

Using trust to gain credible access to the boardroom: A methodological contribution

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Purpose: Researchers have found it difficult to gain access to board members to collect credible data. Acquiring such insights, however, is becoming increasingly important in view of rising numbers of corporate failures. This article is part of a broader study conducted to identify the drivers of effective board leadership in a cross section of companies in selected countries, where trust and distrust were used as the primary levers to gain credible access to board members.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative research approach was adopted, with data collected via semi-structured interviews with 47 directors of companies in a range of countries.

Findings/contribution: The data collection process was guided by nine literature-informed board access strategies designed to overcome potential barriers to structural and substantive access to credible information sharing. The board directors who were interviewed were more forthcoming upon learning that the researcher had board experience and was thus able to empathise with their own experiences. This contributed to an atmosphere of trust during the interviews.

Practical implications: This paper highlights the methodological advances made in the access dimension of process studies, focusing on difficult-to-access subjects like boards of directors.

Originality/value: In addition to the literature-informed board access strategies, the researcher abductively developed a methodological board access conceptual framework. This framework comprises process and empathy levers designed to enable researchers to gain surface-level, moderate-level and deep-level access to board members for the purpose of extracting progressively credible data on board processes from hard-to-access individuals.

Keywords: board of directors; board access; board processes; trust; distrust.

Introduction

Corporate governance scholars have long called for access to the boardroom so that they can open the 'black box' of board processes of large companies (Huse, 2005; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Rost & Osterloh, 2010), especially as they pertain to board leadership (Banerjee et al., 2020; Morais et al., 2018). This desire to understand the inner workings of boards has been prompted by the growing realisation that top leaders (such as directors) need to be held accountable for the ever-increasing failures (Nicholson et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2005) of large companies (Kaczmarek et al., 2012; Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2012; Mthombeni & Chizema, 2022). However, with the exception of the seminal contribution by Leblanc and Schwartz (2007) and, to some extent, to calls by scholars like McNulty et al. (2013) and Shah and Corley (2006), corporate governance scholars have little guidance on how to access the boardroom. This is a methodological gap that this article seeks to address. Encouraging more scholarship in this regard will help to overcome the current impediment to process research in the field of corporate governance.

The objective of this methodological article is to encourage researchers to use extant knowledge of surface-level board processes (how boards work structurally) to investigate underexplored, deep-level board processes (how boards work relationally) (Mthombeni & Chizema, 2022). Gaining structural access to the boardrooms of large companies is necessary; but it is not sufficient for acquiring credible empirical data on board processes. The sufficiency rule may be met by using relational board access to acquire much-needed, credible data on board processes (McNulty et al., 2013; Shah & Crowley, 2006). This article explores how to overcome the challenges associated with accessing credible data by having candid engagements with individual board members so as to establish how boards of large companies really work, taking interpersonal relations into account (Roberts et al., 2005).

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Scholars have explored interpersonal board dynamics using mechanisms such as power (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2012; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Van Essen et al., 2012), control (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Fama & Jensen, 1983), credibility (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012), manipulation (Austin et al., 2007), mimicry (Van Ees et al., 2009), respect (Wright et al., 2001), transparency (Augustine, 2012) and trust (Cucari, 2019). Regarding board leadership, chief among the relational corporate governance mechanisms is the mechanism of power (Morais et al., 2018), with trust being an underexplored concept (Bezemer et al., 2018). However, consistent with Bezemer et al. (2018), who argue that governance actors are more likely to respond positively to non-coercive measures, the author states that they do not regard power as a useful mechanism for gaining access to the boardroom. This is because of its coercive characteristics, whereby the resultant empirical data would not satisfy the four requisite data quality criteria – especially those relating to the external and internal validity (Yin, 2009) or the credibility and transferability (Bryman, 2012) of data. Therefore, of the two, trust remains the only viable mechanism for obtaining credible data.

Literature review

Scholars have long called for the collection of data on internal processes of board governance (Daily et al., 2003). Given that little is known about the phenomenon of gaining access to such data (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007), explorative and inductive research is required, which invariably uses qualitative methods (Bansal, 2013; McNulty et al., 2013). However, owing to the predominantly quantitative nature of corporate governance research, long underpinned by the regnant agency theory (Kim et al., 2006), most of the corporate governance literature is informed by realist, ontological positioning with a positivist, philosophical underpinning (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consequently, the veracity of qualitative data is evaluated against the rigour of quantitative methods (Yin, 2009).

Yin (2009) describes four realist tests, which are construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. External validity applies at the research design phase. Construct validity and reliability apply at the data collection stage. Internal validity applies at the data analysis phase. Welch et al. (2011) argue that ‘many of the procedures that Yin (2009) advocates ... are adaptations of experimental techniques’ (p. 746). This focus on data validity might explain why scholars characterise Yin’s (2009) techniques as rigorous. Creswell (2013) discusses various approaches to validation to establish research credibility based on trustworthiness as the key criterion. Creswell (2013) argues that scholars overemphasise validation in qualitative research. Informed by Guba and Lincoln (2005), Creswell (2013) advances the concept of credibility instead of internal validity to demonstrate how believable or trustworthy qualitative data can be.

