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**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON FAMILY BUSINESSES:
THE RELEVANCE AND USEFULNESS OF THE
INTERPRETIVE APPROACH**

ABSTRACT

This article describes and discusses the interpretive approach: a qualitative research method with high relevance to family business researchers. Family business research has grown over the last decade and there are increasing requests for deeper insights into the nature and workings of these organizations. Research on family businesses is different from research on other organizations in that it means researching a family, and the influence it exerts on the business(es) this family owns and/or manage. Currently, family business research is dominated by quantitative research methods. In this article we argue that these studies should be complemented by a research approach that is more apt to capture the specific complexity and dynamics unique to family businesses. We suggest that the interpretive approach within the broader umbrella of qualitative methods has this potential. Drawing on previously published family business studies using an interpretive approach, and the authors own experiences, the article sets out to discuss central issues, choices, requirements and implications for family business scholars engaged in interpretive research. Our central thesis is that such research provides insights necessary for the development of the field of family business.

Key Words: family firms, research methods, interpretive research, case study research,

INTRODUCTION

Several recent overview articles and special issues of journals show that the family business field of research has grown dramatically over the last decade (Astrachan, 2003; Chua, Chrisman and Steier 2003; Chrisman, Chua and Steier 2005; Heck, Hoy, Poutziouris and Steier, Sharma, 2004). As Sharma (2004:332) argues, when a research field develops and grows it is important to ‘intermittently pause to evaluate the progress made and reflect on the directions to pursue in future so as to gain deeper insights into the phenomenon of interest’. We agree and posit that such intermittent evaluation and reflection should include efforts by researchers to reflect upon, codify and diffuse learning experiences from their research practice (c.f. Pettigrew, 1990). So far, the family business research field has seen very few articles that discuss specific research methodologies and their respective relevance. Handler’s (1989) important article on five critical methodological issues and their respective contribution to the development of family firm research is a notable exception. But the family business field has changed significantly since this article was published.

Articles that take stock of previous experience, codify and communicate learning from existing research practice means that both new and established researchers in the field can reflect and build upon others experiences (Pettigrew, 1990; Suddaby, 2006). Like in all sub-fields of management research, it is important that family business scholars regularly share in detail their methods in use and research experiences (Handler, 1989; Sharma, 2004). In this article we set out to do this.

Handler (1989) and Wortman (1994) observe that family business research is dominated by anecdotal and descriptive studies. Later Dyer and Sánchez (1998) observe an increased use of quantitative research methods using analytical methods from statistics and drawing on larger samples. Sharma (2004) notes a similar development. These authors and several others tend to view qualitative and quantitative research as constituting a 'full cycle of research' (Zahra and Sharma, 2004:341). In short, the full cycle of research refers to a first phase of inductive qualitative research on a small sample of selected firms, followed by later phases of testing the findings from the first phase quantitatively on a larger sample of firms representative of the total population.

In this article, our position is somewhat different. We argue that there is a need for more qualitative and interpretive research in the field of family business that stands on its own, is rigorous and both draw upon and generate theory. Clearly, quantitative approaches are also useful and relevant. Indeed, our position is that quantitative and qualitative research approaches are complementary and that both are needed to advance our knowledge of family businesses. However, we also believe that certain methodological approaches and research strategies are especially relevant to reach an in-depth understanding of the complex and tacit phenomena and processes related to the dynamics of ownership, management and development that are so typical for family businesses. Therefore, this article sets out to discuss the characteristics, requirements and implications of one qualitative research method that is particularly relevant in family business studies: *the interpretive approach*.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to explain, argue for and discuss the usefulness and relevance of interpretive research methods in researching and theorizing on family businesses. To address this purpose, we rely on a set of selected exemplar interpretive family businesses studies as well as on our own experience from working with interpretive family business research. We see at least two main contributions this article

gives to extant family business literature. First, we visualize and discuss a set of contemporary exemplar studies that draws on an interpretive approach to investigate and theorize about important family business topics. In this way we establish the relevance and usefulness of this particular research approach for generating a richer and deeper understanding of family businesses. Second, we draw on these previously studies and our own experience to visualize the characteristics and strengths of the interpretive approach for family businesses research. Thereby, we codify and share previous experiences and learning with a wider set of scholars interested in using the interpretive approach when studying family businesses. In essence, our thesis is that many of the aspects of family businesses that make them unique compared to other types of businesses are appropriately rendered comprehensible through in-depth and detailed interpretive research.

The article is organized as follows. First, we position our focus on interpretive research on family businesses by identifying a set of recently published articles that have used this approach. We then briefly reflect on our own experience and discuss how the specificity of family businesses calls for interpretive research. Third, we introduce the interpretive approach in organization studies focusing on its purpose, definition and core assumptions¹. Fourth, we discuss the interplay between theory and empirical observations given this approach. Fifth, we pay attention to the distinctive contribution that the interpretive approach can make to research and theory building in the field of family business and discuss how editors and reviewers should assess interpretive research. Thereafter we focus on the challenges facing interpretive family business researchers, before we draw some general conclusions.

¹ It should be noted that there is not just *one* interpretive research approach. What we outline, describe and argue for in the following pages is based on our experiences and thus colored by our preferences, choices, world-views and knowledge. The readers are encouraged to seek further information about various kinds of interpretive approaches by consulting the articles and books that we reference.

POSITIONING INTERPRETIVE FAMILY BUSINESS RESEARCH

The impressive growth of the field of family business research means that scholars use an expanding set of theories and methods to understand this group of firms (Chua et al., 2003; Zahra and Sharma, 2004). Although there are still many conceptual articles or articles using anecdotal illustrations (often consultants sharing their professional experience), current family business research is dominated by positivistic and quantitative research approaches, especially surveys. Thus, recent field overviews (e.g. Sharma, 2004; Heck et al. 2008) have called for “alternative research methodologies; micro level collection and alternative data sources” (Heck et al. 2008:325).

