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**Advancing Family Business Research Through Narrative Analysis**

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## Abstract

Despite advances in family business research, the field would benefit from greater methodological rigor. However, rigor does not mean convergence of methodologies. In this paper, we adopt a novel approach, based on narrative analysis, to address the succession process in a family business. This interpretive perspective is appropriate for family business studies, which address multifaceted and complex social constructs that are performed by different actors in multiple contexts. Our analysis highlights five key themes, centering around leadership-style and succession, trust and communication, balance between agents, history and identity, and fear of losing one's identity and social standing through the succession process.

*Keywords:* Family business, succession, narrative analysis, autobiography

### **Advancing Family Business Research Through Narrative Analysis**

The objective of this paper is to argue for the adoption of greater multiplicity in methodology in family business studies, by adopting narrative analysis. Our goal is not to suggest a replacement of current methodological views, but to provide researchers and practitioners with an alternative approach and method for understanding the world of family businesses. Specifically, we ask the following contextualized research questions: What is narrative analysis (i.e., approach and method) in family business studies? And how can it contribute to advancing our knowledge of family businesses?

With regard to the first question, narrative analysis is the study of the stories that people tell (Gartner, 2007). A narrative approach brings stories into focus. A narrative method attends to, registers, and systematizes the storied nature of family business life. It traces the order of events, and how plots are related to each other and bind organizational life together – or not (Czarniawska, 1997). A narrative approach, then, attends to language (and language-use, as in writing, or speaking) and its performative effects in the social (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). It is a qualitative approach that brings the reader closer to the phenomenon being studied (Bansal & Corley, 2011). It is an interpretive approach, which can help us understand human behavior and the complex, dynamic and relational quality of social interactions (Cope, 2005; Leitch, Hill, & Harrison, 2010). It also helps to focus on the process through which the shared or contested realities of family businesses arise, are sustained, and are changed (Morgan, 1980), by highlighting relational processes and the context they are embedded in (Gartner, 2007; Hosking & Hjorth, 2004). We argue for this approach as a methodological perspective, concerning not only methods and techniques, but also the theoretical and philosophical assumptions supporting a study (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Leitch et al. 2010).

With regard to the second research question, narrative analysis can give theoretical contributions to family business research by involving practitioners more naturally, and narrating their knowledge, through methods that attend to how they produce/reproduce everyday family business events. Narrative method enables generation of contextualized in-depth empirical material that would not normally be suggested by quantitative methods (Bansal & Corley, 2011; Gartner, 2007). Thus, it can contribute to, or provide openings for, theory development through the richness of its contextualized accounts and the level of precision in its descriptions (Dyer and Sánchez, 1998; Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Nordqvist, Hall, & Melin, 2009). Through narrative analysis, theory is developed not through absolute generalization (axioms or laws), nor by statistical generalization (sample to population), but through patterns of meanings and conceptual bridges (Greenblatt, 1990; Schutz, 1964), following analytical induction (Williams, 2000). As Eisenhardt, with reference to Glaser and Strauss, puts it (1989: 532), "...it is the intimate connection with empirical reality that permits the development of a testable, relevant, and valid theory." A narrative approach provides an intimate connection to empirical realities.

Allow us also to position this paper vis-à-vis dominant family business research, not only in this journal, but also elsewhere, which is characterized by epistemological commitments adopting logico-scientific approaches to explaining 'why?' in terms of statistically backed-up variance theory (cf. Van de Ven & Poole, 2005; Reay & Whetten, 2011). Narrative methods in qualitative research are concerned with 'how?' questions and are developed to meet the challenges of studying and analyzing processes (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). This paper is thus not so much about contributing to theory as it is about opening family business research to new research questions, made possible by a narrative approach and method. We are convinced, however, that this will benefit also 'why?' driven family business research, the same way as multiplicity of methods has strengthened organization

studies and management research (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). A narrative analysis does not operate with general theory or abstracted empiricism, nor with middle-range theory of the propositional kind. Rather it acknowledges that the relationship between method and theory has implications for both, and that, while often seeking to develop middle-range theory (Merton, 1968), its focus is on particulars, on imaginative interpretation, and plausibility (Weick, 1989).

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we introduce narrative analysis and illustrate its prior uses and potential for family business research. Second, we apply narrative analysis to the story of a third-generation family business owner and manager, to show how narrative analysis can enrich the predominantly functionalistic approach to the study of family businesses. This analysis is carried out in two steps (Czarniawska, 2004), through the explication of the story (what does it say?) and its explanation (how does the story say what it says?" and "why does it say what it says?"). Third, we discuss our findings through our exploration of the story ("what do I, the reader, think of all this?"). In order to do so, we apply Burke's (1968) dramatist analysis, which has been adopted by several scholars in various fields, including organizational studies and entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2007; Czarniawska, 1997; Downing, 2005; Gusfield, 1976; O'Connor, 1995; 2004; 2007). Finally, we present concluding remarks, indicating the openings to new theory development, and limitations of our study.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it shows how narrative analysis can offer novel insights into the relational construction of family businesses (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989: 546). By making room for the drama of family businesses, we can further our understanding of the dynamics of their processes (Franzosi, 1998; Gartner, 2010), with a particular focus on family business transfer processes. Second, by bringing in an analytical capacity to study 'how?' questions, it advances family business theory development by complementing the

paradigm-building agenda, characterizing current family business research (Debicki, Matherne III, Kellermanns, & Chrisman, 2009: 159), with a narrative approach. Third, it contributes from a methodological perspective, exemplifying how research can shift focus from individuals and results, to relations and processes (Hjorth, 2007; Sharma, 2008).