Despite consistent calls for scholars to develop strategies to gain access to the boardroom to collect credible data for the

purpose of uncovering corporate governance process mechanisms, scholars have little guidance on how to go about this. Scholars like Huse (2005) and Nicholson et al. (2017) offer some suggestions but only in a cursory manner as part of their studies on accountability in the boardroom (Huse, 2005; Nicholson et al., 2017). For this reason, I followed the exemplar and much-cited methodological article on board access by Leblanc and Schwartz (2007) to suggest specific research strategies to be applied to the phenomenon of interest.

The interest in trust as a mechanism for acquiring board access was piqued when the author struggled to gain access to boardrooms after conducting a literature review as part of a study on the microfoundations of board leadership, focusing specifically on the interplay between trust and distrust in the boardroom (Mthombeni & Chizema, 2022). Owing to the hard-to-observe characteristics of mechanisms like trust and distrust, our research focused on relational mechanisms that can only be explored and explained through qualitative research, as guided by earlier corporate governance scholars (Zattoni et al., 2013).

In the literature review on trust and distrust, aimed at revealing how these phenomena intersect in corporate governance, the author discovered that the literature on trust and distrust is replete with valuable insights that could be incorporated into strategies to gain access to difficult-to-reach organisational elites. Trust has variously been defined as a person’s belief that another party to a transaction or relationship will make sincere efforts to uphold commitments and not take advantage of them, given the opportunity (Rousseau et al., 1998). An early insight gleaned from this definition was that although trust has obvious benefits, it also has limitations because it has a dark side (Gargiulo & Ertug, 2006). This means that trust can lead to manipulation and other negative actions by the trustor or trustee (Skinner et al., 2013), resulting in data that are neither credible nor trustworthy (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, while trust could get a researcher into the boardroom and thus afford them access to board leaders – a necessary condition of data collection – it would not assure the researcher of access to credible data on board leadership processes (Mthombeni & Chizema, 2022).

Aware that trust is not the only means of acquiring credible data (Skinner et al., 2013), the author turned to the distrust literature for assistance. The author learnt that some scholars view trust and distrust as separate constructs (Dimoka, 2010; Lewicki et al., 1998), in contrast to the dominant view that they are at opposite ends of the same continuum. Lewicki et al. (1998, p. 439) define distrust ‘in terms of negative expectations regarding another’s conduct ... [and trust] ... in terms of positive expectations regarding another’s conduct’. Building on these definitions, the author concluded that even with the advantage of developing relation-based trust with interviewees, the author could naturally expect them to exercise caution in their engagements with me to protect

themselves from any perceived harm that might arise from any of their voluntary disclosures.

To address this caution, the author applied a framework that integrates trust and distrust, as conceptualised by Lewicki et al. (1998), to interrogate the interplay between trust and distrust (see Figure 1). According to this framework, trust and distrust operate either to reduce or to increase complexity and uncertainty. Building on the argument that trust and distrust are different constructs, the author argued that combining considerations of trust and distrust mechanisms could invoke an effective control mechanism where directors control decisions and actions of managers in a prosocial manner – particularly because control mechanisms need a minimum level of mutual trust between the directors (controller) and manager (controlled) (Das & Teng, 1998; Grundei, 2008).

The interplay between trust and distrust between boards of directors and management (see the third quadrant in Figure 1) where they operate simultaneously could therefore be applied to the interviewer–interviewee context, such that it may be possible to create a safe space to acquire credible data on board processes. This led the author to conclude that while trust may get me physically into the boardroom to engage with directors, distrust is assured to get me out of the boardroom with the credible data needed to uncover internal board leadership processes.

Research methodology

Research context

This article forms part of a research project that focuses on the microfoundation mechanisms of corporate governance, such as accountability (Goodman et al., 2021) and trust

and distrust (Mthombeni & Chizema, 2022). The research project follows a qualitative research approach informed by a critical realist, epistemological perspective with the objective of reframing behavioural processes within the corporate governance field. To achieve this objective, scholars need to gain access to corporate governance actors.

The corporate governance literature reveals many scholars bemoaning their difficulty in gaining access to corporate governance actors (McNulty et al., 2013; Shah & Corley, 2006). Those researchers interested in the microfoundations of corporate governance should therefore proactively take steps to develop strategies to address the access challenges. The data access approach used in the current study was informed by guidelines gleaned from the literature and spanned a 2-year period. During this time, over 200 directors operating in the financial services sector in six different countries were invited to participate in the research. However, the author gained access to, and collected data from, only 47 directors across eight companies in five different countries in Europe and Southern Africa.

Research approach

For the current article, and following Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the author adopted the participant observation approach, which was appropriate given that it is one of the traditional approaches to data collection when exploring underexplored phenomena (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). The author used this approach alongside others, as espoused by Yin (2009) who argues that sources of data include ‘documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts’ (p. 99). The additional approaches were designed to support the participant observation used in this study.

There were instances when the author was professionally acquainted with some of the governance actors in the target organisations. The author therefore had to be reflexive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which has been described as a ‘researcher’s conscious and deliberate effort to be attuned to one’s own reactions to respondents and to the way in which the research account is constructed’ (Berger, 2015, p. 221). Yin (2009) encourages researchers to look for unique opportunities to collect data. One advantage of having a preexisting relationship with some of the key participants was that it afforded the author heightened research access.

