

Re-framing the Status of Narrative in Family Business Research: Towards an Understanding of Families in Business

– Eleanor Hamilton, Allan Discua Cruz, and Sarah Jack

Every business family has a story to tell - a legend to look up to, a tragedy it dealt with or a triumphant win against the odds. These elements build a narrative that is shared across generations and contributes to the unique familiness of the business. This article seeks to study the relevance of narratives in developing a better understanding of the family's engagement in business. This theoretical paper discusses the utility of the narratives approach for family business strategy research.

Significance of Narratives in Family Business

Most family businesses are deeply connected with a family narrative. They help understand the nature and strength of bonds between the family and business. Narratives also help explain the complexities and subtleties in the creation, management and strategic behaviours of the family firms. Hence, narratives serve as significant analytical tools to study organisational strategy of family firms.

Narratives as a Form of Knowledge and Means to Inquiry

Individual family members' experiences in family and business are shared in the form of narratives. These narratives provide a framework to family business to organise thoughts, memories, meanings, motivations

and experiences. Hence the narratives appear as a form of knowledge and shape the identity of the family in business. These stories may revolve around myths or realities, heroes or villains, family or non-family members, but they help explain the reason for the strategies and practices that a family business follows. As a form of communication narratives describe the organisation's unique culture, its important events and their rationale.

Narratives can serve as effective means to research and enquire about a family business. The authors suggest that examining narratives can bring out the essence of experiences of family members and describe the reason behind their behaviours.

Open and unstructured interview is the most powerful means of enquiry for in-depth understanding of the narratives and the experiences of the family members that lead to the firm's unique familiness. Hence the authors call on family business researchers to explore 'narratives research' for better understanding of families in business.

Challenges in Narratives Based Studies

The authors mention challenges to narratives research and the precautions that researchers must undertake. These precautions are the following:

1. Narratives research must pass the test of **rigour** required for qualitative research.
2. It is important to keep in perspective the social and business setting of the **time and space context** of the narratives. This will provide the right perspective to understand the behaviours and strategies the family business.
3. Gathering information **perspectives** of multiple members may help researchers of aim a better understanding through contrasting narratives based on diverse experiences.
4. It is critical to keep in view of the **cultural context** as it influences decision in family business, for instance as succession norms differ in a patriarchal society similarly strong community norms may influence it in some other way.
5. The researcher must stay **detached** from the narratives and present an objective analysis.

Practical Implications

The study has significant implications for family business. Narratives describe the connection between the family and business systems. Through stories, legends, life experiences and conversations narratives describe how and why strategic decisions are made and the underlying family and business objectives they aim to achieve.

Narratives are unique to ever family business and are a part of the 'familiness' of the family business. Therefore, narratives can be used as effective tools for intergenerational bonding. They can help transfer the shared meaning and motivations to the successor. Narratives can be effective mechanisms to ensure continuity of family legacy and organisation culture.

Hence family business must document and archive their family stories, anecdotes, biographies of senior members etc. so that their unique familiness can be sustained in future.

Source: Journal of Family Business Strategy, (2017), Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 3-12.