nuanced understandings of own-brand supply relationships; (iv) the adoption of an appropriate textual strategy for writing such interview-based material into economic geography. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Corporate interviews have played a significant role in the construction of contemporary economic geographies. In particular, in-depth interviews with people working for corporations have been a part of the research dynamics that involve the folding of ‘the cultural’ into these economic geographies (see, for example, Cook, 1994; Crang et al., 1997; Crewe, 1996; Gertler, 1997; McDowell, 1997a; Reimer and Leslie, 1997; Schoenberger, 1994, 1997). In this paper, I wish to reflect critically on some ways in which the practices of corporate interviewing are bound up in a research process that actively (re)constitutes geographical knowledges about economies. To do this, the role of corporate interviewing in shaping a particular research project is considered. This project, which I conducted between 1992 and 1996, was concerned with a comparative analysis of food retailer–manufacturer power relations in the UK and USA. In-depth interviews with representatives from retailing and manufacturing corporations in both national economies were conducted in order to discern some of the ways in which the social and cultural energies of this kind of commodity exchange relationship are embedded in the contrasting regulatory environments of the UK and USA.

In this paper, then, I discuss the ways in which these in-depth interviews with managerial actors have created specific kinds of situated knowledges concerning the geographies of supply relationships. In particular, I focus on knowledges of the contrasting character of supply relationships for retailers’ own-brand products in the UK and USA. As the research unfolded, it became clear that own-brand strategies, whereby retailers sell goods under their own store names or private labels and organize the supply chains for these goods, are a central mechanism for the execution of retailer power over manufacturers (see, for example, Doel, 1996; Hughes, 1996a). For this reason, it is a useful dimension of the project to focus on in this paper.

The objectives of the paper are therefore as follows: (i) to situate the use of corporate interviews in my project against the background of an increasingly culturally sensitive economic geography; (ii) to discuss how networks of own-brand supply relationships were identified and accessed in the process of setting up corporate interviews in the UK and USA; (iii) to consider how the material resulting from the interviews helped to produce nuanced understandings of contrasting own-brand supply chain organization in the UK and USA; (iv) to suggest an appropriate textual strategy for writing such interview-based material into economic geography.

I want to begin these reflections, then, by considering the place of corporate interviewing in the sub-discipline of economic geography which, along with other disciplines in the social sciences, has recently experienced various kinds of ‘cultural turn’ (Crang, 1994). A conscious engagement with some of these cultural turns serves as a useful starting point for this paper, not least because they have played such a crucial role in fuelling the active context in which corporate interviews are performed.

2. Corporate interviews and cultural turns in economic geography

Within a recently published edited volume, *Geographies of Economies*, Philip Crang discusses the ‘fluid identity’ of contemporary economic geography. Against the backdrop of a sub-disciplinary history which has been so strongly shaped by Marxian political economy, at least since the early 1970s, Crang argues now that, “the content, concepts and approaches of (political) economic geography are all being actively reassessed” (1997, p. 3). This process of reassessment, he proposes, is very firmly connected to a re-thinking of the associations between ‘the economic’ and ‘the cultural’. That is to say, economic geographers are involved in a re-examination of the relationships between, on the one hand, traditional economic concerns of class, production, labour and capitalism,¹ and on the other, cultural “practices of identity, meaning and signification” (Crang, 1997, p. 5). While the focus of this paper remains with the methodological implications of the ‘cultural turns’ in economic geography, it is useful first to outline some over-arching theoretical issues arising from these sub-disciplinary ‘turns’.

On a conceptual level, culturally sensitive economic geographies appear to be part of a movement away from structural accounts of economic change. Since the early 1970s, the theory and practice of economic geography have been dominated by ideas from Marxian political economy, regulation theory, the flexible specialization thesis and neo-classical economics. While having very different philosophical and political roots, these theories have all framed particular meta-narratives (or, ‘grand theories’) of the economy, which suggest in various ways that industrial change is determined by some kind of deep-rooted, underlying (political) economic logic. During the 1990s, though, the role of these meta-narratives in shaping economic geography has been challenged. Examples of such challenges are afforded by: (i) a critical engagement with regulation theory based upon ideas of complex actor-networks (see Murdoch, 1995);

(ii) a discourse analysis of the metaphors and language circulating through both neo-classical economic and political-economic geography (see Barnes, 1996; Castree, 1995);² (iii) ‘a feminist critique of political economy’ (Gibson-Graham, 1996) and (iv) an engagement with socio-economics in the context of debates on globalization (see Amin and Thrift, 1997). Running through these varied challenges seems to be the motivation, first, to *recognize* the nature of the various meta-narratives constructed through traditional economic geography, second, to *break down* these meta-narratives, and third, to *replace* them with approaches that recognize the social and cultural complexities of industrial organization and economic change. Research that aims to re-think the relationships between culture and economy, then, is strongly related to these conceptual challenges to traditional theories used in economic geography.

On a more empirical level, culturally sensitive economic geographies have focused on the relationships between culture and economy in a variety of ways. By way of introduction, McDowell (1997b) suggests that the boundaries between ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ have been reconsidered through geographical studies of the following: (i) national cultures; (ii) institutional (or, organizational) cultures; (iii) workplace cultures; (iv) class cultures; (v) local cultures; (vi) the culture industries and (vii) the cultural analysis of the economy. At least some of the research falling into these categories has involved corporate interviewing as a central research method. Such work includes the study of corporate culture and its relationship to industrial change in the USA (Schoenberger, 1994, 1997), the connections between institutional cultures and macro-regulatory frameworks in Canada and Germany (Gertler, 1997), workplace cultures and gender in Cambridge high-tech firms in the UK (Massey, 1995), class, gender and workplace cultures in the City of London (McDowell, 1997a; McDowell and Court, 1994a, b, c), the simultaneous production of both material products and symbolic meaning in particular globalized commodity channels (Cook, 1994; Crang et al., 1997; Reimer and Leslie, 1997) and the cultural dynamics of the advertising industry (Leslie, 1997). While this list only scratches the surface of the wide range of projects in economic geography that have used corporate interviewing as a central research method, it does at least serve to illustrate the kinds of studies that, in particular, use corporate interviews in order to re-think the connections between ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’. Albeit in different ways, these studies draw upon the narratives

¹ Crang lists these as being “key political-economic theoretical constructs” (1997, p. 3).

