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Reflections on Family Business Research: Considering Domains and Theory

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> We are all just prisoners here, of our own device.
>
> —The *Eagles* (Don Felder, Don Henley, Glenn Frey)

Most scholars devoted to the study of organizations are familiar with the classic questions regarding the reasons for the existence, variation, and perpetuation of organizations. In family business research, our central questions align closely with those of the classic organization theory domain: Why do family businesses exist? How do family businesses change and survive? How and why do family businesses differ from other businesses and each other? As such, and in relation to these central questions, there are many theories that attempt to explain and predict the behaviors of family businesses and the people within them. And, just as there is no "the" theory of organizations, there is no "the" theory of family businesses. Rather, there are many relevant and useful theories and perspectives that have been developed and utilized to explore these important key questions. Furthermore, the number and variety of these theories and perspectives are growing as we dig deeper into the idiosyncrasies of family businesses.

Along with a general broadening of the scale and scope of the family business domain (Evert, Martin, McLeod, & Payne, 2016; Holt, Pearson, Payne, & Sharma, 2018), there appears to be increasing consideration given to the boundaries of the field and its direction of development. Much of the challenge here is because the family business literature, although historically tied to entrepreneurship due to its roots in small business, is not built on a singular discipline. It instead represents a large set of interrelated subfields that are bound together by the recognition that families, as owners and operators, can have a unique influence on a wide variety of business activities and outcomes (Sharma, Chrisman, & Gersick, 2012; Yu, Lumpkin, Sorenson, & Brigham, 2012). Indeed, what we know or think we know about family businesses is held in such a wide variety of perspectives, emanates from so many different backgrounds, and is disseminated through such a sundry of unique outlets, that it is often difficult for people to identify and understand the distinguishing nature of the field. This difficulty is particularly problematic if family business scholars fail to clearly articulate which constructs and phenomena are within its boundaries and develop unique theories that explain them. For, like any field of study, the challenge of gaining and maintaining legitimacy involves addressing and balancing breadth (i.e., crossing disciplinary boundaries) and depth (i.e., mastering a specific body of knowledge) of understanding.

It is on these broad considerations regarding the scale and scope of the domain that the current issue of *Family Business Review* (*FBR*) was founded. Generally, my musings regarding the direction and legitimacy of the family business field led me to consider the content and focus of this issue of *FBR*—the first under my full supervision as Editor—and the orthodox need to address the past to better establish a path forward. So, I invited scholars of five seminal *FBR* articles that have shaped the boundaries and content of the domain over the last decade—published more than 10 years ago, but since 2000—to reflect on the meaning and implications of their work. What has emerged is an interesting and informative set of articles, written by the original authors, that both consider the past and the future regarding their respective articles, topics, and the field of family business more generally. Additionally, the Associate Editors of *FBR* provide commentaries on the original articles to bring you quickly up to date regarding their content and impact since publication. The articles included in this issue, offered in chronological order of the original article, are the following:

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- Cabrera-Suárez, M. K., García-Almeida, D. J., & De Saá-Pérez. P. (2018). A dynamic network model of the successor's knowledge construction from the resource- and knowledge-based view of the family firm. *Family Business Review, 31*(2), 178-197. This article is reflecting on Cabrera-Suárez, De Saá-Pérez, and García-Almeida (2001).
- Rau, S. B., Astrachan, J. H., & Smyrnios, K. X. (2018). The F-PEC revisited: From the family business definition dilemma to foundation of theory. *Family Business Review, 31*(2), 200-213. This article is reflecting on Astrachan, Klein, and Smyrnios (2002).
- Zahra, S. (2018). Entrepreneurial risk taking in family firms: The wellspring of the regenerative capability. *Family Business Review, 31*(2), 216-226. This article is reflecting on Zahra (2005).
- Miller, D., & Le Breton-Miller, I. (2018). Looking back at and forward from: "Family governance and firm performance: Agency, stewardship and capabilities." *Family Business Review, 31*(2), 229-237. This article is reflecting on Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2006).
- Dyer, W. G. (2018). Are family firms really better? Reexamining "Examining the 'family effect' on firm performance." *Family Business Review, 31*(2), 240-248. This article is reflecting on Dyer (2006).