### **What is Narrative Analysis?**

Narrative analysis originally grew out of literary theory (Zald, 1996) and, over the last three decades, has generated a “narrative turn” in the social sciences (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Narrative analysis has demonstrated its capacity to develop precise and accurate knowledge of everyday practices in communication studies (Fisher, 1984; 1987), anthropological psychology and therapy (Polkinghorne, 1988), history (White, 1973), cognitive psychology (Bruner, 1986; 1990), economics (McCloskey, 1985), anthropology (Geertz, 1973; 1988), sociology (Abell, 1987; 2004; Franzosi, 1998; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988), marketing (Thompson, 1997), and organization and management studies (Boje, 1991; Brown, 2006; Czarniawska, 1995; 1997; 1998; O’Connor, 1995; Oliver & Roos, 2005; Rappaport, 1993; Starkey & Crane, 2003). It has also been embraced by entrepreneurship research (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004), as witnessed by two special issues in *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (e.g., Jennings, Perren & Carter, 2005) and *Journal of Business Venturing* (e.g., Gartner, 2007). This, in turn, opens for new research questions, hitherto not recognized, as well as new possibilities to test and question existing models and theories of – in our case – family business.

Narrative analysis – which benefits from a study where a narrative approach and method have been used – allows us to examine social dynamics as process. A narrative method makes it possible to study processes in a way that does not squeeze the processual aspect out of our empirical material. The dynamics of living (acting, deciding, organizing, launching, and so on) are performed in language-use, and come to us in the form of small

narratives: “I decided to...”; “I think we need to...”. A researcher using a narrative approach will both tell the story of the many small and oftentimes unconnected (although intimately related) stories of the field of practices studied, and analyze this material using narrative methods. This is why we speak of approach and method as being related to analysis. The approach suggests a mode of engagement – via attention to the storied nature of what we study – and the method is about how this is presented (in narratives) and analyzed.

Instead of arriving at the scene of study when, for instance, a family business has already undertaken its succession process, a narrative method extends the relevant empirical scope to include the emergence of (Gartner, 1993), the becoming of (Hjorth, 2007), the process that results in the next generation taking over (or failing to take over) the ownership and/or management of a family business. Studying the processes in a family business using a narrative approach means that we attend to the social dynamics of relational constructs such as roles, resources, projects, organizations and goals. The problem that a narrative method solves is the lack of timing and eventfulness that characterize the life of the ‘empirical’. When represented via interviews, observations, or surveys, life of the empirical is transformed into the temporality of the rhythms of asking questions, of taking notes, or of responding to propositions. This misses how the empirical is lived before it ends up as ‘empirical material’ in our studies. A narrative approach and method recognizes that life and knowledge are told, storied, narrated, and proposes that we study them in this way, and analyze them accordingly.

This naturally resonates with the ambition of processual approaches (Steyaert, 2007), in entrepreneurship and small business research, which seek to extend our knowledge by including not only the results of what happened, but also their making. For this knowledge to be created, a different time – time of creation, time of becoming – as well as a different temporality – the rhythm of everyday language – need to be part of research. It is with

reference to this form of everyday knowledge (as opposed to scientific knowledge) that a call was made (Bruner, 1990; Czarniawska, 1997; Lyotard, 1979; McCloskey, 1990) for greater attention to stories. As Lyotard put it: “...*the little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative intention, most particularly in science.*” (1979: 61). Stories are how everyday knowledge is circulated. Attending to these stories and how they are circulated is thus a matter of accuracy and realism; about precision and bringing what we study into a ‘high-resolution’ focus. Narrative knowledge relies on sequentiality, on intensity of images, when we identify its plot (schemes for tying together actions and events through time and space) and its power as story.

Scientific knowledge relies on proof of truth and falsity (Bruner, 1990; Czarniawska, 1995). Upon closer scrutiny, however, one quickly notices how scientific knowledge is also storied, and how folk-tales and fiction use facts and play with formal logic. Rapprochement between the two kinds of knowledge is thus proposed (Czarniawska, 1995; Latour, 1988). As Czarniawska (1997) points out, there are a number of traditions within management studies that support this, including case studies and various interpretive traditions (ethnography included).

Narratives have the following traits, according to Czarniawska (1995: 16): “...*sequentiality which ambiguously suggests causality, a recognizable repertoire of plots, unpredictability (suspense) and a moral point...*” In family business, as well as management and organization studies, narrative knowledge has entered in several forms: research written in stories (van Maanen, 1988), stories from the field, scholars that collect stories of the field, and researchers that conceptualize organizational life as story-making and theories thereof as story-reading (van Maanen, 1988: 16). If you want to explain and legitimize action, your rhetorical strategy and intention as a writer draws you towards the style of scientific



knowledge: ‘I propose’, ‘What this model suggests is that...’, ‘Our regression analysis has shown there is a strong connection between...’.

If you want to understand the meaning of a statement, the significance of an act or decision, you interpret and attend to language and stories; i.e., you are drawn to narrative knowledge:

*“The task of understanding [then] depends not on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but rather on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual.”* (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000: 7).