² Castree’s (1995) work is strongly related to that of Barnes, but has a much sharper focus on the Marxist geography of David Harvey, with particular reference to Harvey’s treatment of ‘the subject’.

produced through corporate interviews in order to shed light upon the social and cultural complexities of ‘the economy’.

Corporate interviewing, then, is a relatively recent method used by economic geographers in order to understand the complexities of capitalist processes (Schoenberger, 1991) and relates to a conceptual rejection of overly structural theories of ‘the economic’. The most common form of interviewing in contemporary economic geography appears to be semi-structured interviewing, which implies that the researcher goes into the interview with a set of themes to discuss with the respondent; themes that can be addressed in any order (Bernard, 1988; Cook and Crang, 1995; Schoenberger, 1991). In this way, not only can the researcher’s broad questions be answered, but also new and interesting points can be raised by the interviewee during the course of more fluid conversation. This technique, then, allows existing theories of the economy and its geographies to be continually reworked in the light of conversations with the people who actively transform what it means to be involved in ‘the economic’.

Before the practices of corporate interviewing in the context of my research on retailer–supplier relationships are discussed in depth, it is appropriate first to acknowledge that the role played by corporate interviews in transforming economic geographies is a *partial* one. Indeed, it can be argued that methods such as participant observation, discussion and focus groups and ethnographies (amongst other techniques) are far more effective in elucidating the connections between ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’. As Crang and Malbon (1996) point out, corporate interviews very often ‘lack texture’. Useem (1995) too acknowledges that narratives produced through the reflections and memories of the corporate actors themselves are not *necessarily* the best representations of the business practices in which the researcher is interested. It is important, then, to be aware of the limits to corporate interviewing. However, I argue that there are particular kinds of research issues that *are* most effectively studied through the use of corporate interviews. First, projects that aim to paint a picture of a wide variety of business practices in order to elucidate the dynamics of a vast network of economic relations embody practical limitations with respect to the use of more textured, in-depth research methods. Under these circumstances, in-depth interviews with a relatively large number of different corporate actors might provide the most appropriate research technique. Second, there are also restrictions on the use of ethnographic methods that are imposed, in part, by the corporate actors themselves. McDowell (1998), for example, reflects upon the reluctance of elites in merchant banks to allow her actually to observe their involvement in some of their organizational practices. In view of these kinds of constraints on the in-depth study of cer-

tain economic processes, corporate interviews are sometimes the ‘closest’ we can get to our research subjects and their corporate worlds. Given this situation, and also the numerous research possibilities that are opened up through the practices of interviewing, corporate interviews remain an important research method in economic geography. As such, their practice deserves considerable reflection. It is in this spirit, then, that I wish to reflect upon the ways in which the practices of corporate interviewing have actively produced certain kinds of geographical knowledges circulating through a particular research process.

3. Corporate interviews and the comparative analysis of retailer power in the UK and USA

In using corporate interviews as a central method in the research of retailer–manufacturer power relations in the UK and USA, the assumption is being made that economic power relations can best be studied by talking to the corporate actors who actively shape them. As Schoenberger (1991) explains, corporate interviews rely on participants’ own interpretations of their experiences and competitive processes, which in turn are interpreted by the researcher. In the context of my research project, it is the ways in which the individual interpretations of the corporate actors speak to the broad-scale frame of analytical reference, concerning retailer–supplier relations, that are important.³

Two broad objectives have underpinned the study of food retailer–manufacturer power relations in the UK and USA. The first concerns the critical examination of the dynamism of supply relationships that operate between the two interdependent economic sectors of retailing and manufacturing. The second involves the demonstration that this dynamism is qualitatively different in particular geographic contexts; in this case, within contrasting national economies. These two objectives were researched as the basis of a doctoral dissertation carried out at the University of Southampton between 1992 and 1996. Fifty-six interviews were conducted in total, with retail buyers, sales and marketing staff of food manufacturers and industry analysts in both countries. Prior to this research, it had been proposed simply that food retailers in the UK appeared to exert more power over their manufacturing suppliers than their counterparts in the USA. Work conducted by Neil Wrigley (1992) on the contrasting regulatory environments surrounding food retailing in the UK and USA had highlighted the following key observations:

³ This contrasts with the kinds of corporate interviews conducted in the study of the individual biographies of the interviewees themselves (Useem, 1995).

(i) UK food retailers, as a result of their large market shares, have been able to exercise oligopsonistic buying power over the manufacturers and dictate terms and conditions of supply to them, whereas US retailers, owing in part to their industry's much lower level of capital concentration, appear to exercise far less buying power over their suppliers; (ii) US food retailers appeared to have been less able to pass back the costs of inventory holding to their suppliers than their UK counterparts; (iii) the level of own-brand trading in the USA was about a third of that employed by UK retailers. These observations, though, were preliminary and based mainly upon secondary data sources. Furthermore, while research was being conducted by geographers into the organization of food retailer–manufacturer relations in the UK, including own-brand supply relationships (Bowlby and Foord, 1989, 1992; Doel, 1996; Flynn and Marsden, 1992; Foord et al., 1992, 1996), little work was being carried out on the complexities of retailer–supplier relations in the USA. As such, the idea of engaging in an in-depth comparative analysis of food retailer–manufacturer power relations in the UK and USA presented a research opportunity to build on Wrigley's (1992) studies of retailing and regulatory environments and shed light upon the ways in which the (re)production of particular intersectoral power relations are indeed embedded in different national economies.