These articles also serve as the foundation for this editorial, which seeks to (1) introduce this issue of *FBR*, (2) stimulate discussions regarding our domain, and (3) highlight some ways to develop the field theoretically. For as the *Eagles*' quote (shown above) from the classic song *Hotel California* suggests, the limitations of the field are of our own making; we need only to think more broadly and deeply to take the next big step forward.

Of Domains and Theories

Family businesses are a platform through which a variety of theories and perspectives might be examined and, perhaps, challenged with regard to basic assumptions and boundary conditions (Holt et al., 2018). For instance, family business research has expanded and clarified agency and stewardship theories such that some basic assumptions and conditions of the theories are confronted (James, Jennings, & Jennings, 2017; Madison, Kellermanns, & Munyon, 2017). In such cases, family business research has not only examined unique relationships and phenomena but also demonstrated relevance and impact beyond the domain. These efforts, among many others, have undeniably helped enhance the field's legitimacy (Perez Rodrıguez & Basco, 2011). However, many scholars—particularly those taking an outside-in perspective—have difficulty identifying and understanding the distinctiveness of the field, arguing that our research does not predict and explain phenomena beyond that of other related domains (e.g., organization theory). In other words, despite work that enhances our understanding of business generally, and family businesses specifically, some scholars may still question if the field of family business is anything other than a unique—although quite prevalent—context of study.

While the "family business as a context" view of the field is diminishing and the field has overcome its liabilities of newness (Craig & Salvato, 2012), family business arguably still lacks what one might refer to as a comprehensive conceptual framework that clearly outlines and defines the boundaries of the field. Indeed, much like the development of the field of entrepreneurship (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), there has been an extensive amount of effort devoted to the basic definition (and measurement) of the family business and in contrasting family firms and nonfamily firms. It is uncertain, however, if this *lack* of a decisive definition of the family business has precluded the conceptual progress of the family business field or if the *search* for a definition has hindered the growth and demarcation of the field. In an ironic way, I would argue that neither has impeded development as such, but rather these efforts are necessary for all emerging fields of research; they are necessary growing pains, if you will, that result in a foundation on which to build. Indeed, I would argue such tensions and deliberations only serve to further perpetuate the field and expand its scope in a healthy way. Nevertheless, the new millennium (and particularly the last 5 years) has seen a steady progression away from binomial, comparative perspectives to a heightened awareness of family firm heterogeneity and the recognition that the family effect on business (and vice versa) can vary widely across organizations. Generally, it seems that the family business domain has found its own identity, emerging from a state of adolescence to one of maturity. As such, it is time for us to think broader and develop more encompassing research (as noted by the authors of articles in this issue);

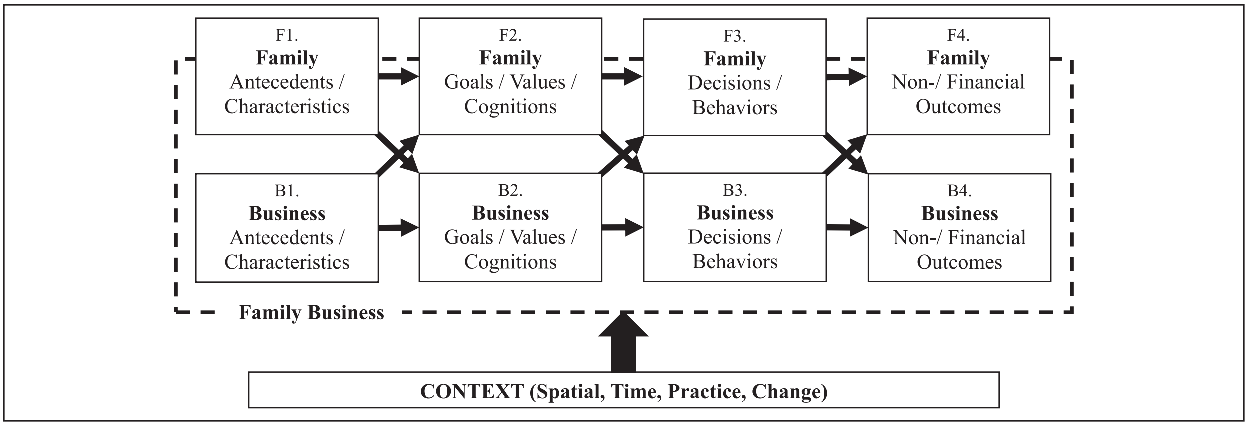

Figure 1. A framework for understanding linkages between family and business.