As shall be furthered elaborated upon in the next section, one reason why research methods that allow for a detailed and in-depth investigations are important for a richer and deeper understanding of family businesses, is the complexity and dynamics inherent in the family institution. Another reason is the heterogeneity of the family businesses population. Even if often treated as similar and routinely compared to ‘non-family businesses’, family businesses are in fact different amongst themselves. It is therefore relevant to talk about different types of family businesses (Westhead and Cowling, 2007). More critical and in-depth interpretive approaches can help to generate insights with regards to the specific challenges and characteristics of different forms of family businesses rather than default to a lumping together of all family businesses (Melin and Nordqvist, 2007).

The simultaneous unique complexity and dynamics inherent in family businesses compared to other organizational forms, and the striking heterogeneity within the family business population itself seems contradictory, but is in fact a strong reason for the relevance and usefulness of the interpretive research approach. This is perhaps also why we detect a small but increasing amount of published interpretive family business studies. In figure 1 we list 11 recently published studies drawing on an

interpretive approach to examine and understand a wide array of important family business research topics.

Insert figure 1 about here

Following Huff (1998) we use these studies as ‘exemplars’ to reflect upon and illustrate how interpretive research methods can be used in practice, and what results and new knowledge these studies can generate. Our endeavor in this article is to combine these exemplars with our own experience to explicate, describe and discuss insights that hopefully can facilitate and inspire more interpretive research as the family business field grows further.

THE SPECIFICITY OF THE FAMILY BUSINESS (RESEARCH)

Over more than ten years, the authors of this article have used an interpretive research approach in our research endeavors to better understand family businesses. We have done this from a belief that the specificity of family businesses strongly motivates such a research approach. Our focus has been on studying strategy, ownership and governance, with a specific interest in the development of family businesses from a micro perspective. This means to take the point of departure in everyday interaction between individuals and to understand the complex and dynamic organizational reality that family businesses constitute. Understanding various aspects and dimensions of organizational life from this perspective means understanding individuals, their needs, motives, roles, values, emotions and relations – aspects and issues which might be rather tacit and more or less unconscious to the individuals studied, but nevertheless possible to trace, interpret and visualize through scholarly inquiry.

Probably the most referred to characteristic of family businesses, and the one distinguishing them from other businesses, is the integration of family and business

(Astrachan, 2003). Understanding family business dynamics means recognizing that decisions and actions of key individuals in the company are at the same time decisions and actions of members of a specific family. A family might be defined as a social group bound together by genuine relations, i.e. 'close relations with particular well known others' (Sjöstrand, 1997:25). Genuine relations involve individuals that are particular to each other. Genuine relations, like kin ties, are unique, and the individuals are not (easily) replaceable. These close family ties are emotional, and they seek the preservation of confidence and trust (Stewart, 2003). A further characteristic is reciprocity. Genuinely related individuals benefit from interactions with each other as part of a close, well defined group. Ultimately, this shapes the identity of the individuals. Most research on management largely ignores the dynamic caused by kin ties and close family relations (Dyer, 2003; Stewart, 2003; Ram, 2001).

A research challenge in family business research is that it means researching and understanding the interaction between families, individuals and their influence on the business (Habbershon, Williams and McMillan, 2003). Copeland and White (1991) argue that family research differs from research on other groups. One reason is the shared family history, and the resulting family values. Interaction among family members builds on 'extended prior experience and family myths' (Copeland and White, 1991:5). Families also have a built in power hierarchy, which distinguishes them from other social groups.

This hierarchy is partially determined by the existence of two or more generations, partially by culture-wide expectations (e.g. for different sexes), partially by age difference even within a generation, and partially by idiosyncratic family history. The roles of parents and children define their behavior (even when roles appear to be reversed) (Copeland and White, 1991:5).

Family relations tend to be closer and more emotional and complex than relations between non-family members. The long-term relationship and shared history intensifies emotions and the multiple role relationships family members have to each other within their family business context. These distinguishing characteristics of the family are to some extent recognized by literature on family business. Research has discussed how family relations, history, values, traditions, emotions and ways of thinking might have a strong impact on the business, manifested in a long-term perspective, commitment, and a strong culture. Along with these characteristics also the challenges of multiple role relationship have been highlighted, for instance, in relation to succession and to the choice of overall strategic direction (Astrachan, 2003; Craig and Moores, 2005; Gersick et al., 1997)

The understanding of *how and why* of family influence and involvement on business is, however, still in its infancy. Even though valuable insights have been provided through the studies summarized in Figure 1, Sharma's (2004) request of *deeper insights* could not be met by the application of the methods currently dominating the field. Understanding how and why family involvement influences business means understanding the influence of family members relations, emotions, values, power, and roles. In turn, this means understanding the needs, motives, meanings, and rationales underlying not just interaction between family members, but also the interactions between family and non-family members at different levels of organizing (Ainsworth and Wolfram Cox, 2003; Fletcher, 2002).

Many of these aspects are invisible and tacit – sometimes even unconscious to the family members themselves. Yet, any serious attempt to understand the uniqueness of family businesses – the rationale for talking about a field of family business research – must try to understand precisely these issues. This means not only to establish *that* family dynamics and complexities have an influence on business development but also

to contribute with suggestions as of *how* and *why* this is the case. This means to explore, describe and theorize on family influence to make it more visible and comprehensible to an audience of researchers and practitioners. We argue that researchers interested in the complex and tacit – yet so influential – dimensions of family businesses can benefit from turning to the interpretive approach.

DEFINITION AND ASSUMPTIONS OF INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH

The overall purpose of interpretive research is to contribute with an understanding of social, economic and political phenomena and to view social reality in novel ways that complicates or challenges dominant taken-for-granted views (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In most interpretive approaches society at different levels, such as a family business, is understood as an ongoing interplay between actors that interact in and with different contexts. This is consistent with an epistemological view of human beings as active, knowledgeable actors in the creation and re-creation of their social reality (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1967). From this perspective, the complex and ambiguous realities of family businesses must be interpreted as something in order to be comprehensible.