The more specific focus of the research has been to demonstrate the ways in which the contrasting regulatory systems of the UK and USA, along with the associated differences in retailer–manufacturer power relations, are continually produced and reproduced through the *practices* that make up the vast web of inter-firm relationships at the retailer–manufacturer interface in both national economies. Moreover, it has been of central importance to recognize that the organization of these retailer–supplier relationships (including those for own-brands) is *socially and culturally embedded*, rather than being determined simply by regulatory systems and structured by an underlying economic logic. This conceptualisation of inter-firm relationships, shaped by the 'cultural turns' in economic geography, strongly influenced the decision to conduct corporate interviews with retailers and their manufacturing suppliers in the UK and USA. It was assumed from the outset, then, that retailer–supplier relationships can be most effectively researched through the *subjective, partial and positioned* knowledges of both myself as a researcher and a selection of people who are actively involved in producing and reproducing these supply relationships (the corporate actors). It was also decided early in the research process that, in order to make the empirical investigations more manageable, a limited number of product categories would have to be studied. Three product categories were selected. These were canned soup, take-

home ice cream and pasta sauce, which were chosen on the grounds that, between them, they cover a range of variations along the axes of market structure and market segmentation in both countries (see Hughes, 1996b). The corporate actors identified as key informants for the study were therefore the people involved in the purchase and sale of these particular commodities. In the remainder of the paper, it is shown how a comparison of the social and cultural complexities of own-brand supply relationships for these products in the UK and USA was built up through the process of corporate interviewing in both national economies.

4. Tracing the configuration of own-brand supply relationships

Secondary data sources reveal that levels of own-brand trading were much higher in the UK than in the USA when the research began in the early 1990s. In 1992, the own-brand share of the grocery market was 37.1% in the UK (The Grocer, 1994) and 13.7% in the USA (Private Label, 1992).⁴ Existing literature on the character of own-brand supply chains highlights that, from the mid-1980s, there have been two main kinds of supply relationship for retailers' own-brands in the UK – the administered relationship and the associative relationship (Dawson and Shaw, 1990). The administered relationship refers to an arms-length connection between the retailer and supplier of basic, often low-priced, own-brand products. In this type of relationship, retailers tend to dictate terms and conditions of supply to the manufacturer. In contrast, the associative relationship exists for the supply of more quality-based, high-margin own-brands (Bowlby et al., 1992; Doel, 1996). This latter kind of relationship, involving a high level of collaboration and joint decision-making between retailer and supplier, has been argued to be central to the development of own-brand strategies and retailer power in the UK since the mid-1980s (Doel, 1996). Less was known about the supply relationships for the provision of own-brands in the USA. One of the key aims of my research was to make a direct comparison of own-brand supply chain organization in the UK and USA, and to ascertain whether or not the kinds of supply relationships evident in the UK were also present in the USA. In order to achieve this comparison, the networks of own-brand supply relationships for the selected product categories of canned soup, ice cream and pasta sauce first required identification in both countries.

What became clear from the outset was that the networks of inter-firm relationships existing for the

⁴ These figures are used in Hughes (1996a, b).

supply of retailers' own-brands are often far from transparent. As such, a great deal of investigative work was required in the process of setting up interviews with appropriate corporate actors, as well as during the interviews themselves, in order to determine the companies involved in own-brand production. This work was fundamental to the identification of the structures of own-brand supply chain networks for the three product categories in both national economies, before analysis of the character of supply relationships could proceed.

As the UK fieldwork unfolded, three key means through which the suppliers of own-brands were identified appeared to emerge. These were as follows: (i) tracing the suppliers during the course of interviews with the retailers; (ii) chance discoveries that producers interviewed for the remainder of the project as brand manufacturers also happened to be suppliers of own-brands to the retailers; (iii) identifying specialist own-brand manufacturers through the trade press. However, even through all three processes, a complete picture of supply networks was virtually impossible to paint, as I shall show.

At the beginning of the project, letters to all the UK food retail multiples were sent out. Owing to the high concentration of capital in this sector (see Wrigley, 1992, 1994), this involved just a dozen easily identifiable supermarket chains. As it was imperative to obtain the co-operation of as many of these companies as possible, communication with the buyers at these chains emphasized the significance of their companies to the research. The buyers were also assured that interviews would be organized quickly and efficiently, in order to avoid taking up too much of their valuable working time. Such strategies for securing corporate interviews are an acknowledged component of studying powerful groups of people (McDowell, 1992; Thomas, 1993). Once these interviews were set up, with refusals to co-operate coming only from two discount chains, discussions of supply relationships could begin and the producers of own-brands could be located. This particular strategy to uncover the names of own-brand suppliers, however, met with variable success. As a report by Christian Aid (1996) suggests:

Tracing own-label products back to source is very difficult. Supermarkets are very secretive about the production of own-label foods. There is a singular problem of lack of transparency in the supermarket business . . . (1996, p. 10).

While retail buyers were often happy to reveal the large producers of more basic own-brand lines, such as standardized canned soup and low-margin ice cream, they tended to be less comfortable about naming the suppliers of quality-based, high-margin products such as pasta sauce and premium ice cream. The following

quote from the Central Buyer at one of the leading UK food retailers illustrates this point. When asked which companies supply own-brand ice cream to this supermarket chain, he replied that:

We have a variety. The main supplier is Allied and then we have some small specialist manufacturers, and they would be confidential because they make very special products for us that nobody else could get (Interview, June 1994).⁵

Such information is also shielded, in some cases, from the own-brand suppliers themselves, as the National Accounts Controller of one ice cream producer explains:

I know that we are not the only supplier, but what I do not know is whether one, two or three other suppliers supply them [the retailers] (Interview, November 1993).

So, while tracing the supply chains back by obtaining information from the retailers themselves worked for some of the basic commodities, retailer secrecy ensured that alternative tactics were needed to reveal other firms in the networks.

