Re-framing the status of narrative in family business research: Towards an understanding of families in business

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Narrative research Families in business Phenomenological inquiry Entrepreneurship Family business strategy

ABSTRACT

This article will emphasize the status and relevance of narrative research in the study of families in business and family business strategy. It argues that narratives can provide a better understanding of the intricate connections between family and business and across family generations in business. Narratives generate knowledge by helping to shape a collective identity and as a form of intergenerational communication. By focusing on narratives as a phenomenological inquiry, we argue that interviews allow researchers to engage often in emotionally charged and intimate conversations with individuals that want to talk about experiences as members of a family business. This paper will discuss the usefulness of narrative approaches for family business strategy research, develop a catalogue of research questions for exploration, highlight challenges and offer solutions to deal with them when using narrative methods in family business research. This paper argues that while several challenges may be encountered, narratives allow researchers to delve into the intricate lives of members of a family in business.

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1. Background

Every family in business has a story to tell, a legend to live up to, a tragedy to lament. Such elements shape narratives that are shared by members of a family in business across generations, often with lasting effects. How relevant are these narratives to understand family business strategy? How does a researcher prepare for hearing intimate, and often emotionally charged, details of families in business’s lives? This article focuses on the status and relevance of narrative in developing understanding of families in business and family business.

There are several reasons why a closer look of narratives in family business research is warranted. First, family business is the most fundamental and universal form of business organization around the world (Howorth, Rose, Hamilton, & Westhead, 2010). Detailed compilations by the family business casebook series show that they come in all shapes and sizes, operate in all industries, can be young and old, and influence both the socioeconomic fabric of small villages and large cities as well as international trade (Astrachan, Poutziouris, & Soufan, 2004; Pieper, Keyt, & Astrachan, 2014). While family business has endured for centuries and shows little signs of decline (Hoy & Verser, 1994; The Economist, 2004; Wooldridge, 2015), we often overlook that most businesses are deeply connected with a family narrative (Fletcher, 2007; Steier, 2007), and that their strategic behaviour is influenced by family (Astrachan, 2010; Basco, 2014; Nordqvist & Melin, 2010). Second, the importance of narratives to the study of family businesses has not gone unnoticed. Narrative research allows understanding of the genesis, operation and continuity of family firms (Dawson & Hjorth, 2012; Dalpiaz, Tracey, & Phillips, 2014; Hamilton, 2006a; Parada & Viladás, 2010). Narratives help our conceptual and theoretical understanding by grasping the subtleties and complexities of underlying processes behind the creation and management of a family firm (Hamilton, 2006a, 2006b; Larty & Hamilton, 2011). Finally, there is a greater interest to place the family in business at the centre of family business research (Nordqvist & Melin, 2011; Pearson, Bergiel, & Barnett, 2014; Randerson, Bettinelli, Fayolle, & Anderson, 2015; Wright & Kellermanns, 2011). In that regard, a family in business broadly relates to members of a family that engage in the foundation, management and continuity of one or several family business ventures over time. Narratives place the family in business at the heart of the inquiry and reveal that they are inextricably intertwined with the strategies behind the businesses they create and manage (Hamilton, 2013). Narratives are also an important analytical tool to draw on to study strategy in organizations (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Fenton & Langley, 2011; Martens, Jennings, & Jennings, 2007;
Phillips, Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008; Vaara, Somemshin, & Boje, 2016) and therefore relevant for our understanding of families in business and family business.

While narratives may provide a conduit to generate further insight about family business strategy, Hamilton (2013) suggests that several challenges may arise. First, qualitative researchers are often challenged in the power of their methods to demonstrate rigor and must confront the view that qualitative research is perceived as producing less reliable accounts of the social world. Second, narratives based on oral histories are often criticized due to the reliance on faulty memory and the lack of accuracy of human accounts to truly describe what has happened in time. Third, narratives may challenge researchers to ask themselves – is this fact or fiction? Fourth, historical and cultural contexts matter when understanding the narratives that place the strategies of families in business at the heart of an inquiry. Finally, researchers may be challenged to review the connection of their personal research journey and life history with the research carried out.

Our article will emphasize that narratives can help researchers examine a family in business and its strategic behavior over time. To do so, the remainder of the paper will first discuss narrative as a form of knowledge and communication. Then we expand on narrative as a phenomenological inquiry. Finally, we discuss key items that pose opportunities and challenges for family business researchers.