### **Narrative Analysis in Family Business Studies**

Despite significant advances in family business research, the field would benefit from greater methodological rigor both in quantitative and in qualitative studies (Bird, Welsch, Astrachan, & Pistrui, 2002; Chrisman, Sharma, & Taggar, 2007a; Debicki et al., 2009; Sharma, 2004). However, rigor does not necessarily mean convergence of methodologies (Leitch et al., 2010; Morgan, 1980). On the contrary, mirroring developments in older areas, the field’s methodological maturity should correspond to a multiplicity of methods (Roth, 1987) allowing for a greater breadth of research questions to be asked and investigated. Family business research addresses multifaceted and complex social constructs that are performed by a variety of different actors in different contexts (Debicki et al., 2009). This calls for “inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism in research perspectives and approaches”, as long as they are robust, rigorous, trustworthy (Leitch et al., 2010: 68), and resonant with the problem at hand.

A narrative approach can help address family business phenomena in a way that goes beyond calculation and strategic decision making, by encompassing the lively, moving, creative, and dramatic characteristics of family relationships (Hjorth, 2007). By emphasizing

relational, rather than cognitive, aspects, studying and analyzing narratives helps us understand how family businesses are socially created and maintained in emerging interactions among people. Such interactions take place in resonance with the actors' histories, and socio-cultural and economic context (Fletcher, 2007). By taking into account the dramatic nature of family firm processes, a narrative approach can offer new ways of studying these organizations, as well as include new problems that are relevant to investigate.

By using narrative analysis we are attempting to problematize the fact that family business research has not been very receptive to narrative approaches and methods (nor, perhaps, to processual theorizing). The dominant logico-scientific method is based on evidence that is generated without much attention to narrative, temporality, the eventness of the event, the becoming of the new, thus resulting in *thin descriptions* (Geertz, 1973), i.e., texts that call upon reality but end up with an abstraction instead of a richly contextualized description of what is real to those studied. The effect is a lack of intensity which fails to demand our interpretation. A *thick description*, however, would generate recognition and wonder, and our capacity to interpret would increase, enabling us to get in touch with the real in several ways (Greenblatt, 1997), and resulting in greater realism (for the world is complex and lends itself to multiple understandings). A narrative approach helps us base our analyses of the dynamics of family businesses on thick descriptions, intimately acquainted with the sociality of family business life. Narratives can bring lived experience into our study in a form that still carries the temporality and vividness of the real: a form where life is still in language, which is the form of everyday knowledge. Such studies can tell the difference between a wink and a twitch in everyday family business life, and can thus distinguish between an event (resulting from an individual's intention) and the ordinary. The result is knowledge creation based on high-resolution data; theories based on precise articulations of the drama and dynamics of family business life.

### **Empirical Analysis**

In order to illustrate how narrative analysis can be applied to the study of family business, we have chosen the autobiography of a family business owner and manager (Berger, 2007). Autobiographies are a particularly interesting form of narrative “for the study of subjectivity, meaning, motivation and individual agency” (Maynes, Pierce & Laslett, 2008). Autobiographies are a literary genre that tells a verifiable personal story that is written retrospectively about the events in the author’s life that are considered to be important in order to explain to the reader about their actions and intentions (Maynes et al., 2008). When reading autobiographies, it is important to recognize their social, cultural and historical specificity as well as how they have been influenced by literary conventions. Indeed, the autobiography we have analyzed is based on two influential writers who helped shape the Western autobiographical form, Goethe and Rousseau. Following these two models, the family business owner/manager describes his developmental process, writing about his childhood and youth and the shaping of his personality, and suggests that his story is worth telling for the insights it provides.

Tommaso (Tommy) Berger (henceforth Berger senior), born in 1929 in Austria, built upon his grandfather and father’s business to create a food empire in Italy, which included Hag decaffeinated coffee and several bottled mineral waters (e.g., Fiuggi, Sangemini, and Levissima). Although Berger senior’s son, Roberto (henceforth Berger junior), was involved in the management of the family business, when Berger senior started thinking about retirement, he decided not to transfer the family business to his son but to sell it. In 1992, Berger senior put his wealth in a trust fund – i.e., a legal arrangement governing intrafamily wealth transfers, whereby property is managed by a trustee (or trustees) for the benefit of other individuals, in this case himself and his children. Thus, this is the story of a successful

third-generation family business owner who is faced with succession issues and decides to divest his business rather than transferring it to the next generation.

How can we interpret the Berger family business narrative? Narrative theorists have developed a number of frameworks for analyzing stories (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Martin, 1986; Riessman, 2008). In this article we have chosen to work with a model proposed by Barbara Czarniawska, who has devoted several books and articles to clarifying the role, function and importance of narratives in and for social sciences (e.g. Czarniawska, 1999; 2004; 2010). Czarniawska (2004) suggests using Hernadi's (1987) hermeneutic triad (explication, explanation, exploration), which conceptually distinguishes three ways of reading a text – although in practice the reader may read a text in a simultaneous and intertwined manner. In this section we address the first two ways of reading a narrative, as they pertain to the analysis of the story, whilst we address the third way of reading in the next section, where we discuss our findings.

The first way of reading a narrative – explication – is by translating the text into the reader's vocabulary. The reader interprets the story and asks the question “what does it say?”. For a scholar reading a narrative of a family and their business, this will imply understanding the key events of the family and the business, how issues have evolved over time, and so on. The second way – explanation – requires a more critical approach, with the reader asking “how does the text say it?” and “why does it say what it does?”. Here, a scholar will attempt to disassemble, or deconstruct, a text to see how it was made.