Both McDowell (1998) and Parry (1998) firmly acknowledge the role of chance in accessing corporate elites and eliciting information from them. My research journey was also guided, at least in part, by an element of luck. As the project incorporated the manufacturers of national, proprietary brands in addition to suppliers of own-brands, it fortuitously emerged that some of these brand manufacturers were also producers of retailers' own-brands. Most notably, this was the means through which two particular suppliers, of premium own-brand ice cream and pasta sauce, respectively, were revealed; suppliers who subsequently became key informants on the qualitative character of associative own-brand supply relationships. In the case of the premium ice cream supplier, the involvement of this producer in own-brands came up in the respondent's discussion of the company's product portfolio. The finding of the key supplier of premium pasta sauce to the leading high street food retailer in the UK was even more fortuitous, as this manufacturer was actually being interviewed as a producer of a leading national brand in the premium canned soup market. In both cases, the interviewees were only too happy to extend the discussion to own-brand supply relationships, emphasizing in particular their own individual roles in the initiation of the supply relationships with the retailers. Such heroic

⁵ Ironically, I am unable to name the companies represented by most interviewees due to my promise to maintain anonymity for these respondents in publications.

recounting of corporate events and histories is typical of corporate interviewees, particularly some male executives, and often framed the narratives used in later analysis of supply chain organization. This is exemplified as follows, in the context of my conversation with the Sales and Marketing Director from the supplier of own-brand pasta sauce:

AH: One of my other chosen products is actually pasta sauces, which I hadn't mentioned in my letter because I hadn't realized that your company were involved in that. So, if you could tell me about that ...

WB: How that came about? I'll tell you about how we got into pasta sauces with [this high street retailer]. I've worked with [them] for twenty years, so I know them very well. They wanted a new range of pasta sauces. I said, 'I can make that, okay?' It's a very personal business. It's very much who you know (Interview, September 1993).

Finally, examining trade publications such as *The Grocer* enabled the identification of large manufacturers with facilities devoted to retailers' own-brand production. In most cases, these suppliers were exceptionally forthcoming when it came to naming particular retail customers with whom they do business and were therefore far less secretive than the supermarket chains had been. Overall, though, identifying the companies involved in retailers' own-brand supply networks in the UK was a difficult process and very firmly connected to the process of corporate interviewing itself.

The processes of tracing own-brand suppliers in the USA was also very much driven by the particularities of food retailing in this national economy, as well as the market structure of each of the selected product categories. As with the UK fieldwork, the co-operation of the majority of leading supermarket chains was gained, though this involved many more companies than in the UK, owing to the regional structure of this sector and its low concentration of capital at the time of research.⁶ Access in the USA appeared to be aided by the perception of my status as a travelling British researcher. With respect to the identification of own-brand producers, less secrecy was encountered on the part of the US supermarket chains. Significantly, this may have been linked to the distinct absence of associative supply relationships for quality-based own-brands.

In the case of ice cream, vertical integration marks the channels of own-brand supply. That is to say, several of the large and medium-sized US food retailers own their own facilities for own-brand ice cream production.⁷ This applied to six of the supermarket chains interviewed and thus rendered this particular aspect of own-brand supply chain configuration comparatively transparent. Moreover, it was explained in the interviews themselves that some of these facilities were also used to co-pack own-brand ice cream for other retailers. This was a clear example of an unexpected issue arising in the course of the interview process, as new themes were allowed to emerge during conversation. Explanations of this co-packing arrangement were often provided through very proud accounts by the interviewees, as shown by this quote from the Manager of Corporate Grocery Merchandising of one of the leading US food retail chains:

Our manufacturing facilities in ice cream are state-of-the-art and we've always prided ourselves on the state-of-the-art quality, so we co-pack, in the ice cream business, part of that product for other people – we even co-pack and manufacture some private label [own-brand] for other competitive retailers (Interview, March 1994).

With respect to the category of canned soup, it transpired that there was actually only one major, national supplier of own-brand canned soup to the US retail chains, which turned out to be H.J. Heinz. In the process of setting up the US fieldwork, Heinz had been approached as a very small player progressively being squeezed out of the branded marketplace. Once contact was established, though, it was made very clear to me that the involvement of this producer was almost entirely in the own-brand market. There was very little secrecy attached to this supply arrangement, hence my decision to name the company in this paper, partly because of the lack of competition in own-brand soup production.

The main element of luck in identifying own-brand supply networks in the USA came when the interviewees at Heinz were telling me about their ideas for new product development for retailers' own-brands. It came to light that, while pasta sauce was a category in which own-brands were practically non-existent in the USA at the time of the research, it was nonetheless an area of potential own-brand innovation. During my US fieldwork, Heinz were researching this product category and preparing to market their ideas for own-brand development to the retailers. This chance finding, during the

⁶ The US food retailing industry has since become much more highly concentrated, owing to a series of mergers and acquisitions since the time of study (see Wrigley, 1998).

⁷ This is, in part, due to the fragmented and regional structure of both the dairy and food retail sectors in the USA.

course of my interviews concerning own-brand soup, illustrated perfectly one of the key differences between UK and US own-brand supply relationships – that of manufacturer-led innovation in the USA.

Overall, the greater transparency of the own-brand supply networks in the USA, owing in part to the arguably less sophisticated sourcing strategies of the US chains at the time of study, appeared to pose fewer methodological challenges to supply chain research in that country. The challenges experienced during the UK fieldwork, though, implied that knowledges of own-brand supply networks were always going to be partial, positioned and incomplete. The processes of identifying networks of own-brand supply relationships were therefore far from straightforward. Yet, they played a central role in marking out the initial routes of the research journeys that later constructed in-depth knowledges of supply chain practices.