There are different interpretive approaches in the social sciences. But they all seem to have in common that they are related to the idea of *verstehen* (e.g. Weber, 1921/1968) and have their philosophical roots in hermeneutics (see Palmer, 1969; Howard, 1982). Most interpretive approaches also share a focus on the ‘fine-grained details’ and ‘complex processes’ by which human actors interpret the meaning of their own and others actions (Schwandt, 2000). A majority of interpretive researchers unite around the effort to explicate the ways people in specific social settings come to understand, account for, and manage their daily lives, where the goal is to build

‘shareable understandings’ (Denzin, 2001). The focus on three central concepts, *interpretation*, *meaning* and *understanding* is also shared among interpretive researchers.

Interpretation can be seen as the clarification of meaning, and understanding is the result of processes of interpreting, that is, grasping and comprehending the meaning that is felt, intended, and/or expressed by actors (Denzin, 2001). Interpretive researchers seek to reach understanding through interpretation of meanings assigned to, for instance, actions, events, processes, objects, and actors. An interpreter is someone who interprets or translates meanings to other actors and an interpretation can be seen as an acceptable, approximating translation (Weick, 1995). Interpretations are made both by the actors under study and by the researcher studying them. Giddens (1979) calls this ‘double hermeneutics’, which means that interpretive research is a collaborative project where the researcher and the researched join in an ongoing dialogue (Denzin, 2001) where knowledge is created through mutual understanding (Melin, 1977).

Von Wright (1971:6) adds that understanding in social sciences is about the ‘recreation in the mind of the scholar of the mental atmosphere, the thoughts, feelings and motivations of the objects of his study’. Similarly, Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2000:54) observe that understanding calls for ‘living (thinking, feeling) oneself into the situation of the acting person (writing, speaking)’. In this view, understanding is reached through detecting or assigning meanings to social phenomena (Lindholm, 1979), where meaning is seen as ‘what an experience means to a person, defined in terms of intentions and consequences’ (Denzin, 2001:160). In the interpretive approach, *understanding* is thus about *seeing something*, such as an organizational phenomenon, *as something*. From this view, *interpreting* is about *seeing things in new ways*, or *assigning new meanings to them* (Asplund, 1970; Ödman, 1991). This can, for instance, involve seeing patterns in

the empirical material that, linked to a wider theoretical frame of interpretation, can provide novel and unexpected understanding (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000).

Recent examples of family business research that have done this include Hamilton (2006) and Hall and Nordqvist (2008). Hamilton (2006) visualizes an alternative gender discourse in the context of the role of women in family businesses through her interpretive study. Rather than subscribing to the general assumption that women are marginalized and held back by patriarchic power patterns, Hamilton's interpretive study uncovers strong resistance to patriarchy and offers a credible account of how women challenges power relations and assumptions that are dominant in both research and practice. Hall and Nordqvist (2008) builds on Fletcher (2002) and draws on interpretive research to question, challenge and then extend the current dominant understanding of the concept of 'professional management'. They argue that the taken for granted meaning and assumptions related to professional management in family businesses are outdated and not really useful for research or practice. Using alternative theories and in-depth empirical material they show that professional management is about much more than being a formally competent non-family CEO (Hall and Nordqvist, 2008).

Interpretive researchers differ in the extent to which they take a more objective approach to the phenomenon under study or a more relativist approach. With a more objective view, interpretations means to detect, decipher, or translate something's actual and real meaning. From a more relativist and often social constructionist standpoint, the "seeing as" in the act of interpreting implies giving something a specific meaning where the meaning is constructed by the interpreter:

An interpretation aims to read something into what is ambiguous – or what can be productively turned into something ambiguous through turning the self-evident into something complex and open. Interpretation draws the attention to the open nature of phenomena. (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:141)

For most interpretive researchers the “seeing as” in the definition of interpretation implies that every organizational phenomenon can be seen as something else. For instance, Ainsworth and Wolfram Cox (2003) questions the normative unity and harmony often assumed when using the notion of family in organizational studies. In their critical interpretive study they reveal alternative meanings and interpretations of family, which have implications for patterns of compliance, resistance and control embedded in the organizational culture.

The aim of interpretive research is often not to find one truth. Given the socially constructed reality there might be many truths to construct, where ‘each of them tells us a way the world is’ (Goodman, 1972:30-31, in Shotter, 1993:104). Social constructionism draws attention to the socially negotiated, constructed and objectified nature of the reality and the knowledge about it. Every understanding is a product of negotiated meanings, and, as such, it is open to reconstruction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Shotter, 1993; Schwandt, 2001). It is therefore fruitful to think of research as conversation (Huff, 1998), where interpretations and conclusions are arguments ‘for a particular way of understanding social reality, in the context of a never-ending debate’ (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000:276). For family business research this means that interpretive research aims to go beyond the ‘surface-scratching’ research (Handler, 1989) that has dominated the field to date.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THEORY AND EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

Most interpretive researchers probably agree that knowledge is a social and historical product, and that empirical material comes to us laden with theory and prior conceptual and practical understanding (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Denzin, 2001). This means

that many interpretive researchers acknowledge ‘naturalistic retrodution’ (Emerson, 2004) or ‘abduction’ (c.f. Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000; Suddaby, 2006). These two notions refer to that empirical material and theory are not divided, but rather that researchers moves back and forth between empirical observations and theory, ‘modifying original theoretical statements to fit observations, and seeking observations relevant to the emerging theory’ (Emerson, 2004: 458). This interplay between empirical material and theory and iterative analysis is a more adequate description of the actual interpretive research process than is the often assumed inductive approach (Suddaby, 2006).