The opportunity to access board members, who have experienced distress, to better understand board processes has eluded many researchers (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2012; McNulty et al., 2013). Therefore, gaining access to 47 directors of organisations (who had experienced distress) for the purpose of explicating the internal mechanisms of corporate governance research was a rare privilege. Another key benefit of prior professional association with some study participants was the potential to

High trust Characterised by Hope Faith Confidence Assurance Initiative	High-value congruence Interdependence promoted Opportunities pursued New initiatives	Trust but verify Relationships highly segmented and bounded Opportunities pursued and down-side risks and/or vulnerabilities continually monitored
	Casual acquaintances Limited interdependence Bounded, arms-length transactions Professional courtesy	Undesirable eventualities expected and feared Harmful motives assumed Interdependence managed Preemption; best offence is a good defence Paranoia
Low trust Characterised by No hope No faith No confidence Passivity Hesitance	Low distrust Characterised by No fear Absence of skepticism Absence of cynicism Low monitoring No vigilance	High distrust Characterised by Fear Scepticism Cynicism Wariness and watchfulness Vigilance

Source: Lewicki, R.J., McAllister, D.J., & Bies, R.J. (1998). Trust and distrust: New relationship and realities. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 438–458. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.1998.926620>

FIGURE 1: Integrating trust and distrust: Alternative social realities.

'perceive reality from the view point of someone "inside" ... [which] ... is invaluable in producing an "accurate" portrayal of a case study phenomenon' (Yin, 2009, p. 112) that remains underresearched.

As discussed later in this article, in instances where the author had no prior relationship with an interviewee, the author used particular strategies that had been developed incrementally in the field to develop a relationship with the research participant prior to the formal interview – without shifting from being an outsider to being an insider (Berger, 2015). The author borrowed the strategy of using multiple data sources to aid triangulation (Bryman, 2012; Danermark et al., 2001; Eisenhardt, 1991; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Stake, 1995; Verschuren, 2003), which in turn facilitated the study's validation criteria (Yin, 2009) – also known as credibility (Creswell, 2013). The author used this strategy to acquire prior knowledge of the targets before approaching them to participate in the study.

Naturally, there are risks associated with being a participant observer. The author addressed these risks substantively and procedurally. Substantively, the author reviewed the study's entire research design (Welch et al., 2010) to mitigate any potential biases that may have arisen due to my familiarity with participants (Yin, 2009). Some of the biases that the author controlled for included holistic fallacy, elite bias, finding non-existent patterns and personal bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Procedurally, the author mitigated participant observer risks by following a rigorous approach, as espoused by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Yin (2009), which included journaling and memoing, as informed by a documented research protocol instrument (see Appendix 1). These journaling and memoing procedures involved deep reflection about the research process and formed the basis of the data from which the results were subsequently derived.

Findings and discussion

Board access strategies

Informed by a review of multidisciplinary processes in the literature on trust and distrust, the author incrementally developed nine board access strategies over the data collection period, the details of which are summarised in Box 1. These strategies assisted author in accessing credible empirical data on board processes, which contributed valuable insights into the role of trust and distrust in the boardroom, both in distressed and healthy organisational contexts (Banerjee et al., 2020; Mthombeni & Chizema, 2022).

Given the well-known difficulty of gaining access to board members to investigate board processes (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007), attempting to access multiple boards operating in multiple countries was going to be even more challenging. The author incrementally relied on multidisciplinary literature to develop nine strategies to overcome this difficulty. The first three strategies were used primarily for gaining *structural* access and were informed by the literature on social network theory (first strategy) and signalling theory (second and third strategies).

The next six strategies related to gaining *credible* access. These relied on trust development theory (fourth and fifth strategies), general research theory (sixth strategy), narrative and appreciative interview methods (seventh strategy) and emotional detachment theory (eighth strategy). Finally, the author relied on a detailed desktop analysis of each of the companies and the individuals who represented them to ensure triangulation and the signalling of due diligence, when necessary, during the interviews.

Gaining access to directors

The first strategy that the author developed involved leveraging author's social network of board members. Given the importance attached to the role of gatekeepers in providing access in field research (Reeves, 2010), the author used social network theory to inform my approach to engaging with directors with whom the author had strong ties (Le Breton-Miller et al., 2011). Social network analysis has generally been used to illuminate the strength and value of social capital (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). Informed by the enabling role of social networks within the corporate governance domain (Westphal & Milton, 2000), the author relied on the network of directors and professional services firms in each country to connect with directors in various firms.

The author developed a business network over the 15 years that the author spent as an executive at a large financial services company, with operations in more than 16 African countries and a few European and Asian countries. The network has been further enhanced through the author's role as a non-executive director in the financial services industry and through the academic connections the author has made over the past 10 years. This rich network linked the author to many leading directors (Kang, 2008), enabling the author to gain easy access to those with whom the author had strong ties.

The author built the second strategy on the basis of signalling theory, especially in relation to corporate governance (Ruigrok et al., 2006). This theory was useful when applied to

BOX 1: Strategies for accessing credible 'black box' board governance data.