### **Step One: Explication (or ‘What?’)**

The most obvious way to explicate – or reconstruct – a narrative is to summarize it (Czarniawska, 2004). This carries a responsibility for a scholar for what they write and a duty to respect their interlocutor, because the same text may be read in a number of different ways. As an illustration, a special issue of *Journal of Business Venturing* on the narrative method

included six different readings of the same text, a story about the founding and operation of a toy store. One reading of the story (O'Connor, 2007) concluded that there was a discrepancy between the surface (the moral of the story claimed by the narrator) and deeper levels of the story (deriving from the narrative analysis). Through a post-structuralist feminist perspective, the same story was read as one that reproduced discriminatory gender relations (Ahl, 2007). A further reading broadened the conventional focus on the constructs we usually analyze as scholars (in this case, opportunity recognition/evaluation/exploitation), by finding parallels between the story and a play by Shakespeare (Hjorth, 2007). Through a narrative reading, we can “tell back” stories of families and family businesses generating new ways of talking about this phenomenon and uncovering new perspectives on the nature of family business (Gartner, 2007).

Another way in which a scholar can respect their interlocutor is by having a multivoiced story, i.e. propose more than one version of a narrative. Every story is told from a particular point of view, with a particular narrative voice (Pentland, 1999). Each version tells its own story and the scholar does not have to take a stand on which one is “right” or “wrong” (Czarniawska, 2004). For example, Baker (2007) contrasted the narrator’s version of the critical events and activities from the toy store narrative (see above) with the – imagined – perspectives of other people in several different roles. Here, in order to explicate the narrative about the Berger family business, we take two different versions of the same story, that of the father (Tommy), which is recounted in his autobiography (Berger, 2007), and of the son (Roberto), which is told in a book written by a journalist (Astone, 2009).

What does this story say? Berger senior’s autobiography (2007) was written four years after he claimed he was excluded from the trust he had set up to manage his wealth. Berger senior was born into a wealthy family, in Vienna, Austria, in 1929. He grew up in Milan, Italy, where his father owned and managed the family business that had been created

in 1890 by his own father. Because the Berger family was Jewish, they had to escape to Switzerland in 1943 – due to the persecution of 1938 racial laws – and there they spent a few years in labour camps. Berger senior writes<sup>1</sup>:

*“... I was a kid with my back covered by pustules, I slept in a dorm, got up in the morning to go sweep the streets or dig vegetable gardens, forced to march, in complete silence, under the watchful eye of the soldier. All because I was a Jewish adolescent who had run away from Italy, even more of an outcast because I was stateless, even more unhappy because I had had a rich and protected childhood.”*

After Italy was liberated from Fascism, Berger senior returned to Italy with his family and started a new life. Together with his father, he rebuilt the family business and created one of Italy’s largest groups in the food industry, which included coffee and mineral water.

*“I became one of the most well established entrepreneurs in Italy. And for 45 years my formula worked: I wanted to work, had courage, and used my intelligence.”*

However, when it was time for his retirement, things did not work out as Berger senior had planned them:

*“... in 1992 I sold [my businesses]. I was 63 years old. My share [was] 150 million dollars... After 45 years of work [I hoped] that would be the final – quiet – stage of my life. But, ten years later, I was abruptly taken back to reality, ... [when I discovered that] like King Lear I had been ousted from the [trust] I had built by investing all my wealth... like him, I was dispossessed by my own children and advisers.”*

As well as managing the family’s wealth, the trust also invested in companies, many of which were selected and managed by the son Roberto. Berger senior tells about his son’s mistakes and bad decisions about risky investments in new economy firms. He also describes

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes have been translated from Italian.

how the rules regulating the trust were changed over time and how he accepted the changes “*to have a quiet life. And why would I ever... believe that they were cheating me? Could I imagine that my son was tending me a trap?... [In 2003 I received] a letter informing me that on March 7 I had been dismissed from being the [trust’s] president.*” This resulted, according to the autobiography, in Berger senior being excluded from the trust’s money and from other benefits (such as his yacht). In 2004, he sued his son Roberto and his advisors for fraud. They reached a settlement in 2006. Berger senior died, at the age of eighty, in 2009 and all the major Italian newspapers reported his death alongside his (version of) his story (e.g., *Corriere della Sera*, 2009).

The same story, told by the son Roberto, appears quite different. This is reported in a chapter of a book written by a journalist (Astone, 2009) on Italy’s latest generation of family business owners and managers:

*“The story of ... Tommaso Berger, [an] eighty year old patriarch who disowned his son (Roberto Berger) ridiculing [him] in front of the whole world, has been widely told by Italian newspapers and televisions. What a shame that the version of this story that [has been] commonly accepted... does not correspond to the truth... Roberto Berger [is] in reality a 40 year old manager with proven managerial skills, a strong international resume and successful experience.”*

*“Nobody asked the son what he thought about it... In many places [Berger senior’s autobiography] does not correspond to the truth. Actually, often the truth is the exact opposite...”*

The journalist cites Berger junior as saying “*I do not deny that some of the investments were making a loss. But it is the normal distribution of risk for a firm that operates as a private equity fund.*” During the ten years under his management, Berger junior claims that the capital in the trust had significantly grown. Numbers are provided to show

how five of the investments made by Berger junior, which are not cited in his father's autobiography, were in fact successful. The journalist also reports that Berger senior's advisers, who were referred to in his autobiography, sued Berger senior for libel in 2007. In the documents they deposited, according to the advisers:

*"... there was no expropriation. [According to them] everything happened according to Mr. Berger's wishes [and he] always maintained a central role."*

According to the documents, although Berger senior had formally – and voluntarily – given up his powers, he was still very much in charge. An agreement had been reached in 2003, according to which all key decisions regarding the trust were to be taken by Berger senior, the trustees and the beneficiaries (Berger senior's son and two daughters), with Berger senior casting the deciding vote in case of a tie.