this begins with building a general framework through which we discuss opportunities for developing new, more robust theory.

A General Framework for Understanding Linkages Between Family and Business

The family business field of study generally explores the antecedents, processes, and consequences associated with the involvement of families in business enterprises. Based on this very basic domain statement, it becomes clear why many uncertainties persist regarding who and what falls under the purview of family business research; the field is fundamentally characterized as residing at the nexus of two interdependent, multifaceted, and changing entities (i.e., the family and the business) that are nested, one within the other. If one starts to break apart the various constructs and relationships that comprise the intersection of family and business (not to mention basic definitions and conceptualizations of both), the complexity of the field is even more plainly pronounced. Indeed, the field has been referred to as one of paradoxes (e.g., Sharma et al., 2012; Zahra & Sharma, 2004), which denotes a "wide variety of contradictory yet interwoven elements: perspectives, feelings, messages, demands, identities, interests, or practices" (Lewis, 2000, p. 761).

The complexity of the family business is visually (and relatively simplistically) demonstrated in the model shown in Figure 1, which serves as an overarching framework for the key points found in the remainder of this article. In briefly exploring this general framework, I hope to better describe the complexities and distinctions associated with the family business research, as well as the extensive number of possibilities for future research, particularly theoretically. Specifically, in the following paragraphs, I focus on two key points: (1) movement and flows through the model, which includes various points of intersection and demonstrates the inherent multilevel and complex nature of family businesses and (2) the importance of theory in developing and examining the "how" and "why" of these various relationships. Throughout this discussion, I also hope to generally clarify the domain, identify some key gaps in knowledge, and make a few suggestions for future research. I also refer the reader to the articles held within this issue, as they consider some of these same ideas, but grounded within their own specific topic areas.

Model Flows, Complexities, and Limitations

As shown in Figure 1, the model utilizes a simple two-level architecture to demonstrate the inherent division and intersection of family and business that defines the research domain. Across the top (Boxes F1-F4), the basic antecedents and consequences associated with the family component of the family business are shown. Likewise, across the bottom, the business antecedents and consequences are given (B1-B4). As each are independently recognized entities within a family business (i.e., the family is both a part of and separate from the business), both the family and the business have their own unique (1) characteristics and attributes; (2) goals, values, and cognitions; (3) decisions and behaviors; and (4) nonfinancial and financial outcomes. Furthermore, as shown below the dotted rectangle representing the family business, externalities are represented by the box labeled "context." Context here generally follows the dimensions suggested by Zahra and Wright (2011)—spatial, time, practice, and change—and can influence not only the relationships that are represented by arrows, such as through moderation, but also directly influence the constructs as well.

