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The case study method in family business research: Guidelines for qualitative scholarship

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we provide guidelines that are useful to family business researchers when deciding whether and how to use case studies as well as to reviewers and editors when evaluating case study work. Drawing on examples from our published qualitative research and the complementary insights from other case study work in the field, we offer general suggestions for choosing the case study design, defining the unit of analysis, selecting cases (sampling), collecting information, analysing information, presenting results and ensuring validity and reliability in research findings. By outlining the most important and distinctive challenges faced by qualitative researchers of family business and establishing the relevance and usefulness of the case study method for generating new and valuable insights into family businesses, this article attempts to move the family business field beyond its current state, encourages scholars to engage in the case study method in high-quality family business research, and suggests important implications for scholars, reviewers and editors of case studies in the family business field.

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1. Introduction

As family business researchers who frequently work with qualitative data, we are often asked to give seminars on how to conduct qualitative research and review qualitative papers. Through these experiences, we have deemed that there is widespread misunderstanding about the range of roles that qualitative data can play in research on family business and how qualitative methods should be used to generate high-quality and publishable research on family business.

Among qualitative methods, case studies play a particularly important role, as they represent one of the most adopted qualitative methods in organisational studies (Eisenhardt, 1989) and have been acknowledged as an approach to generating and testing theory that has provided the mainstream management field with ground-breaking insights (Burgelman, 1983; Chandler, 1962; Penrose, 1960; Pettigrew, 1973). Moreover, case studies have been the most used qualitative methodology in family business research to date (De Massis, Sharma, Chua, Chrisman, & Kotlar, 2012). To family business students and scholars unfamiliar with the case study methodology, there is often a misconception about what a case study is and how it can inform theory building and professional practice as a form of qualitative research. For example, in a doctoral-level introductory qualitative research methods course, we have listened to attendants describe their view of case studies as a suitable methodology that should be primarily used for descriptive purposes, mostly used in areas of nascent theory or to exclusively study individuals or specific historical events.

In our view, family business is a heterogeneous field that encompasses multiple theoretical approaches and levels of analysis, and we believe that diversity can and should be reflected in the way in which case studies are used. It is often observed that there is no accepted "boilerplate" for writing case study methods and determining quality (Amis & Silk, 2008; Bansal & Corley, 2012; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Maxwell, 2012; Pratt, 2009). This lack of understanding as to what makes "quality" research (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, & Locke, 2008; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Graebner, Martin, & Roundy, 2012) is unfortunate because papers that build theory from case studies are frequently considered the "most interesting" (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and are also among the most impactful papers in the academic community (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consistent with the idea that case studies represent a method that is ideally suited to generating managerially relevant knowledge (Amabile et al., 2001; Leonard-Barton, 1990), we view case studies as a powerful methodology that can be used in a rigorous, creative

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and wide-ranging variety of ways to advance family business research. When the approach is applied as we suggest and in a robust way, it becomes a valuable method for family business scholars to describe complex phenomena, develop new theory or refine and extend existing theories. Our intended contribution in this article is to guide novice or experienced family business scholars who are interested in deepening their knowledge on case study research methods in appreciating the potential value of qualitative methods to enrich their research and in identifying the key elements of designing and implementing qualitative case study research projects. Our goal is to humbly attempt to provide some guidelines that are useful to family business researchers when deciding whether and how to use case studies and hopefully to reviewers and editors when evaluating case study work. An overview of the case study design is provided along with general suggestions for choosing the type of case study approach that is most appropriate for the research question, defining the unit of analysis, selecting cases (sampling), collecting information, analysing information, presenting results and ensuring validity and reliability in research findings. To facilitate the application of these principles, we draw on our own published qualitative studies and the complementary insights from other case study work in the field to provide rich and clear examples of the types of case study designs, research questions, sources of information, sampling techniques, study propositions, and data display frameworks. Specifically, we offer concrete examples of articles and exemplar quotes within these studies that are particularly illustrative of the ideas expressed in this article.