Strategy:			
Gaining access to credible data	7. Conduct strategic interviews through historical narrative and appreciative approaches.	8. Regulate emotional response through emotional detachment coupled with professional empathy.	9. Triangulate data with public data (content analysis).
Building the bridge from structural to credible data	4. Develop trust through successive meetings.	5. Develop trust through narrative bartering (building of rapport).	6. Develop trust through procedural assurances (review of output by lawyers, sharing of transcripts).
Gaining access to directors	1. Leverage professional social networks.	2. Signal trustworthiness to weak social networks.	3. Signal further trustworthiness through geographical diversity.

directors with whom the author had both strong and weak ties because it enabled the author to signal trustworthy behaviour, which was especially helpful where the author had weak ties with the directors concerned (Granovetter, 1983). In the trust literature, signalling effects are crucial for building interpersonal trust in network structures, especially in organisational settings (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005).

Accordingly, the author signalled trustworthy behaviour, and thus personal credibility, by establishing a non-threatening context. In this regard, the author developed invitation and consent letters indicating that the study was concerned with investigating both healthy and distressed companies for the purpose of comparing the board dynamics of firms in either of these two states. Signalling theory has been found to be useful when individuals have 'different access to information' (Connelly et al., 2011, p. 39) as it enables them to decide how much information to reveal to each other. While signalling theory is principally used to reduce the information asymmetry between parties, in the current study the author used it to communicate respect for the interviewees because consent letters did not indicate or prejudge whether the recipient had been identified as working for a healthy or distressed firm. The author also used it to indicate that the author would not be bringing any preconceived ideas to conversations with interviewees.

The third strategy, to further signal trustworthy behaviour, the author communicated to potential participants that the author was interested in multiple companies in multiple countries. The author conveyed this in the invitation and consent letters, indicating that the study was focused on boards of firms geographically located in Southern Africa (South Africa and Zimbabwe) and in Europe (England, the Netherlands, Sweden and Poland). This suggested to the potential participants that the study would be valuable beyond their particular firm and country (Banerjee et al., 2020) and that the research findings would be anonymised and theoretically generalised to companies in multiple countries and in multiple contexts, thereby mitigating their fears about possible harm to their firms' reputations.

Building the bridge from structural to credible access

The author decided on a fourth strategy, which was to arrange multiple meetings with each interviewee, with each meeting having a specific purpose. The author met most of the interviewees at least twice. The first meeting was to establish rapport, and the second and third meetings (if required) were to conduct the formal case interviews. The objective of this strategy was to swiftly gain participants' trust (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). The strategy was premised on the view that 'frequent interaction[s] are more likely to develop a strong relationship and rapport among [individuals] ... resulting in greater affective trust' (Webber, 2008, p. 753). The author observed that, in a few cases, when the author met with the directors for the first time, the engagement was more restrained. Three interviews – in the

Netherlands, Poland and Zimbabwe – stand out as having been particularly difficult. In all three cases, the individuals were the chief financial officer (CFO) of their respective organisations.

In ascending order of difficulty, the Netherlands CFO needed convincing that the author was worthy of their intelligence, the Poland CFO needed the assurance that their anonymity would be maintained, and the Zimbabwe CFO feared that their personal safety was under threat and hence they did not want the interview to be digitally recorded. In the case of the Netherlands CFO, the author worked systematically throughout the interview to convince them that the author was indeed sufficiently qualified to interview him. In the case of the Poland CFO, the author assured them that the author would share the recordings and the anonymised transcripts with them for their review. In the case of the Zimbabwe CFO, the author acquiesced and took copious notes without any digital assistance and transcribed our discussion from memory within an hour of the interview taking place. In other words, the author had to overcome each obstacle to the data collection process to gain sufficient credibility to proceed.

The author implemented a fifth strategy early on, which the author called 'narrative bartering'. Where the author had more than one meeting with a participant, the author used the first meeting to share their personal, historical experience of boards of distressed organisations, thereby demonstrating that the author understood the subject matter (Easton, 2010). The author provided a brief but factual account so as not to undermine the quality of the empirical data that still needed to be collected. Moreover, the author did not discuss the behavioural mechanisms that underpinned the author's historical experience; rather, the author stuck to a factual account of the organisations concerned, based on publicly available information.

Generally, interviewees responded favourably to the news that the author had served on the boards of two companies that had experienced financial distress. The objective of this (fifth) strategy was to demonstrate the author's credentials (Danermark et al., 2001) and to positively influence participants' perceptions about the author's trustworthiness, which is an antecedent to interpersonal trust (Colquitt et al., 2012). This had the desired effect because the author was invited to a second or third interview by 44 of the 200 directors whom the author had initially targeted. The author also interviewed another three directors at our first meeting, albeit under some constraints (as discussed above).

For a sixth strategy, the author assured interviewees (prior to the interviews starting) that the output of the study would be reviewed by a lawyer to establish whether the data had been properly anonymised and to ensure that no harm would come to any interviewee because of the study. The objective of this strategy was to reassure participants that the author was concerned about their well-being (Yin, 2009).

Interviewees were given the details of the lawyer whom the author had retained to review my data. This gesture was welcomed by most participants. In addition, they were given access to their interview transcripts prior to coding taking place as well as the opportunity to withdraw, if they so wished (Creswell, 2013).