5. Corporate interviews and nuanced understandings of own-brand innovation

Innovation in own-brand strategies, with respect both to new product development and to ways of organizing the supply chains for these products, is acknowledged as a key dimension of retailer power in the UK (Dawson and Shaw, 1990; Doel, 1996). It allows retailers' own-brands to compete more successfully with manufacturers' brands, increases retailers' overall profits and can lock suppliers into retailer-led distribution systems. Doel (1996) argues, though, that such innovation is insufficiently explained by theories of the economy that have prevailed in the discipline of economic geography until the 1990s. In particular, she suggests that theories of radical political economy and neo-classical economics fail to explain the complex processes of own-brand supply chain initiation for new products. Instead, Doel engages with key aspects of retailer innovation and describes these processes of initiation through material based on her corporate interviews with UK retailers and their suppliers of chilled ready meals.⁸ Rather than seeking to explain the character of own-brand supply relationships in terms of an underlying (political) economic logic, then, Doel's objective is to embrace the agency of key corporate actors. This agency, particularly in the context of innovation and new product development in own-brand supply relationships, is best examined using corporate interviews with appropriate agents of economic change. My own research has followed this methodological lead taken by Doel (1996), and also by Foord et al. (1996). Moreover, one of the

key aims of my study has been to construct a comparison of own-brand innovation in the UK and USA that is based upon situated accounts presented in corporate interviews. Rather than provide structural explanations of own-brand innovation, then, the objective has been to produce more nuanced understandings of its organization in the context of specific supply relationships. Such nuanced understandings, which are particularly sensitive to the role of inter-personal relationships and corporate culture, are seen to tie in strongly with the more culturally sensitive economic geographies discussed earlier.

With respect to the UK, much of my research confirms the existence of the two main types of own-brand supply relationships – the administered relationship and the associative relationship. While this model forms a useful classificatory framework on which to hang ideas of own-brand innovation, though, it is limited in its capacity to explain the complex processes through which innovation actually comes about. In contrast to the adoption of research techniques based on questionnaires and structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow corporate interviewees to describe in depth how new product development is organized. The following examples from my UK interviews highlight the ways in which narratives from corporate interviews make the category of associative supply relationships in particular more complex, and illustrate its embeddedness in inter-personal relationships. Examples from the aforementioned suppliers of own-brand pasta sauce and premium ice cream are particularly useful to draw upon here.

Once the key producer of quality-based, branded canned soup had also been identified as a supplier of own-brand pasta sauce to a major high street retailer, the Sales and Marketing Director of this company went on to explain where ideas for own-brand pasta sauce recipes actually come from. He described his company's innovative approach to new product development as follows:

[The retailer's] chefs and my chef and myself and a selector went out together and went to the best Italian restaurants in London and tested sauces for lunch and dinner over a period of a week, and selected the products that we wanted to make. The chefs then made the sauces fresh in the kitchen and these sauces then became the benchmark of the sauces we had to make in the factory (Interview, September 1993).

While the changing consumer cultures of the restaurant trade are widely acknowledged as being a seed-bed for ideas in food manufacturing, it emerged that the high street retailer with whom this supplier does business is quite unique in its attempts to harness ideas directly from restaurants in this way. The participation of its chefs and selectors in restaurant consumption, as a

⁸ Chilled ready meals represent a category predominantly developed by the UK retailers themselves.

significant strategy through which own-brand ideas are seen to evolve, is therefore also a key feature of the collaborative relationships it builds with its preferred suppliers. This emergent theme in the interview shed important light on the unique organizational character of this own-brand supply relationship, its embeddedness in inter-personal relations and its connection with the corporate culture of this particular high street retailer.

Fostering ideas for new product development in this precise way was absent from other associative supply relationships. However, alternative sources of ideas for new products unexpectedly became apparent during the course of other interviews. In the case the supplier of own-brand premium ice cream mentioned above, one such source came to light in the midst of discussion about supply chain initiation. The National Accounts Controller for this supplier explained that:

To answer your question specifically about how did the private label [own-brand] discussions commence, well, I mean, [one of the largest UK supermarket chains] were the first people with whom we did private label [own-brand]. And I suppose it was just a case one day of *them*, as I recollect it, saying something like, you know, ‘Just supposing we were to want to do a private label blackcurrant ice cream’, for example, which was one of the first they started with. It was the idea of one of the directors’ wives. And it’s amazing in the likes of [this retailer] how many of the ideas emanate from, or so it appears, from directors’ wives (Interview, November 1993).

Narratives of corporate interviewees also helped to construct knowledge of the degree to which associative supply relationships are based upon partnership between the retailer and own-brand supplier. When asked about the extent to which new product development for own-brands is based upon joint decision-making, the Central Buyer of one leading quality-based UK retailer replied:

It’s joint. We would see ourselves as giving ideas. A good example would be if we decided that we wanted an American style banoffee ice cream and a strawberry cheesecake ice cream. So we would talk to the supplier about that and yes, these might be good ideas. And although we’ve got very extensive laboratories here, capable of doing absolutely anything, we wouldn’t normally want to develop our own recipes or do that sort of work. We would want the supplier to do that (Interview, June 1994).

McDowell (1998) discusses the need to search for inconsistencies, absences and contradictions in the interviewees’ single narratives, and the quote above cer-

tainly contains such features. On the one hand, this Central Buyer asserts the collaborative nature of the relationship. And on the other, he describes how the costs of actually developing the products are often passed back to the supplier in a relationship that appears to be far from equal. This interviewee’s reflections therefore shed light on how even associative relationships are built on a combination of cooperation and competition. The National Accounts Controller of the ice cream supplier mentioned above also highlights such a combination, though far less subtly. With regard to own-brand product development, he suggested that:

It’s very much a joint thing with the major multiples. A sharing of ideas. One is pretty sure now and again that they’ll take one of your ideas and give it to someone else to do, but that’s a risk you take. That’s how things are in private label [own-brand] (Interview, November 1993).