### **Step Two: Explanation (or 'How?')**

The second step in narrative analysis is to address the question 'how?' or, in Hernadi's (1987) terminology, to explain – or deconstruct – the story. Inevitably, as a scholar asks "how does this text say what it says?", they will also be reacting to the text and asking "how come?" (Czarniawska, 2004; Eco, 1990). Figuring out 'how?' demands concepts – and theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995). Analysis activates concepts by conducting a 'conversation' with the narratives. This conversation results in a third story; that which allows us to understand 'how' what is now the case has thus become, and the less evident meaning of this. If we see a succession process in a family firm that has gone well/bad, we want to understand 'how', by describing the process, or sequence of events, that connects cause and effect (DiMaggio, 1995) and 'converse' using an appropriate set of concepts (which are determined by our purpose).

In the logico-scientific method, explanation is achieved through theoretical models accounting for observed data, synthetic measures, such as aggregates and scales, or



calculation of R-squared (Pentland, 1999). In the narrative method, explanation involves identifying, describing, and understanding the particular and unique. In other words, understanding meaning is achieved through analysis of language; from within relationships between author, text, and reader, rather than pre-existing *per se* (Czarniawska, 2004).

So, how do the Berger narratives say what they say and why do they say it? Let us start from the first question (how). How does Berger senior tell his story? He tells his story through an autobiography, which is therefore written in the first person and – as the rise and fall of a successful family business owner, tricked by his own children and closest advisers – it makes for quite gloomy reading of a victim's story. At the same time, the story is made to appear objective. This is done through quotes (Berger senior often cites what other people have said to him, although this is from memory), by providing facts and figures (for example, when he writes about the acquisition or performance of various of his businesses), and by adding copies of correspondence between himself and his son and various lawyers at the end of the book. Also, when Berger senior talks about his son, he indicates that the conclusions he has reached are based on a third person's opinions, i.e. the managing director for the family business who had been hired at the end of the 1980s:

*“... as a father, I did not feel that I was able to evaluate [Roberto's] abilities objectively and some events... made me doubt his character.”*

The evaluation, in Berger senior's words, was as follows:

*“He told me that my son Roberto... was in his opinion unsuitable to manage a firm... for three reasons. First, he is not able to take decisions, something that is required as an entrepreneur. And when he takes a decision, if it turns out to be wrong, he does not have the capacity nor the courage to change course... Second, he does not see the big picture but just the details. Third, he is easily influenced by individuals who have a strong personality.”*

Now let us turn to how the son tells the story. As noted above, Berger junior's story is told through the words of a journalist (Astone, 2009). The journalist writes that he contacted Berger junior who had decided "*not to take the initiative himself to challenge the accusations... What has happened is already very ugly, with the publication of the book and all that. Imagine what it would be like to continue the quarrel. Also, continuing would have meant being merciless towards my father. Too much. It was better to hope that people would forget.*" This is a much shorter story (a chapter rather than an entire autobiography) and is also made to appear objective, through quotes taken from documents and figures from annual reports. The (journalist's) tone, however, is quite different: it is critical of Berger senior's autobiography as well as of the main Italian newspapers which reported Berger senior's version of the story without asking the son Roberto for his version.

Now we move on to the second question: "why do the stories say what they say"? As before, we will start from Berger senior's (2007) story. Why does Berger senior tell his story? The reading of the text suggests two key reasons. First, Berger senior wants his grandchildren, and indirectly the world, to know what happened to him. In the autobiography, the dedication reads as follows:

*"This book is dedicated to my grandchildren ... whom I practically don't know, so that they can learn about the story of their family and so that in their life they may always be honest, loyal and truthful, therefore be 'just', and may always hold their heads high."*

Berger senior wants to educate, help his future generations learn where they come from.

Second, Berger senior contrasts his upbringing and values to those of his children and his son Roberto in particular, in order to show how they differ. As well as what he writes in the dedication (see above), this is what he writes about himself:

*“... there I was alone, that September morning, with two rolls of gold coins in my pocket and the objective of escaping the Nazis... [The consul] told me the name of a guide, a smuggler I think... I went to his home... and we agreed that three days later we would meet just before curfew... and we would walk with him towards Switzerland... [When I returned home, my father asked me] ‘Tommy, can we trust him? Our lives are at stake.’ If I had to pick the moment when my childhood was over, it was that moment. I was fourteen and my father was putting our family’s fate in my hands.”*

And Berger senior contrasts this with what he writes about his children:

*“...my children grew up as privileged individuals. I thought: ‘I want them to have the childhood and adolescence that were taken away from me.’ That is why I never upset them with stories about the past I had survived. This was a mistake I paid dearly.”*

And about his son Roberto, “my only male descendant, to whom I decided to give my father’s name” and for whom “I had great hopes”:

*“I looked for a school in the United States that would take my son. It was my way to ensure he would have the high level schooling that I had not had. It wasn’t easy, but in the end he was admitted to the Milton Academy in Boston, where the Kennedys had studied, and there he finished his high school. Then, again in Boston, he went to university and graduated in Business Economy. But Roberto had not really matured. What had grown were especially his delusions of grandeur... In 1982, when he graduated, I went to Boston for the ceremony... Four days later... the hotel presented me with a two thousand dollar bill [because Roberto had gone golfing], plus another two thousand for telephone calls to Italy.”*

Why does Berger junior tell his story? According to the book, Berger junior did not take the initiative to tell the story. Instead, the journalist contacted Berger junior in order to

set the record straight because, by listening to one side of the story only, the Italian media had not worried “*about the fact that, by acting in such a way, it is easy to run the risk of writing nonsense.*” However, just before finishing the book, the journalist received a letter from Berger junior in which he gave his version of events. Therein, he talked about his father’s “*constant confusion between personal and business wealth.*” We can understand Berger junior’s story as legitimizing why they (children) had acted as they had towards their father:

*“In the recent past, within our family, there has been great conflict due to significant differences regarding business choices... When dad tried to force decisions, violating governance rules..., this created a violent crisis which ended up in court.”*

### **Discussion**

The third step suggested by Czarniawska (2004) to read a story is exploration, which involves discussing the findings emerging from the first two steps. Exploration is actually closer to writing than to reading, as it involves asking the question “what do I, the reader, think of all this?”. Above, we described this as staging a conversation between central concepts (the theoretical framing) and the stories from the field, and the subsequent writing of the ‘third story’ that this conversation centres on.

