

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

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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

discussion of the philosophical assumptions of qualitative research, except to offer the note that Yin (2003) primarily bases his approach to case study on positivism (Clegg, 2008), with its root in empiricist philosophy and a deductive research approach. Conversely, other scholars base their approach to case study on interpretivism (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Denzin, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schwandt, 2000; Stake, 2005), which is grounded in an inductive research approach.¹ This alternative case study tradition assumes that evidence is formed and shaped in the mind of the researcher (Stake, 1995, 2005). This means that knowledge is constructed rather than revealed, and the researcher works towards reconstructing events and believes that humans are active in the construction of knowledge rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. Thus, knowledge is constructed through the creation of concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of human experience and are continually interpreted and modified by the researcher. This contrasts with positivism, which assumes that the researcher “finds” or simply “observes” findings and obtains knowledge in an objective way. Put differently, interpretative case studies seek to “understand the human experience” (Stake, 1995, p. 38). The inductive research approach is sometimes acknowledged as being particularly suitable to build grounded theory from case study data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Both Fletcher (2000) and Nordqvist, Hall, and Melin (2009) have outlined the importance of interpretivism to advancing the field of family business research. However, although the philosophical tradition is very seldom explicitly stated, the vast majority of case study articles in the family business field are based on the positivistic tradition, with only few exceptions (e.g., Hall, Melin, & Nordqvist, 2001; Hall & Nordqvist, 2008; Nordqvist & Melin, 2010; Parada, Nordqvist, & Gimeno, 2010).

3. Defining the unit of analysis

Once the case study method has been chosen, a very important step in its application is choosing the unit of analysis (case). The unit of analysis can be defined as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). Family business scholars should start by asking themselves what their unit of analysis is; do they want to “analyse” the individual? A group of individuals? A process? A programme? A project within the firm? Differences between firms? Answering these questions can be an appropriate strategy to outline the unit of analysis, and a case study needs to be explicit about the underlying unit of analysis. For example, the research objective may be to understand “*How and why the anatomy of the product innovation process differs between [small] family and non-family firms*” (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al., 2013). In this example, the unit of analysis is the product innovation process of small-sized family and non-family firms. However, it may be that researchers are less interested in the process of product innovation and more interested in focusing specifically on the experiences of R&D and innovation managers of small firms. In this case, the research objective may be to understand “*How R&D and innovation managers of small-sized firms describe their experiences in managing and organising product innovation, and how these descriptions differ in family versus non-family firms*”. In the first example, the unit of analysis would be the management and organisation of product innovation in this group of firms, and it would be a process to be analysed, but in the second

example, the unit of analysis would be the individuals or the experiences of R&D and innovation managers of small-sized firms.

In some cases, researchers may be interested in phenomena that occur at multiple levels. In these circumstances, multiple units of analysis can coexist in the same study, and the researcher's ability to navigate the different units of analysis becomes essential. For example, in our study of organisational goal-setting processes of family firms, we initially noted that the formation of organisational goals involves individuals, groups, and the firm as a whole. Thus, we started with an individual level analysis, we then shifted to the analysis of social interactions between groups of individuals (dyads), and finally, we shifted to the analysis of organisational-level phenomena, i.e., organisational goal diversity and the collective commitment to family-centred goals:

Goal setting involves individuals, groups and firms; nevertheless, the relatively scarce studies available are limited to the *firm level*, typically relying on single informants [...] and overlooking the individual organizational member's role in the process. [...] In describing this process, we begin with an analysis of the goals pursued by organizational members in family firms, which helps inform on the individual-level antecedents of goal setting in family firms and, ultimately, on how goal diversity and goal conflicts arise therein. We continue by analysing the social interaction processes through which goal diversity is managed as well as their implications for [organizational goal diversity] and organizational member commitment to family-centered goals. (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

4. Selecting the cases (sampling)

With the case study method, a very critical decision is the *selection of cases*. Contrary to the sampling approaches typically adopted in quantitative research (e.g., random, stratified, or statistical sampling), cases are *selected because they are particularly suitable for illuminating a phenomenon and for extending relationships and logic among variables*, i.e., *theoretical sampling* (Eisenhardt, 1989; Graebner & Eisenhardt, 2004).