In practice, interpretive researchers start with a general focus, research question and some kind of theoretical framework in mind. However, then different themes may emerge from the empirical material as the fieldwork proceeds and this guides the search for new theoretical ideas and inspiration to support emerging interpretations and understandings. In this view, theories and literature are seen as *frames of interpretation* that are deliberately open and adaptable, especially in early stages of the research.

Interpreting socially complex phenomena in family businesses where often several meanings are detectable depending on the voices heard (Ainsworth and Wolfram Cox, 2003; Fletcher, 2002; Hamilton, 2006), means that researchers need to be open for several perspectives and theories to create increased understandings. Hall et al (2006), for instance, combines the concepts of role, arena, values and legitimacy to interpret empirical accounts from an in-depth case study, and Hall and Nordqvist (2008) integrate cultural theory and symbolic interactionism to make sense of their study of professional management.

In interpretive approaches, interpretation requires and is contingent on concepts and language. The importance of language means that certain relevant concepts can be used to ‘sensitize’ the researcher to important aspects of the empirical field under study.

'Sensitizing concepts' suggests directions along which to look (Hammersley, 1989). Nordqvist (2005), for instance, uses the concepts of actors, arenas, and strategic issues as sensitizing concepts to capture the process of strategizing and to interpret the role of ownership in this process in family firms. Fletcher (2000) use the concept of 'resource' to give an alternative interpretation of the role of family in business, Hamilton (2006) draws on the notion of narratives to get close to identity and gender dynamics in a family business context, and Steier (2007) searches for a 'familial sub-narrative' in the broader discourse of entrepreneurship and individual start-up processes.

Empirically, interpretive researchers seek knowledge through individual experiences of actors who are directly involved in the social processes under study. This typically means that the researcher enters the world of the actors being studied in order to 'see the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account, observing how he interprets what is taken into account' (Blumer, 1969:56). An intense contact with a field where the daily lives of individuals is reflected is therefore prioritized (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In family business studies, this approach means increased complexity since researching family businesses inherently also means researching a family (Handler, 1989).

INTERPRETIVE WORK IN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF RIGOROUS CASE STUDIES

From figure 1 it is apparent that case research is a common way to carry out interpretive fieldwork on family businesses. Case research enables researchers to study actors, processes and events closely, holistically and longitudinally (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995). Case study research is appropriate for processual and contextual studies of change (Pettigrew, 1990) and can give insight through rich detail. Orum et al. (1991) summarize the advantages of case studies in four points. First, they permit the

grounding of observations and concepts about social action and structures by studying actors' day-to-day activities at close hand in their natural settings. Second, they provide information from a number of sources and over an extended period of time, thus allowing for a study of complex social processes and meanings. Third, they highlight the dimensions of time and history to the study of social life. In that way, a researcher can examine continuity and change in 'life-world patterns'. Finally, case studies encourage and facilitate theoretical and conceptual development.

Conducting interpretive research through *in-depth* case studies means a combination of several factors. First, the cases under investigation must 'enable the researcher to examine the ebb and flow of social life over time and to display the patterns of everyday life as they change' (Orum et al., 1991:12). This longitudinal ambition gives time for both the researcher and the researched to reflect on and perhaps revise meanings and understanding that emerge from the observations. For instance, the researcher can in conversations with both research or the studied actors get new ideas and test 'emerging, visionary theories' (Melin, 1977). In-depth case studies thus allow for a flexible procedure, where the interpretive researcher can

Shift from one to another line of inquiry, adopt new points of observation as his study progresses, move in new directions previously unthought of, and change his recognition of what are relevant data as he acquires more information and better understanding.
(Blumer, 1969:40)

There are several methods of producing empirical accounts when using interpretive approaches in family business research (e.g. Cole, 1997; Hamilton, 2006; Fletcher, 2002; Hall and Nordqvist, 2008). As in most qualitative research, typical examples are interviews, observations and documents, including archival material.

Interviewing is an acknowledged and useful way to investigate how actors experience and interpret their everyday life (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Stake, 2000), even if some argue that interviews are too politicized and rarely give ‘correct’ interpretations (e.g. Silverman, 1993). However, when leaving the simple question-and-answer type of interview and developing it into a dialogue, the interview becomes a relevant and fruitful setting for interaction and mutual exchange of points of view between the researcher and the interviewee. Such open-ended interviews are a versatile way of reflecting on and interpreting events, issues, and processes that are otherwise difficult to grasp.

In the family business context, it seems important to interview people from different generations, people with different formal relations to the firm (e.g. family members working in the firm vs. not working in the firm), as well as both family and non-family members at different levels of the organization (Ainsworth and Wolfram-Cox; Hamilton, 2006; Nordqvist and Melin, 2008). Especially, family/non-family and generational differences are at the heart of what makes family businesses different from other types of organizations (Sharma, 2004).

Observations are suited for research projects that emphasize the importance of human meanings, interpretations, and interactions, and where an insider perspective is considered to enhance existing knowledge (Waddington, 1994). The purpose and outcome of observations in interpretive research depends on the type of observation that is performed, but they all have in common that they are a way to experience different actions, events, interactions and processes as they unfold in their natural settings. Documented observations can be divided into ‘interactional slices’ (IS), which refers to a sequence of interactions between two or more actors that have been recorded (Denzin, 2001), for subsequent interpretations playing a similar role as quotations from interviews.

For instance, to understand the role of family dynamics, Fletcher (2002) combines in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations in her interpretive case study of cultural organizing and professional management a small family firm. Ram (2001) relies on face-to-face interviews, 'informal interactions', observation of a meeting and company documents in his interpretive research on family dynamics in a consultancy firm. Also focusing on one case firm, McMollom (1992) generates 565 organizational stories collected through in-depth fieldwork to reveal how family and nonfamily employees experience membership in a family business system. These studies are good examples of how interpretive research is able to uncover tacit and ambiguous relations and tensions that are typical for family businesses, but unable to address using quantitative methods.