#### **Step Three: Exploration (or ‘How to Use?’)**

In order to explore – or construct – a story, the reader needs to become an author (Czarniawska, 2004), backed up with new knowledge, eager to show how it will work (Czarniawska, 2008). In the logico-scientific method, exploration is achieved through the discussion and outlining of conclusions by the researcher. Exploration is a crucial step also in narrative analysis, where transparency of authorship and aim(s) of study are crucial elements, enabling the reader to become more reflexive about what can be learnt. Having different versions of the same story is actually considered “one of the great strengths of narrative as a source of data: the details of how a story is told can speak volumes” (Pentland, 1999;

Riessman, 1993). Ethnographers, Van Maanen (1988) notes, tackle this challenge by adopting realist, confessional, or impressionist styles of writing (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). In the case of narrative analysis, objectivity is considered less meaningful, but possible to produce when drawing upon ‘scientific jargon’, which typically shows less interest in questions of ontology (Heidegger, 1962), epistemology, knowledge-sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and power-knowledge relationships (Foucault, 1980).

Several scholars have used Burke’s (1968) dramatist analysis in order to explore narratives, by looking for congruence, or incongruence, among the five elements of Burke’s pentad (Ahl, 2007; Czarniawska, 1997; Downing, 2005; Gusfield, 1976; O’Connor, 1995; 2004; 2007). The pentad holds together the following five elements: act (what takes place? what is done?); agent (who acts?); agency (how is the act carried out? what means are used?); scene (where does the act take place? what is the background/context?); and purpose (why does the agent act?). Social life is a scripted drama according to Burke, and is as such open to battle over whose script is to pass as ‘true’ or objective. Dramatizing is one way of exploring the conversation between concepts and narratives, i.e., to use this conversation for the writing of a learned one. Burke’s pentad is analyzed below.

*Act.* The act – in the father’s story – proceeds through 45 years of his life, in which he escapes poverty to create a business empire and, later, decides to set up a legal trust, to benefit himself as well as his children and grandchildren. This is typical of stories about family business owners, and entrepreneurs in general, in which the beginning usually emphasizes the main actor’s humble and unfavorable origins, the middle part focuses on action, and the ending is “*imbued with ... tragic pathos*” (Smith, 2005). The narrative culminates in the transfer of the family business and the events resulting from this process. The focal act is neither fully a business exit nor a transgenerational succession, but it has

elements of both. Berger senior does not trust his son and does not believe he is capable of successfully taking over the family business, therefore he decides to sell it. In this sense, he engages in business exit, i.e., he divests the family business as a result of his decision to retire and withdraw from it (Duhaimé & Schwenk, 1985; Salvato, Chirico, & Sharma, 2010). However, at the same time, he gives his son a key role in the management of the trust to which he confers the family wealth resulting from the sale of the business. In this sense there is also succession between two generations and, therefore, this can continue to be considered a family business (Ward, 1987). In the son's story the act centers on the events that take place after the succession, which are characterized by great conflict and end up in court.

*Agent.* There are two main agents in the narratives, father and son. The father is a successful third generation family business owner and manager, whilst the son is a fourth generation family business manager. Other actors include Berger senior's two daughters and his advisors, as well as the trustees.

*Agency.* There are three agencies in the father's story: Berger senior's hard work and application of his skills (corresponding to the act 'growth of the family business'); the creation of the legal trust (corresponding to the act 'succession in the family business'); and Berger junior's "conspiracy" to exclude him from the trust (corresponding to the act 'events triggered by succession in the family business'). In the son's story, the agency consists of the father's handling of the business in a very particularistic manner (Carney, 2005), as his own (rather than the family's) business, and his inability to let go.

*Scene.* There are several scenes, ranging from Italy under Fascist persecution, to modern day Italy, where the children grow up, to Italy in the 1990s during the "*mani pulite*" investigation (literally "clean hands", a series of bribery scandals that involved politics and business).

*Purpose.* Again, we will distinguish between father and son's story. In Berger senior's story, there are actually two purposes, which could be distinguished as the purpose of the narrative and the purpose of the act. The purpose of the narrative is to convey two moral themes that are typical of tales of family business entrepreneurs (Lambrecht, 2005; Smith & Anderson, 2004). The first idea is the social promotion of the values represented by the family business, through an emphasis on independence, perseverance, and the importance of success. The second theme is the promotion of particular values, through an emphasis on how behavior should be ethical (Ahl, 2007). This is communicated in Berger senior's autobiography by the falling from grace of those who do not adopt principles of hard work, independence, prudence, honesty, and decency. For those who do follow such values, such as Berger senior himself, there is the reward of legitimacy (Ahl, 2007), according to the formula "hard work = morality = success = legitimacy" (Smith & Anderson, 2004). Thus, narratives provide a legitimizing context, both personal and social, for entrepreneurship. The purpose of the act (family business succession resulting in the creation of the trust) is illustrated by Berger senior's words: "*My philosophy is straightforward: as a father, I believe I must provide for my children and their offspring*". Instead, from Berger junior's perspective, the purpose of the act (the creation of the trust) is to continue holding on to key decisions in the family business.

