

For New Research Insights, Study One Family in Depth

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Academic researchers tend to be very analytical and gravitate to quantitative studies. They're at home studying thousands of pieces of numerical data, testing hypotheses against the data, testing their findings using complex mathematical processes, and generating new understandings made bulletproof by academic rigor. In the case of family business research, they might study data from many families to see common patterns and processes that could be generalized to family firms everywhere.

Few researchers have opted for sitting down with just one family and exploring their histories, patterns, and decisions in great depth and over a long period. This process is called single-case qualitative research, and it accounts for only about 10 percent of the published research on family businesses.

We think that this is a shame, because going deep with one family can do two things. One, it can yield insights that are closer to addressing the unique problems of family firms, and show how they change, evolve, or adapt over time. It can also spotlight some promising areas of study for future quantitative research, involving a wider universe of data, that can generate practical insights for businesses.

Fertile Ground for Deep Inquiry

Family firms are the perfect backdrop for single-case qualitative research. The players tend to remain constant over time, allowing for long periods of study with fewer variables. Their dynamics and complexities are different from those of non-family firms. Focusing on

one family helps researchers study important processes; the contexts, behaviors and interactions that contribute to them; and how they change over time. The insights are richer and yield a better understanding of how a real-life family firm makes decisions and integrates business and family.

For example, in examining three generations of a single business family, Barbera et al. (2018) leveraged multiple generational perspectives to understand vital succession issues in family firms. And for 10 years, Meier and Schier (2016) studied the early succession stage of a public family firm to explore how families mitigate conflicts of interest and collaborate to develop shared visions on future ownership and related outcomes.

While studies like these are rare in family business research, single-case studies have been embraced in the medical field. It's common in medical research to study a single patient and how he or she responds over time to different treatments. Taking a cue from medicine, family business researchers can similarly look at how different strategies and process decisions affect the business over time.

Why Single-Case Research Isn't Common

Single-case qualitative research requires different skills from quantitative research. Many scholars have been trained to be quantitative researchers and have difficulty making the transition. Studying many businesses and analyzing numerical data feels more normal. And if they do try to attempt single-case research, they try to apply the same mindset they use for studying many companies. This overlooks the fact that single-case research requires a different approach, one that is more interpretive. The results of single-case research can't always be widely generalized, and many scholars are

uncomfortable with this constraint. But single-case research can help them develop and test new theories and see how real families adapt to changing contexts.

Three Areas Where it Can Help

We see three particularly useful areas where single-case research can enhance our understanding of important processes at the family firm, and set the stage for more widespread quantitative research of new questions:

- **Family firm goals and the complexities that shape them:** Non-family businesses don't have the same interplay involving the entrepreneur, the business, the customers, and the family. Business goals and family goals are at odds sometimes; in harmony at other times. They involve non-economic goals such as socioemotional wealth, as well as economic goals such as shareholder wealth. Goals and the logic behind them change over time. Studying how these goals and priorities evolve within one family business, and asking many "why" questions, can help us understand family business goals more thoroughly.
- **Family business succession:** Other research has helped us understand succession by studying how attitudes towards it vary by generation. This is a fruitful area for future research. We don't fully understand how families set goals for succession, and which players are involved. Anointing and developing the next leader can take years or decades. It involves not only the current leader but also the family's social environment. With a single-case approach, researchers can follow family firms for a long time to answer questions that have been overlooked in previous research.
- **Strategic decisions:** Many contextual and industry factors influence how a family business is run and the strategies they choose to incorporate. These factors influence the goals, beliefs, and behaviors of family firm owners. Culture also plays a role. Single case research can help us explore questions such as: How does an industry shape family business strategies, routines, and behaviors over time? How does the family's culture impact business decision-making? How do decision-makers change and grow with the changing environment?

Questions for Researchers

Although more single case research is needed and can offer practical insights, researchers who want to contribute to the body of family business literature should consider whether single-case studies are appropriate. Here are some questions to ponder:

1. Does the prospective study aim to explain the intricate dynamics and outcomes of a process?
2. Does studying the process promise to advance extant theory? If so, how?
3. Is there an optimum context to understand the detailed workings of the process?
4. Do insights from the sampled case inform understanding of the same or related phenomena in other settings?
5. Does enough data exist in the case to provide a thick, triangulated explanation of the process?
6. Can the findings and inferences be presented as a true process model?

Conclusion

Case studies involving one family business offer insights that run an inch wide but a mile deep. This rich trove of information on a narrow topic can result in practical insights that resonate with family firms and the people who run them. And because it helps unearth questions that need to be answered, single-case research can shape future quantitative research that has the potential to solve real-world problems, re-shape how family businesses approach processes and transitions, and help them thrive.