A first step after gathering empirical material can be to construct rich descriptions of each case in order to leverage the 'lush, detailed, cumulative and comprehensive' (Orum et al. 1991:13) empirical material that should be the result of in-depth case studies. The next phase in the interpretive work is often to conduct systematic, empirical, within-case interpretations. This can, of course, also be done on the raw empirical data rather than the case descriptions. Here, the intrinsic value of each case (Stake, 2000) is in focus. At this stage, the ambition is typically to 'ask questions' and 'listen' to the text ('let the case talk to you') as well as to discuss arguments and counter-arguments for various emerging meanings and interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). The researcher can observe themes in each of the cases, especially through a focus on key-incidents, that is, particular in-the-field events or observations that 'open up significant, often complex lines of conceptual development' (Emerson, 2004:457) and that can frame subsequent interpretations. The within-case interpretations can be seen as a first level of interpretation (excluding interpretations made already in the field work).

After the within-case interpretations, the researcher can move on to make cross-case interpretations focusing on differences and similarities in the patterns from each of the studied cases. After making the first cross-case interpretations, by comparing the empirical patterns noted in within-case interpretations, next step is often to work more systematically ‘testing’ and ‘trying out’ different theoretical notions and perspectives in order to identify more general themes from the patterns emerging through the interpretive work. Not all of these notions remain in later stages of the interpretive work as they might not contribute to new and relevant understanding. The cross-case interpretations can be seen as a second level of interpretation.

After some analytical ‘twisting and turning’, and as a result of the second level of interpretation, the interpretive researcher can decide to concentrate on a range of especially interesting and relevant emerging themes. Here, the researcher can go back to re-read the original case descriptions and ‘code’ them according to the themes in an attempt to interpret and categorize the empirical material *de novo* (cf. Maxwell, 1998). In this process, using theory as ‘an interpretive structure that renders a set of experiences meaningful and understandable’ (Denzin, 2001:162) means moving from the parts to the whole and back to the parts iteratively to support the emerging understanding (c.f. the hermeneutic circle). Introducing new theoretical ideas at this stage can be done to ‘unearth generic relations’ and formulate emerging theoretical propositions (Hammersley, 1989), at the same time as going back to the empirical material to find support and illustrative examples for the interpretations (see e.g. Nordqvist and Melin, 2008).

In this process of reaching an understanding the researcher creates interpretive constructs and concepts to better grasp the meaning of what people do and say. The new concepts and constructs enable the researcher to assign meaning and direct attention to new aspects of the social phenomenon under study. The different levels of interpretation

in the processes of reaching an understanding represent different levels of theoretical abstraction. This means that the concepts and theories developed represent novel or extended perspectives through which meaning can be assigned to the phenomenon under study and thus contribute to an increased understanding. Ainsworth and Wolfram Cox (2003) is an example of this process in the context of family business research. They draw on theory and empirical data iteratively to develop and refine a typology of spatial, familial and ownership divisions to understand tensions of culture and control in small family firms.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERPRETIVE FAMILY BUSINESS RESEARCH

The interpretive approach in family business research has an ambition to conceptualize and contribute with new theory through novel, sometimes critical, interpretations (Ainsworth and Wolfram Cox, 2003; Hamilton, 2006; Fletcher, 2002; Hall and Nordqvist, 2008). Good interpretations are integrated into new or modified conceptual language and theoretical frameworks that increase our understanding of key issues in the field of family business. For example, Johannisson and Huse (2000) shed new light on the challenges faced by family businesses that recruits non-family directors to the board. Although an active and formalized board can contribute to the competitive development of a family business, it also creates tensions and potential conflicts when different ideologies are played out during board meetings.

Following Whetten (1989) theoretical contributions should include answers to the what, how, why and who, where, when of the phenomenon under study. In brief, *what* refers to which factors that logically are considered part of the understanding achieved, while *how* refers to in what way these factors are related to each other. Further, *why* is about the underlying psychological, economic, or social dynamics that justify the

selection of factors and relationships. Finally, *who*, *where* and *when* is about the contextual limitations, both in time and space, of the theoretical framework generated (Whetten, 1989).

In social constructionist interpretive approaches, interpretations and representations of reality are seen as negotiated through conversation. As words and categories are constitutive of the social world (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001), concept and theory development lies at the heart of interpretive research. As we have seen concepts and theories are developed through intensive empirical fieldwork, but also through *analytical* or *theoretical generalizations*, that is, linking findings from particular cases to the general level of theory (Yin, 2001).

This means to create language (concepts and categories) through which (potentially tacit) structures and processes are rendered more visible and comprehensible. 'Theories are generalizations; they explain some phenomenon across a variety of specific instances or cases of that phenomenon' (Schwandt, 1997:57). While theory constitutes the basis on which analytical generalizations are made, generalizations emerging from interpretive research might also lead to the refinement, elaboration or even questioning of that theory (Schwandt, 1997). Moreover, Garud and Van de Ven (2001:224) argue that the basis of generalization:

Is not from a sample to a population, but from a case to theory. The way this is accomplished is not by teasing out efficient causations between variables, but, instead, by teasing out the deeper generative mechanisms that account for observed patterns in the events.

Theoretical and analytical generalizations made in interpretive family business research is thus not about statistical generalizations. Put differently, the aim is not to find patterns and relationships that can be said to hold in all family businesses. Given the

heterogeneity of the family business population (Westhead and Howorth, 2007) it is reasonable to question the ability to confidently generalize to the all family businesses even if the researcher uses the appropriate statistical procedure. As noted, interpretive research becomes even more important and motivated given the heterogeneity of family businesses. The uniqueness of family businesses (Habbershon et al. 2003) is thus appropriately investigated and better understood through an interpretive research approach than through conventional quantitative survey research.