While there appears to be congruence in each version of the story among the five elements analyzed above, there clearly is a divergence, particularly in terms of agency and purpose, in the father and son's stories. With regard to the agency, from Berger senior's perspective, the transition of the family business (act) is achieved, after much hard work, through the creation of a legal trust and the subsequent exclusion at the hands of his son. From Berger junior's perspective, instead, the act is achieved through confusion between personal and business wealth and an unwillingness to let go on the part of the father. With

regard to purpose, Berger senior claims to have pursued the act in order to provide for himself and subsequent generations, whereas Berger junior perceives it as an attempt to hold on to key decisions in the family business. Clearly the “ratio” among act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose is unbalanced, expectations are “breached, Trouble ensues. And it is Trouble that provides the engine of drama” (Bruner, 1991). This imbalance is partly caused by differences in the scene: Berger senior was formed in an external context of hardship and persecution and in a familial context that transferred strong values and beliefs. Berger junior, instead, grew up in a much more ordinary external context (modern day Italy) in which there were several examples of prominent politicians and business people who acted in unethical and illegal ways (which in Berger senior’s eyes may have had a bad influence on his son). The familial context was also quite different because Berger junior enjoyed wealth and privileges but was not exposed (again, in his father’s eyes) to the family values and beliefs, because the father was not very present.

When we ‘converse’ about this ‘piece of drama’, facilitated by previous research, some themes stand out. More precisely, five dominant themes emerge from this conversation.

*First theme: leadership-style and succession.* Berger senior acts in a way that seems to be contrary to what research has previously found, i.e. that leaders of family businesses that have been successful under previous generations are less likely to exit the business than those of less successful firms (Salvato et al., 2010). Because family firms often pursue both financial and non-financial objectives, family members are often involved in the management, ownership, or governance of the firm, linking their livelihood and identity to the family firm (Salvato et al., 2010). For this reason, even during difficult times, family firms often carry on for the family’s sake rather than for the firm’s sake (Rosenblatt, 1991) and change may not be implemented for fear of losing family harmony (Salvato et al., 2010). Similarly, divestment decisions are often deferred (Naldi et al., 2007).



By reading the Berger narratives, this discrepancy with the literature can be explained by the fact that Berger senior feels as if he has “earned” ownership and management of the family business, because of the hardship and adversity he experienced during his childhood and adolescence. Similarly, his story about his own father paints a picture of a savvy and hard working man who created his own business from scratch. Instead, the son is portrayed as a privileged child who grew up in a wealthy family and managed to go to university only thanks to the intervention of his father. Thus, the father perceives that the son is unfit to succeed him. This opinion is not based on a lack of appropriate schooling or experience (inside and outside the family business) – both of which Berger junior possesses – nor in his lack of interest – Berger junior is involved in the management of the family business. Instead, it is based on the father’s belief that the son is self-centered, unable to take tough decisions, and easily influenced by other people. Thus it would appear that the father is putting the business ahead of the family. However, the son’s story tells of a father who is unwilling to let go and, by setting up a legal trust, maintains control over the family wealth whilst continuing to enjoy the financial benefits. Who is right? There is probably no “right” and “wrong” interpretation, simply different perceptions of the same acts, through distinct agency and purpose of the two main actors. What is certain is that a great amount of conflict emerges from this dissonance, over the theme of leadership-style and succession.

*Second theme: trust and communication.* The process of transition of the Berger family business creates conflict especially between father and son. The stories clearly bear witness of a lack of communication, perhaps made worse by formalization of the transition process. The family business appears to go through the first two stages of the intergenerational succession process (Churchill & Hatten, 1987): the owner manager stage, in which Berger senior is the only member of the family directly involved in the business, and the training and development stage, in which Berger junior starts to be involved in the

business. However, these stages never seem to develop into the partnership stage between father and son, which would then lead on to the power transfer stage, where responsibilities for the business would go to the son (Churchill & Hatten, 1987). The succession process seems to have been started, probably creating expectations in the son. However, the succession process is then interrupted, creating great conflict. The Berger story lacks several of the elements that are advocated in the literature for a successful transition process: the importance of a trust-based relationship between the incumbent and the successor in determining the process, timing, and effectiveness of the succession (Brockhaus, 2004); a good personal relationship and the cooperation between the incumbent and the successor (Handler, 1992; Hollander & Elman, 1988); and a mutual role adjustment between generations, requiring the incumbent to reduce involvement in the firm over time (Brockhaus, 2004).

*Third theme: balance between agents.* The transition of family businesses should have three main players, or agents, which are connected to and influence each other: the individual, the family, and the business (cf. Lambrecht, 2005). In the Berger narratives, explained by themes one and two above, there is no sense of the family, and focus is instead on the individuals (the father, the son) and on the business (the object of the transfer, that never acquires the status of agent). In the father's story, he positively influences the business, whilst the son negatively influences it through his unreliable behavior, whereas it is the opposite in the son's story (where he depicts himself as wisely using the trust's money as a private equity fund, by diversifying risk, whilst the father is portrayed as wanting to concentrate the wealth in a limited number of –in his opinion safer – investments). The family is not represented in the narratives and, when Berger senior refers to his daughters, they are portrayed as being solely interested in the money. There does not appear to be a vision that is shared by the family, nor communication about key decisions related to the

succession process, which are elements that are key for succession (DeMassis, Chua, & Chrisman, 2008; Dyer, 1986; Ward, 1987). That is, the business is never recognized as an agent, which can often help transcending individual needs or preferences.