2. Narratives—a form of knowledge and communication

Narratives are as old as family business and their impact in organisational and strategy research is widely acknowledged (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). In a broad sense, narratives are “a fundamental method of linking individual human actions and events with interrelated aspects to gain an understanding of outcomes . . . . It works by creating individual stories and histories and presenting them for direct observation. Narratives can include personal and social histories, myths, fairy tales, novels or everyday stories that are used to explain or justify our own, or others, actions and behaviours” (Smith & Anderson, 2004: 127). There is a very deep and strong connection between the life experienced by individual family members in business and narrative (Ricoeur, 1991). Individual family members in business may organize their experiences and record what they have lived in a narrative way, through stories (Bruner, 1987). For families in business, narratives may provide a framework to organize meanings, thoughts, motivations, memories and life experiences. In doing so, narratives give sense to life experiences, the world, to members of a family in business and to those working in a family business. Narratives, as analytical tools to understand family business strategy, can shed light as forms of knowledge and communication.

Narratives offer a form of knowledge by shaping identity in a family in business. In the family in business context, narratives provide a sense of where the family comes from; how they got to where they are now and why they do the things they do. Narrative approaches in strategy highlight that family business identities are constructed by, and connected to, engagement in everyday practice (Fenton & Langley, 2011). Furthermore, a family in business identity is constructed socially in relationship to others, through a process shaped by multiple discourses and stories. Narrative mediates and constitutes experiences in family businesses: the identities of family members in business (multiple and complex) are drawn upon, and are located within, a repertoire of narratives available to them historically, socially and culturally (Ricoeur, 1991). Some of these discourses and stories may revolve around family entrepreneurs, family and non-family heroes and villains and their actions, which feed stories, myths and legends and help explain why some strategies emerged in the business realm. Family business identities are “mediated, negotiated and articulated in narrative” (Hamilton, 2013: 5). Knowledge may also allow further understanding of competing and conflicting aspects that shape the identity of a family in business. Stories may bring to light ambiguous relationships of duty, love and conflict in the circle of attachment that is the family (Kondo, 1990) embedded in wider discourses and historical and cultural contexts. The narratives that are shared in the context of a family in business may reveal the struggles, sacrifices, triumphs that family members experienced in the process to set up and develop the family firm. For example, when facing family and business crisis, what work and what did not work, how issues were addressed, who was involved and why create memories (and stories) that are shared in the family in business. These narratives are often intended for family members to learn and help guide decisions thus influencing family business strategy. Moreover, in the family in business context, narratives may provide a conduit to support and communicate an entrepreneurial identity for members of a family as an organisation (Discua Cruz, Hamilton, & Jack, 2012). Family narratives may go beyond describing social relationships and reveal shared understandings, the social and moral values that belong to such relationships, revealing the identity of a family in business and shedding light into what can influence family business strategy.

As a form of communication, narratives serve a way to articulate and transmit an organization’s culture, or the way things are done by a family in business. This occurs as narratives may represent and express “what an organization is” (Brown & McMillan, 1991: 50) and have ‘deep historical resonance and durability’ (McNay, 2000: 92). Around the world and across time, we find family business narratives that reflect the stories, legends, myths and even fairy tales told and retold across generations (see Bamford, 2008; Cardone, 2009; Popp, 2015; Semler, 2001; Taplin, 2015). The different sources that feed such narratives may be communicated around the dinner table, the boardroom, or in any informal or formal context that families find relevant (Discua Cruz et al., 2012; Nordqvist, 2012). The informal and familiar sphere provides a context were narratives mainly intended for family members influence the strategies that will be engaged in the business sphere. Families in business may be more concerned to communicate, through narratives, underlying values and principles behind their strategic decisions compared to merely transferring financial wealth. In such narratives, often relying on historical accounts and stories where family and business events are deeply intertwined, family members make sense of diverse interconnected aspects which go beyond an individual life story and attempt to connect the past, present and future.

Narratives, both on written or verbal form, may communicate events in family businesses as interconnected, and make them understandable to wider audiences within the organization (Boje, 2001). Communication in the context of families in business can take many modes and forms (Sciascia, Clinton, Nason, James, & Rivera-Algarin, 2013). Narratives communicated and shared in the organisation may allow a shared collective sense of identity for different members, both family and non-family, which may become protected from external influence (Boyce, 1995). For example, the ambition of some families in business may be to remain small – in terms of ownership and management structures – and may use narratives to communicate that such strategy can give them a competitive advantage over others. In some family businesses strategy may remain unchanged in terms of management and ownership structures, in others strategies have to be devised to cope with increasing complexity and thus narratives can communicate stability and change (Vaara et al., 2016). Narratives collected and communicated in an organization can help to make sense of its unique culture and provide a platform to think about the future and strategize (Wortmann, 2008).
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