Still, a legitimate concern is the extent to which the results and conclusions from interpretive research can be transferred beyond the context where they were generated. Our experience is that interpretations integrated in conceptual and theoretical frameworks can often stimulate and facilitate the understanding and thinking of other, similar contexts than the cases immediately studied by being versatile and potentially transferable. In a similar vein, Maxwell (1998:77) suggests that ‘a useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon, one that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of that phenomenon’.

We argue that the transferability of a theory or conceptual language among different family businesses refer to the extent to which the results of interpretive research can encourage reflection, give new insights and broaden the understanding of a wider set of cases. In practice, the degree of transferability is typically determined by subsequent efforts to diffuse and expand the results through further research and application in practice.

ASSESSING INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH: A CHALLENGE FOR EDITORS AND REVIEWERS

Many editors and reviewers who come across interpretive family business research are not used to or trained in this approach. Journal editors and reviewers therefore face considerable challenges to give submitted interpretive research articles a fair treatment, correct assessment and secure relevant and useful feedback to authors. Interpretive research is often seen as 'subjective'. While all research is subject to some degree of subjectivity and priority imposed by the researcher a focal point in most interpretive research is that subjectivity is not necessarily seen as something that should be minimized or excluded, but rather leveraged upon (Schwandt, 2000). Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000:5), for instance, argue that in interpretive research 'excerpts from reality can provide a basis for generation of knowledge that opens up rather than closes, and furnishes opportunities for understanding rather than establishes 'truths''. Using criteria such as 'validity' and 'reliability' in their usual positivistic meaning should be avoided:

The interpretation or decision one makes cannot properly be said to be verifiable or testable. Rather, at the best, we can appraise the interpretation by applying norms or criteria that are compatible with the very condition that demands that we interpret in the first place. Hence, to judge an interpretation we might use criteria such as thoroughness, coherence, comprehensiveness, and so forth, and ask whether the interpretation is useful, worthy of adoption, and so on. (Schwandt, 1994:122)

A way to assess the quality interpretive research is to view it in light of three criteria: *directing attention, organizing experience, and enabling useful responses*. This way of assessing interpretive research is not about establishing its "correctness" but its newness, trustworthiness and usefulness with regard to understanding a particular family business phenomenon. The theory and concepts generated through interpretive research should be 'rich in points', that is, the *novel value* of the research should be

highlighted. But also insight development, and problematisation of established ways of thinking:

Inherent in all good interpretations is the casting of new light on something that earlier has either escaped serious attention or been understood in a conventional and thus partly conservative way. (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000:152)

What makes an interpretation or a theory trustworthy? Why should we include a suggested concept into our vocabulary? Are they credible? Trustworthiness and credibility in interpretive research refer to relevance and conviction, where the cornerstones are to be explicit about methodology and its underlying assumptions.

Being transparent about the whole research process is an important way to support the trustworthiness of results (Seale, 2004). Transparency makes it easier for editors and reviewers to follow the often non-linear research process that characterizes interpretive research and thus to appropriately determine the quality of the results (Suddaby, 2006). Following Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000:61) trustworthy interpretations should:

- i) Be *internally consistent*: they should lack logical contradictions and provide an interpretive system where their parts are linked to a larger whole. Ödman (1979) calls this 'internal control' of interpretations and this is linked to securing that not just the interpretations, but the complete research study is reported in a coherent manner where the different parts are integrated into a logical whole.
- ii) Be *externally consistent*: either they should agree with other theories or give plausible reasons and arguments for not doing so. This is also called outer control of interpretations (Ödman, 1979) and is linked to the plausibility of both the interpretations made and the whole research process (Seale, 2004).

- iii) Combine *closeness and distance*: make individual details of the empirical material more understandable, while at the same time growing out from this empirical material.
- iv) Put into a more *holistic understanding*: elevated above the common-sense level, by yielding a deeper understanding of the empirical material through linking it to the interpreter's evolving and successively increasing understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The trustworthy interpretive researcher has an open mind and considers alternative interpretations before finally deciding on the interpretations to put forward as results and conclusions. In this process how close the interpreted meanings of the themes emerging from the texts are to the original meanings that the interviewed or observed actors express can be corroborated by letting multiple actors be heard and observed, by returning several times to the field, and by using different methods. This is a recurrent theme in the interpretive research studies on family businesses summarized in figure 1.

Trustworthiness is also a question of how the research is presented. An overall ambition of the presentation should be to enhance the readers' understandings (Ödman, 1979). Writing up and presenting the empirical material as well as creating interpretations are integrated parts of the interpretive work, since the writing process moves through successive stages of self-reflection (Suddaby, 2006). An important consideration is in what structure and how much of the empirical material to present to the reader. It is often not possible to present all empirical material. This is especially the case for journal publications. Moreover, the reader can often not be asked to go through the same stages of interpretive work as the researcher. Stake (1995) suggests that less will be reported than what was learned during the research. Essentially, the researcher has to decide what is needed in order to communicate an understanding of the final results as well as how they were reached. As Suddaby (2006) notes, presenting

interpretive research in a conventional article form typically requires considerable reorganization giving the impression that the researcher conducted the research in a much more linear way than he or she actually did.

Trustworthiness is also linked to the amount and quality of the empirical material, the process through which the material is collected and to the overall thoroughness and comprehensiveness of the research work, that is, the overall level of ambition of the research. The systematic manner in which the empirical and interpretive work has been carried out is pivotal. Interpretive research means an open approach supporting creativity and continuous iteration in the research process. It is difficult to exactly explain and reproduce when certain ideas emerge that become important for the subsequent interpretive work. As we have argued, new research questions can emerge, conceptual frameworks may change and new theory be brought in as patterns and themes emerge and call for interpretation. This flexible and creative way of doing research and skepticism towards too structured techniques do not mean, however, that ‘anything goes’ rules:

Sloppiness, the expression of opinion not grounded in argumentation, arbitrary use of empirical material, reluctance to engage in dialogue with the literature, and careful consideration of alternative interpretations before deciding which to favor, are certainly not tolerated (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:69).