Gaining access to credible data

Having obtained structural access to the directors and having established personal *bona fides* through bridging strategies, the author proceeded to implement strategies to acquire credible data. A seventh strategy related to having a robust interview technique (see Appendix 1). To this end, the author advised interviewees during the initial meetings that the author planned to explore their historical experience as directors, which enabled the author to develop a rapport with them and share more intimate information about trust and distrust.

This proved to be an effective strategy for building trust with the interviewees because in some cases, two of which are reported in this article, the interviewees exhibited affective signs during the interviews. To deal with affective responses, the author relied on guidelines from the qualitative research domain to ensure that the author neither 'shared the experiences of study participants [nor moved] from the position of being an outsider to the position of being an insider in the course of the study' (Berger, 2015, p. 219).

The author focused heavily on asking good questions during the interviews. Following the traditions of grounded theory (Oliver, 2012) and supported by a pragmatic approach to critical, realist data collection (Danermark et al., 2001), the author decided to collect empirical grounded data. Yin (2009, p. 69) suggests that the data collection process should begin with a researcher 'asking good questions ... [*having*] a firm grasp of the issues being studied ... [*being*] unbiased by preconceived notions'. As such, the author decided to ask the types of question that would demonstrate grasp of issues facing an individual in the upper echelons of the target organisation. To do this, the author spent some time with 'inside informants' who gave credible insights into the company. This was designed to show that the author's interest in the company extended beyond simply my research responsibility, which the interviewees appreciated.

Building on this appreciative approach to data collection, the author asked questions that were intended to extract information about various levels of trust and distrust, without using the words 'trust' and 'distrust'. This approach was consistent with approaches used by scholars who have developed trust measurement instruments in the past and who have guided respondents towards a natural discussion on trust (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2012; McAllister, 1995). The approach also helped to create a safe conversational space, which had a positive effect on the least-trusting directors, with the Netherlands, Poland and Zimbabwe each having one such director.

Appreciative questioning is only one side of the coin; the other side is listening, which broadly consists of receiving, perceiving, comprehending and pragmatically understanding (Rost, 2013). To extract credible data, the author focused on sharpening perception and pragmatic understanding. With specific reference to perception, the author used the literature review process to improve my ability to maximise recognition and minimise categorisation (Rost, 2013). In other words, the author needed to know the literature sufficiently well to be efficient and effective in the data collection process. Regarding pragmatic understanding, the author used experience as a director to be perceptive and to competently listen, with pragmatic understanding exemplified through 'an interactive and co-constructive process in which the outcomes of any communication include renewed perceptions of self, other and the relationship' (Rost, 2013, p. 94).

Pragmatic understanding underpins a form of listening that the author calls appreciative listening, which required listening in a manner that 'communicates understanding of the speaker's expressions at a deeper level than they were expressed' (Truax & Carkhuff, 2007). This enabled the author to be accepted as a worthy conversationalist who was interested not only in extracting data but also in understanding relevant issues from the perspective of the interviewee. This sent a message that the author appreciated and valued their worldview, which led them to feel comfortable and reveal more than they initially indicated they would be prepared to share. Being an appreciative listener means that, as suggested by Yin (2009, p. 69), the data collection process is enhanced through the researcher being 'a good listener – adaptive and flexible'.

Appreciative questions and listening skills had to be embedded in the research protocol. For this, the author similarly turned to Yin (2009, p. 79) who recommends developing a research protocol that 'contains the procedures and general rules to be followed in using the protocol'. The case study protocol should have 'an overview of the case study project ... [*details of*] field procedures ... case study questions ... [*and*] a guide for the case study report' (Yin, 2009, p. 81). Consistent with the research protocol approach, the data collection meetings were held several weeks after my initial contact sessions with all but 3 of the 60 interviewees.

Although the author had a research instrument with tightly worded questions grounded in literature (Eisenhardt, 1989) to guide the unstructured interview process, the author did not take the research instrument into the data collection meetings. The author memorised the questions and followed Yin (2009, p. 106) who suggested that interviews in the case study method should be approached as 'guided conversations rather than structured queries'. Moreover, the approach of entering a guided conversation with a blank notebook rather than a list of predetermined questions created the impression that the interview was an authentic and intimate experience, as opposed to an instrumental and mechanistic exercise. Some of the interviewees commented that this was the first time they

had participated in an academic study, which they said felt more like a natural conversation.

The author decided to follow a different interviewing path to that presented by Yin (2009) who distinguishes between three types of interview: in-depth, focused and structured. In-depth interviews may be lengthy and may include personal narratives or life histories (Shah & Corley, 2006). Focused interviews are designed to confirm and clarify data already obtained through other sources, such as documents, archival records or even in-depth interviews. Structured interviews are analogous to surveys (Yin, 2009). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the goal of interviewing is to obtain a:

[S]olid, deep understanding of what is being studied, rather than breadth. Depth is achieved by going after context, dealing with the complexity of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting themes, and paying attention to specifics of meanings, situations, and history. (p. 35)

Rubin and Rubin (2005) also provide a typology of interviews: narrowly focused, in-between and broadly focused. They distinguish between focusing on meanings and frameworks and focusing on events and processes. Yin's (2009) and Rubin and Rubin's (2005) views are consistent with the critical realism approach to acquiring empirical data, which is the starting point for abstraction (Ackroyd, 2010).