In this way, we hope to help move the family business field beyond its current state by establishing the relevance and usefulness of this particular qualitative research method for generating a richer and deeper understanding of family businesses. We also identify some areas in which we see special opportunities for the use of case study methods. A recent annotated bibliography of the 215 most cited family business studies from 1996 to 2010 has shown that only a scant minority of articles (18) relies on case studies or other qualitative methodologies (De Massis et al., 2012). We hope that this article will encourage an increasing number of scholars to engage in the case study method in high-quality family business research.

2. Choosing the case study design

A case study is a particular strategy for qualitative empirical research that allows an in-depth *investigation* of a contemporary phenomenon *within its real-life context* (Pettigrew, 1973; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Case studies are particularly relevant to organisation and management studies because they promote "understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 533) by using a variety of lenses, which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood. This feature of case studies could be particularly relevant to family business research because family firms exist at the intersection of two systems – the family and the business (Tagiuri & Davis, 1992) – that interact in producing idiosyncratic organisational outcomes. To fully understand the organisational phenomena associated with family involvement in and/or influence on business as well as their antecedents and consequences, researchers need to combine multiple perspectives and navigate multiple levels of analysis. In this respect, the case study design appears to be a well-suited methodology, as it (i) copes with the situation in which there are manifold variables of interest that are embedded in the context of investigation and (ii) relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion (Yin, 2003).

Researchers who decide to use a case study approach must choose what *type* of case study will be conducted (Yin, 2003). The selection of a specific type of case study design will be guided by the overall study objective. An *exploratory* case study should be used when the aim is to understand how a phenomenon takes place. Typical examples of research questions that are particularly suitable to be answered with this type of case study are, for instance, "*How do the individual goals of organisational members influence the organisational goals pursued by family firms?*" or "*How is the product innovation process managed and organised in small-sized firms?*" Exploratory case studies are typically employed to gain an understanding of how organisational dynamics or social processes work:

> In this study, we attempt to broaden and refine the extant theory in the area of organizational goals and goal formulation processes in family firms by addressing the following research question: How do the individual goals of organizational members influence the organizational goals pursued by family firms? [...]. For this purpose, we conducted a theory-building qualitative study to better understand the unexplored dynamics of goal setting in family firms. (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

> More research is needed to uncover how the role of early adopters changes depending on other innovation-specific factors. This article extends prior research by examining how the type of influence played by early adopters is affected by the platform vs. non-platform nature of innovations. (Frattini, Bianchi, De Massis, & Sikimic, 2013)

An *explanatory* case study should be used when the aim is to understand why a phenomenon takes place. For example, this type of case study is particularly suitable to answer research questions such as, "*Why do some successions lead to better outcomes than others?*" or "*Why are family businesses more likely to engage in inter-firm collaborations?*" Most often, the explanatory nature of a case study is combined with its exploratory aim:

> This paper contributes to opening up the "black box" on innovation in family firms by investigating what characterizes their product innovation process [...] Our objective is to gain theoretical clarifications as to *how* and *why* the product innovation process in family firms is different from non-family firms. (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, & Cassia, 2013)

Finally, a *descriptive* case study should be adopted when the aim of the research is to convince someone that a phenomenon is relevant. For example, this type of case study can be used to provide rich evidence-supporting statements such as, "*Family businesses are very likely to fail during the succession process*" or "*Incumbent family firms are subject to organisational inertia when they develop radical innovations*". For example, Dyck, Mauws, Starke, and Mischke (2002) offer a detailed portrait of sequence, timing, technique and communication in executive succession through a longitudinal case study of a failed executive succession in a small, family-owned firm.

In summary, case study research is particularly appropriate to answer *how* and *why* questions or to *describe a phenomenon and the real-life context* in which it occurred. This approach openly contrasts, but hopefully complements, statistical empirical research approaches that are primarily used for confirmatory objectives when researchers already know how a phenomenon happens and have a robust idea of why it happens (i.e., hypothetical deduction is possible) and can quantitatively measure all the variables of interest. In fact, such a research strategy is usually applied to answer *who*, *what*, *where*, *how many*, and *how much* questions.

In addition to choosing a specific type of case study design, different philosophical traditions can be embraced in conducting a case study. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed

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