Rather, interpreting empirical and theoretical texts rigorously, drawing conclusions based in clear argumentation, and honesty and clarity in chosen directions are important criteria for assessing interpretive research.

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY BUSINESS RESEARCHERS

All research approaches call for reflective researchers. Self-reflection is necessary for transparency and includes a wide range of issues, from underlying values, interests and philosophical assumptions to the choice of research methods, such as what cases to pick who to interview or observe, how to construct the empirical material (i.e. what to include) etc. Self-reflection is difficult since many of the priorities and values held by the researcher might be unconscious. Even so, it is a necessary undertaking in rigorous interpretative research where the researcher is the main research instrument.

An important prerequisite of reflection is the chosen character of the research text. It is essential for the interpretive researcher to pay attention to the use of rhetoric, since the way we talk and write about things make them into what they are (perceived to be). 'Partially at least, interpretations are persuasive not because of their evidential support, but because of their rhetorical appeal' (Shotter, 1993:142). Shotter argues for a conversational writing style. This means that the author gives opportunities for the readers to challenge the text and the results. Researchers should also pay close 'attention to the fact that the desk or office work...is no less important than the field work' (Van Maanen, 1988:138).

Arguments such as these are highly relevant for the interpretative approach. In order to acknowledge the underlying assumptions and open up the text for alternative interpretations the researcher should apply a writing and reporting style that reflects this. Such a style implies 'the replacement of traditional realist discourse with forms of writing cast in opposition to 'truth telling', (...) signal(ing) to the reader that the account does not function as a map of the world...but as an interpretative activity' (Gergen and Gergen, 2001:1029).

Ethical considerations are also a crucial. Given the in-depth nature of high-quality interpretative research, good access to families and their businesses is necessary for achieving new and interesting results that can enrich the field of family business

research. Good access builds on relationships based on trust. Once established, trust might lead to the revealing of experiences, thoughts and emotions which individuals would normally not voice. This is especially the case in the family business context where relations between key individuals are simultaneously professional and private. When disagreeing with a colleague at the same time means disagreeing with a close family member, there is no option of taking the problem home, and vice versa.

Therefore, in family business research, it is not unlikely that researchers will find themselves involved in private and often confidential conversations. An experienced and skilled researcher is likely to have a good empathic understanding and the likelihood of good access to individuals' experiences, meanings and stories increase. Out of respect for the individual's and the family's integrity, the researcher might have to exclude relevant, interesting – but at the same time also revealing or hurting information – even at the cost of less transparent interpretations. Serious judgment and reporting of the choices made will then be necessary.

Interpretive research further means that many of the analytical tools of quantitative and more positivistic research approaches are replaced by the judgments of the researcher and 'a more or less explicit dialogue with the research subject, with aspects of the researcher that are not entrenched behind a research position, and with the reader' (Maranhao, 1991, in Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2001:248). The researcher ceases to be an objective finder of the truth (given the right methods correctly applied) but turns into a subject; a socially and culturally situated co-producer of the social reality. As such, the researcher's values, pre-understanding, choice of focus and language influence the research process and the resulting contributions. Moreover, by abandoning the role of the researcher as an objective transmitter of facts, interpretive research means arguing for special cases of understanding making the researcher an advocate of a particular way of seeing the world (Stake, 1995:92). This way of understanding is part

of the ongoing conversation – with academics and practitioners – through with reality is constructed and reconstructed.

Interpretive family business research requires a lot of work, choices, and ethical judgments in both reading and empirical work. These time consuming efforts may, however, be worthwhile, as the result of good interpretive research often is novel, surprising and thought evoking understandings that contribute to theoretically and practically relevant perspectives on everyday life situations. Indeed, this is the kind of research requested by many family business researchers and practitioners (Zahra and Sharma, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This article discusses the interpretive approach as a useful means of researching and understanding complex, tacit and sometimes ambiguous organizational phenomena in family businesses. Our focus is on the overall character and relevance of the interpretive approach, some key decisions in the research process, the challenges facing the researcher applying it, and the contributions of interpretive research in the case of studying family businesses.

Handler (1989) observes that studying family businesses inherently means researching families. This means that the history and socio-psychological development of the owner-family typically have considerable impact on both the content and the process of research (Handler, 1989:264). Goffee (1996) argues for more in-depth and longitudinal research into these complex relationships and interactions of family businesses favoring ‘an emphasis on qualitative research methods rather than more quantitative survey techniques’, where ‘detailed case studies using both participant and non-participant observation are more likely to yield insight’ (Goffee, 1996: 46). We

believe that the interpretive approach discussed in this article is apt for this kind of requested studies in order to move the field of family business research forward.

More specifically, the main contributions of this article are at least twofold. First, we visualize contemporary exemplar studies using an interpretive approach. This we do to in order to position the interpretive approach in the growing field of family business research and establish the relevance and usefulness of this research approach for a deeper understanding of complex family business phenomena that requires in-depth and detailed scholarly attention. Second, we use the exemplar studies as well as our own experience as a point of departure to describe and discuss the characteristics and strengths of the interpretive approach for research on family businesses. We argue that family businesses as social and organizational phenomena are especially apt as a context for research adopting an interpretive approach. Many of the features and dimensions that makes family businesses unique compared to other types of businesses, are indeed only possible to capture and grasp through such in-depth, detailed and close research methods. At the same time, the interpretive approach is an appropriate approach to further investigate and understand the differences within the heterogeneous population of family businesses (Melin and Nordqvist, 2007).

Our key argument is thus that systematic and rigorous interpretive research is needed to further the understanding of family businesses. For academics, a key results of well designed interpretive research is generalized meaning, i.e. theory (new, revised or extended concepts and language), that can be used as building block for further deeper scholarly insights into the complexities and dynamics of family businesses. Here, it is important to point out that studies of family businesses should not only relate to the specific field of family business research and be disseminated in journals and books solely devoted to this topic. The relevance of tacit, micro and relational aspects of organizational life is not delimited to businesses owned and managed by families.