The author used Rubin and Rubin's (2005) typology to structure the interview guide, and also focused broadly on events and processes. However, because the purpose of this study was to explore the structural dimensions of constructs instead of confirming or replicating their operation in different contexts (Easton, 2010), the author deployed a broad approach to conducting the guided conversation, within in-depth interviews. The author did this to encourage interviewees to be at ease. In this regard, the author followed Yin's (2009) advice and used a protocol as a guide, instead of a survey tool, to drive the conversation.

In addition, the author was not constrained by the characterisation of the three types of interviews because the author did not see them as mutually exclusive. The author used the techniques from all three approaches in each interview. Firstly, the interviews were structured such that the author could ask similar questions in each interview, albeit in a different order. Secondly, the interviews were focused because the author asked questions that 'guided' interviewees in illuminating trust and distrust issues. The questions were based on my prior understanding, gained mainly from public information and sometimes from internal archival data. Lastly, the interviews exhibited elements of in-depth questioning as they embedded a historical narrative approach (Creswell, 2013; Shah & Corley, 2006).

The eighth strategy related to emotion regulation during the interviews. When interviewees recalled their emotions or expressed pain, the author paused the interview and allowed a period of silence so that they could regain their composure. By

refusing to be drawn into an emotional exchange with interviewees, the author assured objectivity as a researcher. The affectively inclined interviewees indicated that they appreciated the distanced approach during their brief episodes of emotional recall, because this demonstrated 'familiarity or experiences with what was being studied' (Berger, 2015, p. 219).

The notion that investigating board processes within distressed organisations is emotional work is supported by the literature (Hanna, 2018). Not surprisingly, emotional responses could not be avoided, especially when interviewees shared authentic, intimate and painful memories of their distressed organisations. In such situations, the author had to conceal their own empathy (Hanna, 2018), triggered by the author's past experiences in the corporate governance domain, in order to maintain the integrity of the study.

The ninth strategy related to triangulation. The author believe that using elite access is grounded on what the author calls a foundation for psychological bartering, as informed by detailed, prior desktop research. The author carried out desktop research on each of the target companies that the author wanted to access, prior to requesting access to such companies. This research was aligned to a decision to investigate the phenomenon by applying the multiple case study methods, using cases from multiple countries and regions. Given that the philosophical approach was one of critical realism, the author opted for the case study method because it has multiple sources of data and also benefits from prior research questions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). Sources of data typically include 'documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts' (Yin, 2009, p. 99). For the current study, the author used documentation, archival records and interviews as data sources. The use of multiple data sources aided triangulation (Bryman, 2012; Danermark et al., 2001; Verschuren, 2003), which in turn satisfied the study's validation criteria (Yin, 2009), also known as credibility (Creswell, 2013).

Yin (2009, p. 103) identifies several types of documents, including 'agenda(s), announcements and minutes of meetings and other written reports, news clippings and other articles appearing in the mass media in the community'. Yin (2009, p. 105) indicates that archival records include 'operational records such as budgets and personnel records'. In one exemplar case, the author had unrestricted access to relevant archival records and documents within the target company because the author was a non-executive director of that company. While some of these archival data were private, most were publicly available. In most cases, however, the author relied mainly on publicly available data on such companies. This desktop research provided the necessary foundation to ask the types of questions that demonstrated that the author was looking for insights that exceeded the obvious, publicly available information.

While the interview and archival data were to be expected in the corporate governance domain, affective responses

were an unexpected source of data, which went beyond the scope of this study. However, the author included them for completeness in order to follow the recommendations of case study best practice (Yin, 2009). This led to the inclusion of the affective responses as one of the emerging strategies to acquire credible data on board processes. That said, Yin (2009) suggests that research should follow three principles: use multiple sources of evidence to corroborate data; create a case study database to enable other researchers to replicate the research, using data from the case study in question; and maintain a chain of evidence. Yin (2009) asserts that observing these principles will improve the construct validity of collected data.

The aforementioned strategies were consistent with the procedures and chain of evidence proposed by Yin (2009). On the basis of these combined nine strategies, the author obtained credible data from several companies in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the Netherlands, Sweden and Poland. However, attempts to gain board access in England failed as a result of the relatively weak networks the author had in that country (Westphal & Milton, 2000).

Conclusion

Contribution to methodology

Over and above the nine discreet strategies presented in this article, the author abductively derived a conceptual framework presented in Figure 2 using thematic coding commonly used in qualitative research. This proposed framework consists of process and empathy levers which, when applied, could lead to surface-, moderate- or deep-level access to directors of large companies. This framework is a result of an abductive approach embedded in the critical realism approach (Blom & Moren, 2011), which informs the larger research project within which this article is embedded, as reflected in the article by Mthombeni and Chizema (2022).

The abductive approach that the author followed was also influenced by Blom and Moren's (2011) adaptation of Bhaskar's (1978) critical realist analysis framework, which begins with descriptions of observations of data at an aggregate level – which in this case were data about board access strategies. The next step is to divide and sort the data,

by way of analysis. In this case, it involved dividing and sorting the observations about strategies that yielded positive and negative results following attempts to gain board access. The resultant framework in Figure 2 is therefore the result of a generative process (Blom & Moren, 2011).