*Fourth theme: history and identity.* The Berger family business, despite being longlasting and multigenerational, does not appear to have a strong sense of history and identity (Dyer 1988; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley 2000; Salvato et al., 2010). Berger senior's mindset suggests that he is willing to sell the family business rather than seeing its institutional integrity diluted or even lost (Brunninge, 2005). This is because he sees the family firm's identity as being related more to what he perceives as being his family's (i.e., his own and his father's) values, than to the business itself (Salvato et al., 2010; cf. theme three, the business is never an agent). Rather than focusing on the preservation of the family business in the future, it seems more important for Berger senior to uphold the accomplishments and sacrifices made by previous generations. In the autobiography, Berger senior admits to working too much and not being around much when his children were growing up and this may explain why they did not receive the upbringing that he considers to be crucial for a future career in the family business, through which his son would have familiarized himself with the history, the values, and the culture of the business.

*Fifth theme: letting go as losing identity/standing.* Berger senior's story reveals the father's fear of letting go, which is the most cited obstacle to effective succession (Sharma, Chrisman, Pablo, & Chua, 2001). This is explicitly said in the son's story, but is also implicit in the father's ("*From [my children] I expect to receive ... obedience*"). In family firms, the incumbent often feels that, by retiring, they will also be demoted in their role within the family, lose identity and power, and lose stature in the community (Lansberg, 1988). Instead, by cashing out the family wealth, Berger senior believes he can enjoy his retirement whilst still taking advantage of the financial benefits thanks to his hard work and maintaining

control of the family wealth. Because of his attachment to (the values and identity of) the business, it seems that the potential successor, Berger junior, is never really given a chance to develop the appropriate skills or earn his father's respect and this results in the incumbent deciding that the successor is not competent enough to run the business (DeMassis et al., 2008).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Large-scale surveys conducted among a representative sample of businesses remain the predominant method of research in family business studies (Bird et al., 2002; Davidsson, Low, & Wright, 2001; Dyer & Sánchez, 1998; Grant & Perren, 2002). Qualitative research has mainly been based on case studies (Chenail, 2009). Lambrecht (2005) supplemented case study methodology with biographies of business family dynasties, because *“their life stories confirm and supplement case studies.”* He lamented the fact that *“several researchers have highlighted the fact that there is no connection between planning and successful succession... According to these researchers, succession has been presented as a one-time event, whereas transfer to the next generation must be regarded as a lifelong, continuing process. We must, as it were, step into a time machine that carries us to all corners (e.g., cultural, financial, strategic, and social) of the family business and the business family. Our knowledge about how family business is successfully transferred to following generations is still in its infancy”* (Lambrecht, 2005). Narrative analysis can indeed help us step into that “time machine”. Because family business transfer is a lifelong, continuing process (Lambrecht, 2005), the rich narratives of the participants spanning the generations can help shed light on the relational dynamics of how family and business, as well as family members, are inextricably interconnected.

Our exploration of the Berger story has emphasized five themes that, in this story, prevented successful family business transition. These themes resonate with previous

research on the problems of succession (De Massis et al., 2008). Our narrative analysis of this story has revealed the intensely social nature of family business succession. This approach highlights how the historical tendency in family business research to focus on the individual entrepreneur and his/her psychological or cognitive capacities results into a reduction/limitation. Narratives, instead, carry the relational, dramatic nature of social realities to the fore (Fletcher, 2007; Franzosi, 1998). It seems to us that a densely storied and tightly relational social reality as that of family businesses can in this way be opened to novel approaches of study and analysis. By complementing quantitative methodologies, providing new ways of studying family business phenomena, offering alternative understandings of social relationships in and around the family business, and raising new research questions (Franzosi, 1998; Gartner, 2007; Debicki et al, 2009; Dyer & Sánchez, 1998), we can advance research.

With this paper we have wanted to show how narratives can add new research questions and approaches to FBR's research agenda. Multiplicity of methodologies (approaches, methods, and analytical strategies) help stimulate additional theory development and novel research projects in family business studies. An expanded methodological toolbox will enable a widened scope of inquiry. Contributing to on-going debates in family business research, narrative analysis can provide the possibility to rethink the nature of the subject to which it is addressed. We have offered a methodology that mirrors the current shift in focus in FBR from individuals and results, to relations and processes (Hjorth, 2007; Sharma, 2008). In this sense, it answers the ongoing call for more rigorous methodological research in family business studies, which still rely largely on survey methods (Chrisman et al., 2007; Chua, Chrisman, & Steier, 2003).

The weaknesses of a narrative approach are of course to be found when we want to conduct research that focuses on a macro-level of analysis, such as industry-level. Here the

intimacy with empirical reality can only provide scattered insights that would require vast amounts of field-study time and material to connect. In such cases, quantitative methods are far more effective as well as efficient. Another danger with the richness of data that comes from intimacy and spending time in the field is that idiosyncrasies of a particular case may become over-interpreted and acquire a much too central role (Eco, 1992, Eisenhardt, 1989: 547). As Eisenhardt (1989) points out, idiosyncratic stories may prevent the analyst from raising the level of generality of the theory. Comparing cases is the solution to this problem. Stronger and more relevant theories require both theory building based on the richness of qualitative data and theory testing based on quantitative data.

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