Rather, 'complex interpersonal linkages, emotions and affectionate ties predominate in all organizations (even if) possibly more complex and embedded in family firms' (Fletcher, 2000:164). We believe that interpretive research on family business can help to uncover and visualize important but often hard-to-get-at phenomena at the micro-level of social interaction and organizational development. Therefore, high-quality interpretive research into family businesses that both apply and generate theory have the potential to 'refute or modify time-worn truths about the nature of organizations, and such knowledge will undoubtedly make its way into journal articles and text-books' (Dyer, 1994: 125).

In practical terms, the ultimate goal of the interpretive approach is to 'help practitioners to think more creatively about the complex shifting world in which they operate' (Pettigrew et al., 2002:480). In complex family business realities the ability of critical and creative thinking is a very powerful source of development and change. It is therefore important to understand and be sensitive to family dynamics, not only as an inherent advantage or disadvantage to the business, but as an integral part of it. Not the least this is the case when it comes to giving relevant advice to owners and managers of these organizations. Indeed, 'intervening in family firms can be dangerous if the interdependencies between the family and the business system are not understood' (McCollom, 1988:399). It is therefore highly important that 'family managers and professionals working with family firms...learn...about the effectiveness and endurance of the family firms by understanding the family dynamics that contribute to the management of business operations' (James, 1991:61).

The outcome of interpretive research for family businesses should thus be to contribute with well-grounded theories and concepts leading to questioning of established ways of understanding phenomena, and the construction of new, or

modified, ways of seeing them that can assist both researchers and practitioners interested in the exciting life of family businesses.

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Figure 1. Selected exemplar family business studies using an interpretive approach

Author (year), outlet	Topic	Theory/concepts	Empirical material (data collection strategy)	Main findings and contribution
McCollom (1992) <i>Family Business Review</i>	Family and non-family employees experiences of membership in a family business system	Family business system theory	565 stories from family owned retail firms	Stories reflect daily processes by which relations between family and business systems are created and sustained; through stories a system is constructed that reinforces a family's influence over the business
Cole (1997) <i>Family Business Review</i>	Role of women and impact of gender issues on women's working lives	Gender, role and rules	Study of women in context of their business family in nine firms (interviews)	Women treat other women as invisible, they do not accept traditional roles, they take longer to make decisions, they advance as fast as men and believe they decide how much children hold them back professionally
Johannisson and Huse (2000) <i>Entrepreneurship & Regional Development</i>	Recruiting non-family board members	Governance, contrasting ideologies (paternalism, managerialism, entrepreneurialism)	Pilot survey of 12 family businesses, case research into two family businesses (interviews)	Activating the board by adding non-family members enforces managerialism and challenges dominant ideologies of paternalism and entrepreneurship; tensions can create energized and more competitive family business
Hall, Melin and Nordqvist (2001) <i>Family Business Review</i>	Corporate entrepreneurship as strategic renewal and a change process	Culture and learning	Case research into two family businesses (interviews and observations)	Some cultural patterns preserve traditional ways of doing business, others facilitate change. To support entrepreneurship, a process of high-order learning in which old cultural patterns are questioned and changed is needed. To accomplish this, the culture needs to be explicit and open
Ram (2001) <i>Human Relations</i>	The impact of family dynamics on management of professional service firm	Small business management, family system, kinship ties, household	Case research in one family business (interviews, company visits, observations and	Household relations (rather than entrepreneurial individual) important for understanding operations; tendency to

			documents)	underplay female partner; employees both value 'family' aspects of organizational culture
Fletcher (2002) <i>Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development</i>	Professionalization of the small, family business	Networks, culture, organizing	Ethnography of one family firm (observation, interviews, documents)	Employees shape cultural organizing by invoking emotional categories to produce mutuality and a sense of belonging; individuals try to trade away variance, divergent views and new practices
Ainsworth and Wolfram Cox (2003) <i>Organization Studies</i>	Dynamics of compliance, resistance and control	Culture, shared understanding of divisions, interpretive divisions	Case research into two small family firms (interviews, site visits, observations, documents)	Employee perspectives shed light on critical aspects of family business cultures, family has symbolic, material and ideological meaning; family is hierarchical and gendered
Hall, Melin and Nordqvist (2006) <i>Handbook of Research on Family Businesses</i>	Family and ownership influence on micro strategic processes of change	Arena, legitimacy, role and value, social interaction	One case illustration of a medium-sized family business	Strategic practices and activities are embedded in values, and challenging these might lead to role confusion, questioned legitimacy and thereby decreased organizational efficiency
Hamilton (2006) <i>International Small Business Journal</i>	Role of women in founding and establishing family businesses	Patriarchy, identity, gender, entrepreneurship	Study of two generations in three business families (interviews)	Women resist and challenge patriarchy, given way to an alternative understanding of their previously marginalized role on family businesses
Steier (2007) <i>Journal of Business Research</i>	Family's role for entrepreneurial start-up	Entrepreneurship, narrations, family ties	Case research into one start-up (interviews, company visits, documents)	Family is an important "sub-narrative" to understand start-up processes; family very important as support
Nordqvist and Melin (2008) <i>Long Range Planning</i>	The role of actors in strategic planning processes	Strategy-as-practice, champions	Case research into two family business strategic planning processes (interviews, observations and documents)	Strategic planning champions as key strategic practitioners, acting as known strangers, artful interpreters and social craftpersons to lead strategic planning
Hall and Nordqvist (2008) <i>Family Business Review</i>	Professional Management	Culture and symbolic interactionism	Case research into five family firms (interviews, observations)	Professional management consists of formal and cultural competence; family members can also be professional managers