Having demonstrated how the material from corporate interviews can be used to complicate notions of associative relationships in the UK, attention is now turned to the use of corporate interviews to construct comparative knowledge of own-brand innovation in the USA. In addition to the lower levels of own-brand trading in the USA compared with the UK, my research found innovation such as that practised by UK retailers to be absent from US retailing. Comments such as the following one from the Vice President/Director of Grocery Merchandising at one of the largest US supermarket chains were quite common. He explained that in the USA “private label [own-brand] is an emulator. We do not build a market, but we are a copy-cat. And so therefore we watch the markets very closely” (Interview, March 1994). However, this trend was not quite as all-encompassing within US retailing as at first seemed to be the case. For example, while not as innovative as UK retailers, one US supermarket chain showed more evidence of proactive product development for its own-brands than its competitors. The Manager of Corporate Grocery Merchandising for this chain explained that:

We just came out with a super-premium ice cream line, and we know, by watching people like Ben & Jerry’s and Haagen-Dazs, what are trendy flavours. Now we won’t copy it. We’ll be innovative to come up with some new, unique flavours, but keeping in mind what has been successful for them and what the consumer is looking for (Interview, March 1994).

In terms of the canned soup and pasta sauce categories for own-brands, it has already been noted that this kind of more subtle innovation in the USA is directed much more by the supplier than the retailer; a

situation that stands in contrast to own-brand development in the UK. However, the quote above appears to illustrate a far rarer example of retailer-led innovation. The allowance for this interviewee to qualify his statement on own-brand development in ice cream helped to prevent the over-simplification of low levels of own-brand innovation in the USA, and aided the recognition of a continually evolving US retailing system. The emergence of a post-leverage buyout corporate culture in the retail organization discussed here, in particular, was deemed by the representative interviewed to be central to this company's strategic development of own-brands.

In contrast to the UK network of own-brand supply relationships, though, weak social ties appeared to characterize most own-brand supply relationships in the USA, even those that involved vertically integrated supply channels. It could be argued that this lack of close social relations in the supply networks served to perpetuate the absence of innovation on the scale that it exists in the UK. At no time was this more apparent than during my visit to one US retail corporation. Perhaps because of my status as a travelling researcher, hospitality was extended to me by this retailer, a representative of which drove me to have a guided tour of their own-brand ice cream production facilities 20 miles from their retail headquarters. During the drive to this manufacturing unit, the Frozen Food Category Manager, whom I had interviewed, confessed that he very rarely visited these production facilities, but that there would be much to be gained from doing so. The following extract from my research diary reflects my feelings about this observation at the time of study:

The retailing and manufacturing sides seemed surprisingly arms-length, and the retail buyers and the marketing staff of the production unit met rarely. The guys I spoke with from each respective side had never met before and shook hands for the first time today (Research Diary, March 1994).

This observation, prompted directly by an encounter emerging from my interview, fleshes out knowledge of how such intra-firm supply relationships are actually conducted in practice. Such knowledge expands on the proposal by Sayer (1989) that intra-firm organization can sometimes be arms-length. This turned out to be an important interpretation of the organizational processes existing for own-brand product development in the USA.

Overall, the main point I wish to make in this section of the paper is that, while it is often strategically useful to make generalizations about UK–US contrasts in retailers' own-brand trading, there is also much to be gained from appreciating the social and cultural complexities of own-brand innovation in the supply chain.

Such an appreciation of complexity comes from the nuanced understandings that so often emerge through the construction and analysis of narratives in corporate interviews.

6. Writing geographies of own-brand supply relationships

Finally, it is important to consider briefly the kind of textual strategy appropriate for writing geographies of own-brand supply relationships based on corporate interviews. Much economic geography prior to the 1990s had been written using what Gusterson (1993) terms an objectivist textual strategy. That is to say, economic processes had been described and explained as though they were linked to one underlying logic and could be written about by an all-seeing, all-knowing researcher. Gusterson warns that this objectivist strategy has the effect of masking social and cultural complexity, as it:

[C]onfounds intrapsychic and social processes, encouraging readers to think of entire social groups as if they were giant personalities, and to reduce all members of social groups to a single psychological profile (1993, p. 71).

Such a textual strategy would permit the recognition of different modes of supply chain organization and would allow them to be linked to meta-narratives of economic change. However, the partiality of information bound up in the methodological challenges posed by in-depth interviewing would remain veiled and unacknowledged. Moreover, much of the descriptive richness embedded in the interviewees' narratives on supply relationships would be lost. It is suggested, then, that material resulting from corporate interviews should not merely be squeezed, trimmed and shaped to fit generalizations about retailer–manufacturer relations and the economy. Rather, the complexity and richness of the narratives should be retained and represented in texts that incorporate the voices of the interviewees themselves. Such a textual strategy that allows the articulation of multiple voices is often referred to as polyphony (Crang, 1992; Gusterson, 1993).

Polyphonic textual strategies allow the incorporation of more than one voice and more than one genre in an academic text, thus allowing the juxtaposition of multiple and competing perspectives on certain issues to be included in academic writing. These strategies have been written about by geographers (see, in particular, Crang, 1992), but normally in the context of studying less powerful social groups as opposed to elites (see Gusterson, 1993). It is suggested here that some kind of polyphonic text is also useful for representing material resulting from corporate interviews. As Section 5 of this paper illustrated, quotes from different interviewees are

usefully pitched against one another in order to situate UK–US comparisons of own-brand innovation in particular corporate narratives. This allows the social and cultural complexity of supply chain practices to be articulated in the texts, rather than the interviewees' descriptions being subsumed under generalizations. However, for these texts to remain critical, it is imperative that corporate narratives are also triangulated with other existing data and theoretical perspectives on the issues being researched. In the context of my project, this has meant the incorporation into research papers of secondary data, extracts from the trade press, information from industry analysts and existing theoretical perspectives on the retailer–supplier interface. The use of such a range of material, in addition to the juxtaposition of retailers' and suppliers' narratives, supports the value of triangulation endorsed by Cochrane (1998).