Most important to family business research—and effectively defining the domain—is the intersection of the family and business entities and how constructs represented within one (or more) of these boxes influences constructs represented in other boxes, but at a different level of analysis. However, important issues may also involve examining constructs residing at the same level, while accounting for other constructs residing at the other level. As such, the number of relationships that can be explored is extensive and complexity is high when levels and externalities are being considered. For instance, there is a significant amount of research that examines succession in family businesses (cf., Daspit, Holt, Chrisman, & Long, 2016), and this literature may be mapped onto the model in many ways depending on the focus of any specific study. A study of antecedents to a choice of external versus internal successor (e.g., Dehlen, Zellweger, Kammerlander, & Halter, 2014) would primarily involve constructs from Box F2 (Family Goals/Values/Cognitions), along with constructs from Box F3 (Family Decisions/Behaviors). Then again, a study that examined succession failures (e.g., Miller, Steier, and Le Breton-Miller, 2003) could involve both F3 (Family Decisions/Behaviors), B3 (Business Decisions/Behaviors), and their influence on B4 (Business Outcomes). As such, it is apparent that the study choices regarding any stream of family business research, including succession, are very broad and many questions remain unanswered (Le Breton-Miller, Miller, & Steier, 2004). For instance, researchers have yet to fully explore how competing values or logics between family (F2) and the business (B2) influence decisions and outcomes for both the family (F3, F4) and the business (B3, B4). As noted by Mitchell, Agle, Chrisman, and Spence (2011), "hybrid organizational forms [i.e., family businesses] are likely to experience greater stakeholder conflicts, greater ethical conflicts, and greater cognitive complexity than other organizational forms"; how and why these conflicts develop and influence succession-based decision making, behavior, and outcomes remain underdeveloped areas of inquiry (Jaskiewicz, Heinrichs, Rau, & Reay, 2016, p. 239).

While the schematic model (Figure 1) serves as a method to develop and discuss ideas, it has clear limitations that should be acknowledged. However, in highlighting some of the limitations, my general thesis regarding the many complexities and available opportunities that exist in family business research is provided additional support. As a first limitation, the model is clearly incomplete; it is impossible to visually demonstrate or verbally discuss the many constructs and relationships that have been (or could be) examined in the extant literature. One primary missing component is the individual, be it an individual family member or an individual nonfamily member that works in the business. While our focus on the firm level of analysis and archival data has minimized efforts on individual actors in the recent past (Evert et al., 2016), this is an important area of inquiry that we should revisit. Of course, considering individuals adds an additional level of analysis—one nested within the family and one not—and brings with it an exponential amount of complexity that is beyond the scope of this simple model.

Another missing component that is not explicitly accounted for in this model is the resources and capabilities possessed by the family or business. Although resources and capabilities may best be represented by Boxes F1 and B1 (antecedents and characteristics), there are many scenarios where they could be inserted at different phases of the model and influence the model's constructs and relationships in various ways. As noted by Sirmon and Hitt (2003), competitive advantage and wealth creation involves a multistage process of resource inventory building, bundling, and leveraging; this makes resources, and related activities, important at various points along the model. However, the bulk of research in this area has focused on whether and how family businesses, assuming some family-based resource endowments, differ in business performance outcomes (B4). Looking at how resources and capabilities are employed to benefit the family's outcomes (F4) is an important area in need of development (Dyer & Dyer, 2009; Rau, 2014).

The model is also limited in terms of its linear design; it is presented and discussed in basic causal terms, flowing from left to right, and shows no feedback loops. However, there are many possible reciprocal effects, as well as additional interactive effects, that could be theoretically developed and empirically tested. More longitudinal efforts that examine feedbacks and reverse causal mechanisms, along the relationships currently demonstrated in the model, is warranted. Additionally, the context is presented in a very simplified way in that only one all-encompassing box is provided with a single arrow demonstrating the influence external factors have on the family and business, and the relationships between them. This treatment, of course, does not do proper justice to the extensive externalities that exist, and I encourage researchers to consider contextual aspects in their research and conceptual models more explicitly rather than simply including them as control variables. For instance, while time has been generally considered in research on long-term orientation (e.g., Brigham, Lumpkin, Payne, & Zachary, 2014), survival (e.g., Revilla, Pérez-Luño, & Nieto, 2016), and market entry (e.g., Evert, Sears, Martin, & Payne, 2018), explicit inclusion of time in family business research is relatively rare (Sharma, Salvato, & Reay, 2014). Efforts that utilized random coefficient models (e.g., Anglin, Reid, Short, Zachary, & Rutherford, 2017) are desirable extensions in this area because they allow for the examinations of multiple levels of analysis, including time.