Process levers

The board access levers framework has three parts or pillars. The first pillar is called the process lever because it refers to knowledge of surface-level board processes – the structure and role of the board, the structure and role of board-derived committees, the role of the chairperson, the role of the CEO and the role of management. This knowledge can be acquired through experience, research or both. At a minimum, researchers need to have surface-level understanding of board processes to be effective in activating the access lever.

At the time of data collection, despite extensive experience as a director with more than 25 years of accumulated experience (including some overlaps between executive and non-executive roles), the author found it helpful to be grounded in the literature on structural board processes. This is because it gave confidence knowing that the author was relying not only on personal, comparatively narrow experience but also on that of scholars who have formally studied board processes.

The review of the literature revealed a gap in corporate governance scholars' understanding of board processes owing to their lack of access to boards of directors. To understand the deep-level process, however, the author relied entirely on multidisciplinary literature pertaining to interpersonal and team processes, particularly in relation to top management teams and specifically boards of directors. Understanding of the literature on internal personal processes (relational mechanisms like power and control, trust and rapport, and deception) across disciplines enabled the use of literature to find deep-level data – such as when the author used the empathy ladder, as described below, to move down the access levels until the author was able to operate largely at a deep level in the interviews.

Empathy levers

The second pillar of the board access levers framework deals with different empathy levers. The desired empathy lever is the relational empathy, which is built through powerful or trusted informants (where relational networks have powerful informants or trusted informants, whereas industry bodies have ineffective or effective informants). This is followed by experience-based empathy built from direct experience (where professional networks are developed through prior board experience, consulting experience to boards of directors or personal experience acquired through governance research). While useful, experience-based empathy is less effective than relational empathy. Cognitive empathy, in turn, is built through indirect knowledge. It is the absolute minimum form of

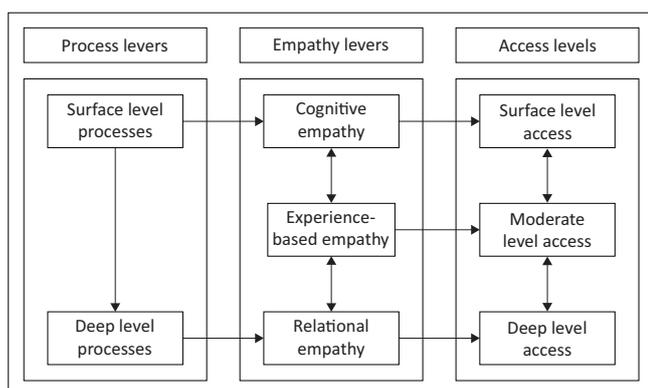


FIGURE 2: Board access levers framework.

empathy required to establish credibility with top management teams. The conceptual framework suggests that on its own, cognitive empathy can be expected to deliver only surface-level access. However, without it, the other two deeper-level empathy levers are unlikely to be effective. However, when combined with the other empathy levers, the cognitive empathy lever can be effective in extracting credible data.

Access levers

The third pillar of the board access levers framework is concerned with the different levels and types of access that corporate governance scholars can expect to experience. Surface-level access – obtained through structural access – is better than no access. However, it may not be very helpful when it does not yield credible data. This was the case in almost all initial meetings with the directors, before they got comfortable with me and the research process. Indeed, such a level of comfort was only achieved at subsequent meetings. Moderate-level access is likely to yield some interesting, but not particularly insightful, data on board processes, thus leading to mid-range theorising. However, deep-level access is likely to yield some empirically based data revealing unexpected insights, which are useful both to the researcher and the interviewees.

Therefore, at a minimum, scholars should set out to gain surface-level access, where interviewees engage in a safe and non-emotive exchange. It would be preferable, though, for scholars, making appropriate use of earlier levers, to secure moderate-level access, where interviewees respond to questions in a reflective and emotional manner, thereby stimulating some of the processes being investigated. However, the optimal approach would be for scholars to secure deep-level access, where interviewees provide advance access to the interviewer to company records or meeting transcripts, thus enabling the triangulation of interviewee data during live interview sessions.

Contribution to the literature

In this study, the author advance the underresearched topic of access to boards, the notable exception being the seminal article by Leblanc and Schwartz (2007). However, the author went beyond that article by proposing strategies and a conceptual framework with three objectives: (1) to gain access to boards of directors, (2) to develop a bridge to develop trust and rapport with such directors and (3) to acquire credible data on board process. These strategies can be used in part or in full to assist scholars, of all ages and experience levels, to develop better theories to explain corporate governance processes.

Alternatively, these strategies can be viewed as part of a conceptual board access levers framework derived both from empirical experience and engagement with the literature. Crucially, the framework relies on a combination of process and empathy mechanisms. It suggests that the more levers that researchers use, the greater is the likelihood of their

achieving moderate- to deep-level access, resulting in moderate to strong theoretical contributions using qualitative research methods (Zattoni et al., 2013). Conversely, utilising only a limited number of levers would at best result in surface-level access, which could lead to superficial research results that fail to meaningfully advance understanding of board leadership processes.

By deploying these nine strategies through the board access levers framework, the author hope to contribute to corporate governance scholarship in a way that goes beyond proxy variables (Daily et al., 2003), thereby creating a better understanding of how boards actually work (Bezemer et al., 2018) and, in particular, how effective boards are led (Banerjee et al., 2020). It could also encourage scholars to pursue research that is proximally closer to mechanisms that can enhance the performance of boards of directors, thereby helping to reduce the risk of organisational failure and to sustain strong organisational performance well into the future.