Just as the partiality and methodological challenges of corporate interviewing in practice should be acknowledged, as suggested in the earlier discussion of tracing own-brand supply networks, so the inter-subjective⁹ nature of the writing process in economic geography should also be embraced. Crang (1992) has talked about the implications of polyphony for the nature of authorial control in geographical writing. He argues that, "... what the presence of polyphony does do, whether it involves more formal shifts to coauthorship or not, is to focus that authorial power around editorial decisions" (1992, p. 542). It follows, then, that in writing corporate narratives into geographies of retailer–supplier relations, it is the editorial decision-making that is crucial in maintaining a critical stance. While it is beneficial to incorporate the voices of corporate agents into accounts of retailer–supplier relationships, if objectivist writing is avoided, the *politics* of listening to and representing these voices in academic work must not be ignored. Using 'multivocal texts' (Crang, 1992) to humanize notions of economic power and represent the social and cultural embeddedness of capitalist exchange relations in academic texts, then, is a potentially powerful strategy. However, in line with Crang (1992), McDowell (1998) and Parry (1998), it is suggested that editorial decisions must be seen as political decisions as well as creative ones. Thus, in retaining the analytical richness of corporate narratives on, say, own-brand innovation and supply chain practices, decisions concerning which quotes to use, where in the text to place them, what kinds of information to triangulate them with and the level of anonymity preserved for the interviewees, should all be viewed as both creative and political. The result is the production of an economic geography that is fully acknowledged,

throughout the entire research process, as being based upon partiality and 'situated knowledge'.¹⁰

7. Discussion

Through a discussion of some of the specific practices that have shaped the research of retailer–manufacturer power relations in the UK and USA, an attempt has been made to highlight the ways in which corporate interviews actively construct knowledge in a particular area of economic geography. Through the interrelated practices involved with designing the research, setting up the fieldwork, performing the interviews and writing up the research, it has been suggested that corporate interviews create some qualitatively different kinds of economic geographies from those resulting from traditional approaches to economic geography.

The value of corporate interviewing in forging understandings of the social and cultural energies of supply relationships has been touched upon, drawing on examples of UK–US contrasts in own-brand innovation. With respect to this issue, it is appropriate to conclude that interviews with the different corporate actors who actually shape supply relationships create situated accounts of these relations. These situated accounts, when cross-checked with one another and (re)configured in geographical texts, produce knowledges on the complexities and contradictions of supply relations; complexities and contradictions that are driven by the corporate cultures and inter-personal relations that lie at their heart.

The merit of basing a comparative analysis on corporate knowledges and narratives that are situated is firmly acknowledged. Rather than making a cross-country comparison based upon knowledge that is claimed to be value-neutral, it is argued that corporate interviews in the UK and USA produce valid comparative knowledges that are based upon inter-subjective understandings of the supply relationships being studied. As these inter-subjective understandings are produced in subtly different ways in the UK and USA, though, I propose that the dynamics of the corporate interview process should therefore always be seen as being geographically, as well as socially and culturally, constituted.

The reflections outlined in this paper, as well as the corporate knowledges I have drawn upon, are partial and situated. They are rooted in, or rather routed through, my own experiences of a very particular research journey, from the setting up of fieldwork to the process of writing up the study. I would not, therefore, wish my discussion to be read as any kind of prescriptive

⁹ Inter-subjectivity is a term borrowed from Cook and Crang (1995).

¹⁰ This is a notion borrowed consciously from Haraway (1991).

guide through the processes of corporate interviewing. Rather, my observations and suggestions should simply serve to highlight the active role played by corporate interviews in the construction of economic geographies. I suggest, then, that this paper represents just one of a wide variety of starting points from which critical reflections on the study of corporate elites and their worlds can be developed; critical reflections that are so central to many of the transforming debates in economic geography.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jenny Robinson for her help and patience in putting together the theme issue of which this paper is a part. I would also like to extend thanks to an anonymous referee for some very pertinent and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I acknowledge the financial support of a British Academy conference grant, which allowed me to present this work, and gain useful feedback, in a session on 'New Methodologies for Elite Research' at the Association of American Geographers Annual Conference in Charlotte during 1996.