The model presented in Figure 1 is not meant to be comprehensive, of course. Rather, it is intended to demonstrate to both more experienced and new family business scholars the basic domain of the field and outline—in a parsimonious way—the many different avenues available for theoretical and empirical exploration. Still too often, family business research is relegated to a simple, binomial perspective of family versus nonfamily firm research, when research opportunities abound if we simply change the nature of our research questions from a question of "if" and "what," which are descriptive and comparative, to the more important ones of "how" and "why," which are explanatory and predictive (Chrisman, Chua, De Massis, Minola, & Vismara, 2016). Even in our most heavily researched areas, such as succession, there are numerous questions that have yet to be answered (Daspit et al., 2016; Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017). However, new theories, along with new constructs, need to be developed to make larger leaps forward as a field; these should be unique and specific to family business rather than borrowed from other fields and applied without variation (Craig & Salvato, 2012).

Regarding Theory and Theorizing

Theory is a simplification of reality and is an attempt to parsimoniously explain some relevant components of a phenomenon. Theory is useful in that it helps us classify things, understand and predict relationships, and guide behaviors and future research. Good theory should (1) identify the key factors related to a phenomenon, (2) explain how and why these factors are related, (3) credibly explain how this is an improvement on past perspectives, and (4) provide the conditions and boundaries of the identified relationships (Reay & Whetten, 2011). Theoretical contributions, then, should involve adding or subtracting factors (i.e., concepts, constructs, variables), (re)conceptualizing the relationships between the factors, and/or explaining why the new theory warrants consideration as a representation of a phenomenon (Whetten, 1989).

While these basic tenets regarding theory and theory contributions are well known, their application in the family business domain has historically been lacking. Generally, and as noted previously, there has been much effort placed on questions surrounding *if* family businesses differ from nonfamily businesses rather than developing good theory *about* family businesses. While examining differences has pointed (and perhaps can continue to point) us toward theoretical limitations or new boundary conditions, this is generally insufficient as a theoretical contribution (Whetten, 1989). That is to say, simply recognizing differences is limited in its utility if there is not an alternative theoretical explanation offered that explains the differences. So, while the discovery of new factors that are important to family businesses may be useful, this approach generally only addresses the "if" and "what" questions and often does not continue forward to provide answers to the "how" and, more importantly, the "why."

The main point I wish to pontificate is that we should work toward more theorizing, focusing on the process of developing theory, so that we can better understand and examine the "how" and "why" of family businesses. Theory is a product or outcome of the process of theorizing, which includes "activities like abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing and idealizing" that results in intermittent components of more encompassing and generalizable theories (Weick, 1995, p. 389). As such, theoretical developments, or approximations of theory (Merton, 1967), could occur at any of the points along the model (Figure 1) and contribute to our overarching understanding of family business as a whole; these efforts ultimately lead to grander and more generalizable theories and therefore have much value, particularly as we continue to establish our domain as a field of study.

A common characteristic of the foundational papers being revisited in this issue (and a key act of theorizing) is that they all challenged a convention or assumption of the field. Challenging the status quo generally is derived from a dissatisfaction with the normative order and through asking difficult questions about how we explain a phenomenon. At the time these original articles were written, the authors' challenges were largely based on frustrations derived from assumptions founded on comparative studies of family and nonfamily businesses. What is the best way to define and measure the family business? Are family businesses (always) better than nonfamily businesses? Are family businesses homogeneous? Are family businesses more or less conservative than nonfamily businesses? These authors, however, not only challenged the status quo but also offered up creative arguments for how and why their alternative theoretical model—often founded on established theories from adjacent fields (e.g., contingency, resource-based view, agency, stewardship)—might be more accurate and valid. Taking these important steps toward better understanding the how and why is the reason these articles were so well received, in my opinion.

It is notable that the theorizing process described by the authors represented in this issue is very comparable; they tend to describe a common, albeit oftentimes onerous, progression. First, there was a recognition that the literature did not fully align with their personal experiences or observations. Second, there was a general questioning of the completeness or "truth" of the existing theoretical perspective and the introduction of possible alternative concepts and/or relationships. With the emergence of new concepts and possible relationships, the authors then provided compelling evidence—through logical, empirical, or epistemological means (Whetten, 1989)—for why the prior perspective was incomplete or incorrect. Finally, the authors offered up a model that better or more completely explained the phenomenon. By going through this theorizing process, which tends to be iterative and reciprocal, apperceptive moments emerge that eventually take the form of more explicit forms of theory, such as hypotheses, propositions, and models; these go on to be empirically explored, sometimes in the same article. Scholars working to craft new theory should carefully consider these steps in their own efforts.