Limitations and areas of future research

As indicated earlier, this is a methodological article that supports Leblanc and Schwartz (2007) who provide some insights into how researchers can gain access to hard-to-access corporate governance actors. While the strategies presented in this article have been used in earlier studies, such as by Goodman et al. (2020) and Mthombeni and Chizema (2022), they are yet to be tested broadly by scholars with whom the author is not associated. This is a limitation that needs to be resolved in time.

Looking ahead, this article could encourage other scholars to share their own experiences, such that knowledge into internal mechanisms pertaining to corporate governance could ultimately become ubiquitous.

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Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

M.M. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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Appendix 1

TABLE 1-A1: Research protocol instrument.

Section	Title	Cross-references
A. Case introduction and protocol		
1.	Primary Research Questions and Secondary Research Questions (derived from literature on trust, distrust and corporate governance fields)	Introduction and Literature Review
2.	Theoretical concepts and frameworks (optimal trust; moderated trust; agency theory; stewardship theory and stakeholder theory)	Literature Review
3.	Research paradigm and design (explain relevance of critical realism throughout the document)	Research Methods
B. Guiding research questions†		
1.	Ask respondents to describe the nature of the relationships among members of the board, between the board chairman and the CEO, and between the board and management. Explain how this influences the type and nature of the work of the board. Indicate whether the board is effective and provide reasons for your opinion. <i>Note:</i> In the interview, use <i>agency theory</i> -based examples to probe the explanations and justifications provided by the respondent.	Literature Review
2.	Ask respondents to describe the nature of the relationships among members of the board, between the board chairman and the CEO, and between the board and management. If necessary, explain how this may be salient to the type and nature of the work of the board. <i>Note:</i> In the interview, for this question, use <i>stewardship theory</i> -based examples to probe the explanations and justifications provided by the respondent.	Literature Review
3.	Ask respondents to describe how different levels of trust and distrust between the board and the CEO influence the selection and performance of appropriate board tasks, like control, monitoring and advice. <i>Note:</i> In the interview, for this question, use <i>stakeholder theory</i> -based examples to probe the explanations and justifications provided by the respondent.	Literature Review
4a.	Ask respondents to describe specifically how high trust or high distrust influences the selection and performance of board tasks. <i>Note:</i> In the interview, for this question, use examples of <i>optimal trust</i> to nudge the conversation towards deeper reflections, but do not use academic terms such as mechanisms and constructs. IMPORTANT NOTE: Only use after the issue of trust has been raised by the respondent.	Literature Review
4b.	Ask respondents to indicate how important certainty of outcomes and information or facts are to them (the interviewee), their chairman (if not interviewing the chairman), their CEO (if not interviewing the CEO) and their board as whole. Explain how the answers above influence the tasks that the chairman, CEO and the board, respectively, tend to focus on. <i>Note:</i> In the interview, for this question, use examples of the concept of <i>need for certainty</i> to nudge the conversation towards deeper reflections, but do not use academic terms such as mechanisms and constructs.	Literature Review
C. Data collection and analysis procedure		
1.	Names of case sites and case informants (in multiple companies and companies – all within the financial services industry)	Findings
2.	Expected preparation (review of archival documents as well as development and deployment of access strategies)	Findings
3.	Data collection <i>approach</i> (traditions of grounded theory used to collect empirical data for each case site)	Methodology
4.	Data collection <i>procedure</i> – commence with biographical questions prior to launching into guiding research questions indicated in Part B of this protocol	Methodology and Findings
5.	Data analysis <i>approach</i> following interpretivist approaches of critical realism, especially the iterative <i>abductive</i> method	Discussion
6.	Data analysis <i>procedure</i> – computer-assisted coding (Atlas.ti) using transcribed interview data and archival data assisted by <i>memoing</i>	Discussion
D. Rival explanations		
1.	Use critical realist analysis methods (especially abduction) to investigate rival explanations supported by pattern matching technique.	Discussion
2.	Use concepts with most effective powers and liabilities from a critical realist perspective to develop corporate governance theory that explicitly and simultaneously engages trust and distrust.	Literature Review and Discussions
E. Findings and discussions		
1.	Background of company (including country, size and type of financial services company)	Findings and Discussion
2.	Nature of organisational distress (financial or non-financial)	Findings
3.	Board structure (dual or unitary)	Findings
4.	Role of the board (passive, active, engaged)	Findings and Discussions
5.	Description of board relationships	Findings
6.	Themes-based analysis (informed by within- and cross-case categories underpinned by codes grounded in empirical observations by research participants)	Findings and Discussion
7.	Concept-based analysis and presentation of results (based on critical realist analysis methods, especially <i>abduction</i>)	Discussion
8.	Overall structure of results and findings (within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, findings, propositions, theory development, contributions, limitations and areas of future studies). Consider review of results and findings.	Findings and Discussion

Note: Developed by author but protocol structure informed by Yin (2009); content based on multiple sources of literature.

†, Questions 1 and 2 are the same on purpose; differences are in the follow-up nudging questions. Question 3 only used when respondents voluntarily used the term 'trust', and only after such had happened.