References

- Amin, A., Thrift, N., 1997. Globalization, socio-economics, territoriality. In: Lee, R., Wills, J. (Eds.), *Geographies of Economies*, ch. 11. Arnold, London, New York, pp. 3–15.
- Barnes, T.J., 1996. *Logics of Dislocation: Models, Metaphors and Meanings in Economic Space*. Guilford, New York.
- Bernard, H.R., 1988. Unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviewing. In: Bernard, H.R. (Ed.), *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Sage, London.
- Bowlby, S., Foord, J., 1989. The changing organisation of retailer–supplier relationships: locational implications. Paper presented at the RSA's 29th European Congress, Cambridge, September.
- Bowlby, S., Foord, J., Tillsley, C., 1992. Changing consumption patterns: impacts on retailers and their suppliers. *Internat. Rev. Retail Distribution Consumer Res.* 2, 133–150.
- Castree, N., 1995. On theory's subject and subject's theory: Harvey, capital and the limits to classical Marxism. *Environment and Planning A* 27, 269–297.
- Christian Aid, 1996. *The Global Supermarket: Britain's Biggest Shops and Food from the Third World*, Christian Aid.
- Cochrane, A., 1998. Illusions of power: interviewing local elites. *Environment and Planning A* 30, 2121–2132.
- Cook, I., 1994. New fruits and vanity: symbolic production in the global food economy. In: Bonanno, A., Busch, L., Friedland, W., Gouveia, L., Mingione, E. (Eds.), *From Columbus to ConAgra: The Globalization of Agriculture and Food*. University Press of Kansas, Kansas, pp. 232–248.
- Cook, I., Crang, M., 1995. *Doing Ethnographies*. IBG CATMOG series.
- Crang, P., 1992. The politics of polyphony: reconfigurations in geographical authority. *Environment and Planning D: Society Space* 10 (5), 527–550.
- Crang, P., 1994. Teaching economic geography: some thoughts on curriculum content. *J. Geography Higher Education* 18 (1), 106–113.
- Crang, P., 1997. Cultural turns and the reconstitution of economic geography. In: Lee, R., Wills, J. (Eds.), *Introduction to Section One in Geographies of Economies*. Arnold, London, New York, pp. 3–15.
- Crang, P., Malbon, B., 1996. Consuming geographies: a review essay. *Trans. Inst. British Geographers* 21, 704–711.
- Crang, P., Thorpe, M., Cook, I., 1997. Eating places and the cultural materialisation of the economic. Paper presented at the Cultural Turns/Geographical Turns Conference, Oxford, 16–18th September.
- Crewe, L., 1996. Material culture: embedded firms organizational networks and the local economic-development of a fashion quarter. *Regional Studies* 30 (3), 257–272.
- Dawson, J., Shaw, S.A., 1990. The changing character of retailer–supplier relationships. In: Fernie, J. (Ed.), *Retail Distribution Management: A Strategic Guide to Developments and Trends*. Kogan Page, London, pp. 19–39.
- Doel, C., 1996. Market development and organisational change: the case of the food industry. In: Wrigley, N., Lowe, M. (Eds.), *Retailing, Consumption and Capital: Towards the New Retail Geography*, ch. 3. Longman, London, pp. 48–67.
- Flynn, A., Marsden, T., 1992. Food legislation in a period of agricultural retreat – the British experience. *Geoforum* 23, 85–93.
- Foord, J., Bowlby, S., Tillsley, C., 1992. Changing relations in the retail-supply chain: geographical and employment implications. *Internat. J. Retail Distribution Management* 20, 23–30.
- Foord, J., Bowlby, S., Tillsley, C., 1996. The changing place of retailer–supplier relations in British retailing Chapter 4. In: Wrigley, N., Lowe, M. (Eds.), *Retailing, Consumption and Capital: Towards the New Retail Geography*. Longman, London, pp. 68–89.
- Gertler, M.S., 1997. The invention of regional culture. ch. 4. In: Lee, R., Wills, J. (Eds.), *Geographies of Economies*. Arnold, London and New York, pp. 47–58.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., 1996. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): a Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- The Grocer, 1994. Focus on private label. 7 May, 59–98.
- Gusterson, H., 1993. Exploding anthropology's canon in the world of the bomb: ethnographic writing on militarism. *J. Contemporary Ethnography* 22, 59–79.
- Haraway, D., 1991. *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, London.
- Hughes, A., 1996a. Retail restructuring and the strategic significance of food retailers' own-labels: a UK–USA comparison. *Environment Planning A* 28, 2201–2226.
- Hughes, A., 1996b. *Changing Food Retailer–Manufacturer Power Relations within National Economies: a UK–USA Comparison*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Southampton.
- Leslie, D., 1997. Flexibly specialized agencies? Reflexivity, identity and the advertising industry. *Environment and Planning A* 29, 1017–1038.
- Massey, D., 1995. Masculinity, dualisms and high technology. *Trans. Inst. British Geographers* 20 (4), 487–499.
- McDowell, L., 1992. Valid games? A response to Erica Schoenberger. *Professional Geographer* 44 (2), 212–215.
- McDowell, L., 1997a. *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City*. Blackwell, Oxford and Malden.
- McDowell, L., 1997b. Economy, culture and justice. Paper presented at the Cultural Turns/Geographical Turns Conference. Oxford, 16–18th September.
- McDowell, L., 1998. Elites in the City of London: some methodological considerations. *Environment and Planning A* 30, 2133–2146.
- McDowell, L., Court, G., 1994a. Missing subjects: gender, power and sexuality in merchant banking. *Economic Geography* 70, 229–251.

- McDowell, L., Court, G., 1994b. Performing work: bodily representations in merchant banks. *Environment and Planning D: Society Space* 12, 727–750.
- McDowell, L., Court, G., 1994c. Gender divisions of labour in the post-Fordist economy: the maintenance of occupational sex segregation in the financial services sector. *Environment and Planning A* 26, 1397–1418.
- Murdoch, J., 1995. Actor-networks and the evolution of economic forms: combining description and explanation in theories of regulation, flexible specialization, and networks. *Environment and Planning A* 27, 731–757.
- Parry, B., 1998. Hunting the gene-hunters: the role of hybrid networks, status and chance in conceptualising and accessing corporate elites. *Environment and Planning A* 30, 2147–2162.
- Private Label, 1992. Private label's top 100 report, November–December 14, Supplement.
- Reimer, S., Leslie, D., 1997. Culture, economy and the home furnishings commodity chain. Paper presented at the Cultural Turns/Geographical Turns Conference, Oxford, 16–18th September.
- Sayer, A., 1989. Postfordism in question. *Internat. J. Urban Regional Res.* 13, 666–695.
- Schoenberger, E., 1991. The corporate interview as a research method in economic geography. *Professional Geographer* 43 (2), 180–189.
- Schoenberger, E., 1994. Corporate strategy and corporate strategists: power identity, and knowledge within the firm. *Environment and Planning A* 26, 435–451.
- Schoenberger, E., 1997. *The Cultural Crisis of the Firm*. Blackwell, Cambridge, Oxford.
- Thomas, R.J., 1993. Interviewing important people in big companies. *J. Contemporary Ethnography* 22, 80–96.
- Useem, M., 1995. Reaching corporate executives. In: Hertz R., Imber, J.B. (Eds.), *Studying Elites Using Qualitative Methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, pp. 18–39.
- Wrigley, N., 1992. Antitrust regulation and the restructuring of Grocery retailing in Britain and the USA. *Environment and Planning A* 24, 727–749.
- Wrigley, N., 1998. Four myths in search of foundation: the restructuring of US food retailing and its implications for commercial cultures. Paper prepared for ESRC Research Seminar on 'The Restructuring of Commercial Cultures', Winchester School of Art, Faculty of Arts, University of Southampton, 19th November 1998.