As also noted by the authors' reflections on these high-impact papers, however, theory development is a much more involved, creative, interactive, and "behind the scenes" process than most readers are aware. Unfortunately, theorizing is also not something that is generally taught (or even discussed) in many doctoral training programs and, therefore, tends to be a skill developed more incidentally rather than purposefully. Indeed, instead of explicitly trying to develop new theory regarding a phenomenon, we often tend to stumble upon new ideas or constructs while developing others and, over time, learn the process of theory development. For instance, in developing the model shown in Figure 1, I was struck by my primordial instinct to put the family fully within the boundaries of the family business box (the dotted line). However, it is highly likely that *not* all family members (including some very influential members) are active participants or owners of the business. In fact, the family—the business family (e.g., Litz, 2008; Moores, 2009)—may be involved with multiple enterprises simultaneously, where there can be significant overlap among, but also separation between, the participants of the family and the business(es). Furthermore, important and influential members of the family may not be part of any business operations explicitly, but may play a role in directing the family and its interests, which can ultimately influence the associated business or businesses, even inadvertently. Such relationships are only just being mentioned in the extant literature and there remains much to explore (e.g., Jaskiewicz & Dyer, 2017), particularly if we reframe our level of analysis from the business to the family unit, which is an ever-changing designation (Moores, 2009); conceptualizing these relationships and the gaps in our current knowledge is the first step toward developing new theory. But, as demonstrated using this example, we need to first open ourselves up to the theorizing process, such as through the production of models, to identify theoretical openings and make initial advancements. In truth, I find the process of developing models—graphic representations of theory using boxes and arrows—and typologies to be among the most effective means to develop theory and testable hypotheses (Doty & Glick, 1994; Payne, Pearson, & Carr, 2017; Van de Ven, 2007).

Where we look for inspiration and clarification can be an important factor in our theorizing efforts. Indeed, observation can and should be a central component when theorizing. Our predilection is to rely on past literature as a source of inspiration, although sources should be numerous and of varying types including news stories, blogs, interviews, diaries, and casual conversations (Swedberg, 2012). For while founding our perspectives on established literature is a good practice, we also need to broaden our perspectives to seek out new ways of "seeing" and theorizing. Of course, there is much value—particularly at earlier points in the theorizing process—in discussing ideas, issues, and problems with the people working in and around family businesses. Scholars should make more of an effort to engage with family business practitioners and consultants to help them identify new areas of inquiry that can start the theorizing process.

Extending upon this argument, the use of qualitative approaches such as case study, ethnography, and historical narrative analysis methods is encouraged (Fletcher, De Massis, & Nordqvist, 2016). Indeed, such methods are among the most impactful ways to inductively develop new constructs and theory, although with high levels of rigor (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Likewise, more explicitly considering context can allow for new perspectives and theories to emerge (Wright, Chrisman, Chua, & Steier, 2014), such as improving our understanding of the mechanisms through which context influences the family business and vice versa. For instance, Soleimanof, Rutherford, and Webb (2018, p. 45), in their extensive review of the family business and institutional theory literature, suggest that scholars should explore "the dynamic and recursive attributes of a coevolutionary perspective to understand the path-dependent evolution of family firms and institutional contexts."

Conclusion

As family business scholars, we continue to strive to establish the domain of family business research and improve upon our theoretical and empirical contributions to academia, business, and society. Our path toward making substantive and substantial contributions is long and met with many challenges. Many of these challenges are "of our own device"; our own myopic tendencies or biases can restrict us from questioning and challenging conventional views so that new and better ideas, concepts, constructs, and theories can emerge. It is my hope that the articles and commentaries contained within this issue of *FBR* help put off some blinders, overcome some challenges, and continue to propel the field forward in provocative and imaginative new ways.

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