A first, critical choice for researchers is whether it is prudent to conduct a single-case study or if a better understanding of the phenomenon will be gained through conducting a multiple-case study. The theoretical sampling of single cases is straightforward. Single cases are chosen because they are unusually revelatory or extreme exemplars or because they offer opportunities for unusual research access. As an illustration, this is how Karra, Tracey, and Phillips (2006) report the reasons behind the choice of their single case:

We chose to study Neroli for three reasons. First, the case has “*rare or unique*” qualities that make it a logical candidate for “*theoretical sampling*” [...]. Preliminary research revealed that the firm had grown rapidly over a relatively short period of time and relied upon a high level of family involvement. The organization of the firm remained family-based, and most employees were either relatives or shared the same ethnic background as the owner. In addition, the entrepreneur's motivation for founding the firm was the betterment of the family, and the dynamics of the family were therefore central to the firm. Second, Karov provided a very *high level of access to the firm*. We were able to interview him and other important members of the firm on multiple occasions during the period of the study, and he provided us with extensive archival data relating to the history of the firm. In addition, one of the coauthors was able to travel with him to attend key meetings with distributors and retailers in Russia and Eastern Europe and to attend trade shows and visit important suppliers in Italy. She

¹ Although it is not the aim of this article to provide a detailed discussion of the philosophical traditions in qualitative research, it is important to note that beyond positivism and interpretivism, a range of philosophical traditions such as hermeneutics and social constructionism (Schwandt, 2000) or critical realism (Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-tymaki, 2011) inform qualitative research.

was also able to interview all of the family members and other key individuals, including manufacturing partners and employees. Third, the firm was only slightly more than a decade old at the time of the study, and the founder was still the CEO of the company. This was significant because it increased the likelihood that the *details of the founding of the firm and its early development remained fresh in the minds of the founder and other interviewees*. We therefore consider Neroli a “strategic research site” [...] for studying altruism in family business. (Karra et al., 2006, p. 865)

As explained in detail by the authors, the case was chosen because the authors had deep access to the firm and because the case offered a distinctive and extraordinary setting in which to observe the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., the influences of family, kinship, and ethnicity on altruism and agency in family firms). In sum, a single holistic case study typically exploits opportunities to explore a significant phenomenon under *rare, unique or extreme circumstances*. The studies by DeAngelo and DeAngelo (2000), Dyck et al. (2002) and Salvato, Chirico, and Sharma (2010) are other examples of single-case studies in the family business field.

However, although single case studies can richly and persuasively describe a phenomenon (Siggelkow, 2007), this approach also suffers from serious limitations, especially related to the external validity of results.² In this regard, *multiple-case studies* typically provide a stronger base for *theory building* or *explanation*. Multiple cases enable comparisons that clarify whether an emergent finding is simply idiosyncratic to a single case or consistently replicated by several cases. Thus, a multiple-case study will allow the family business researcher to analyse within each setting and across settings. Overall, the theory created from multiple cases is considered more robust because the arguments are more deeply grounded in varied empirical evidence. However, the theoretical sampling of a multiple-case study is more difficult and complex. Indeed, the sample cases must be selected for theoretical reasons, i.e., because they allow the prediction of similar results (literal replication) or contrasting results but for predictable reasons (theoretical replication) or because they allow the elimination of alternative explanations (Yin, 2003). A particularly important theoretical sampling approach that is widely used in the family business field is “polar types” sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) in which a researcher samples extreme cases (e.g., along dimensions of structure, behaviour, or performance) in order to more easily observe contrasting patterns in the data. Such an approach can positively impress reviewers and prospective readers because the resulting theory is likely to be very consistently supported by the empirical evidence and thus allows “*very clear pattern recognition of the central constructs, relationships, and logic of the focal phenomenon*” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). Our two studies of product innovation in family versus non-family firms and goal-setting processes in family firms provide examples of polar sampling:

Our study involved 10 Italian firms, five of which are family and five non-family businesses, according to a “polar type” sampling logic [...] We decided to focus on firms which are well respected for their prowess and success in the area of product innovation. Having selected companies that consider product innovation a critical determinant of their competitive advantage, we could not misinterpret differences in the

anatomy of the product innovation process due to heterogeneity in the strategic relevance assigned to this activity [...] We adopted this convenience, theoretical sampling approach because we needed to create an experimental empirical basis that allowed us to study the phenomenon under particularly insightful and illuminating circumstances. (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al., 2013)

We represent the segmentation of the family firm’s organizational members by examining Chief Executive Officers, professional (non-family) top executives, young generation family members, family CEO spouses and old generation family members. This set of organizational members maximized the differences along four dimensions that were considered particularly relevant to our study. First, we selected individuals that own equity shares of the firm and others that do not, since ownership is likely to affect the incentives and priorities of organizational members [...]. Second, we selected family members as well as non-family members because the latter could be expected to follow a self-serving attitude, whereas family members are possibly more oriented towards the family firm’s collectivistic goals [...]. Third, we selected family members who are actively involved in the business and those who are not, since they may differ in terms of their power in the organization and how they perceive the family and business priorities [...]. Fourth, we selected family members that belong to the current CEO’s generation, to the younger generation and to the older generation, since research has pointed to relevant differences between incumbents and descendants [...]. Given these differences among the types of family firms and organizational members, we felt that this combination would provide enough distinct windows through which to view organizational member individual goals. Taken together, this sample and context provide an excellent opportunity to examine goal setting in family firms. (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

As reported in the quotes taken from the two exemplars above, the selected cases should offer *enough distinct windows* through which to observe an investigated phenomenon in a unique and extraordinary way. In a case study, researchers should not underestimate the importance of explaining the sampling approach adopted for the selection of cases. We encourage family business scholars to provide a clear *rationale for the case study selection* and ample details on the *case study context* (e.g., competitive dynamics, financial data, the business lifecycle, and the generation of family control) to allow the reader to appreciate the researchers’ sampling choices. The studies by Howorth, Westhead, and Wright (2004) and Johannisson and Huse (2000) are other examples of multiple-case studies in the family business field where the authors explicitly state and explain the theoretical sampling approach. In addition, robust case study articles not only convey the rationale for case selection to the reader but also actually seek to *convince the reader of its appropriateness* for a given research question. Continuing with the example of product innovation in family versus non-family firms, this is how we justify to the reader why the characteristics of the selected firms in terms of importance attached to product innovation and small size are particularly suitable for their research objective:

We decided to focus on firms which are well respected for their prowess and success in the area of product innovation. Having selected companies that consider product innovation a critical determinant of their competitive advantage, we could not misinterpret differences in the anatomy of the product innovation process due to heterogeneity in the strategic relevance assigned to this activity. Finally, we decided to include in our sample only small companies [...]. First, this choice was suggested by the fact that product innovation is

² It should be noted the existence of a trade-off between researching a single case and comparing multiple cases. Although in single cases the external validity of results is threatened and it may also be difficult to convey the specificity of the case to other researchers, single cases, if compared to multiple cases, generally allow for “ticker”, that is, more detailed descriptions and involve more in-depth (often longitudinal) understanding of the specifics of the broader context of the case.

considered one of the most critical determinants of sustained competitive advantage for this category of firms [...]. Second, innovation in small firms has several peculiarities which differentiate it from large companies [...]. What is more, scholarly research has thus far focused in particular on large firms and only to a lesser extent on small firms [...]. By focusing on small companies only, we also reduced the risk of unobserved heterogeneity due to differences in the size of the family and non-family firms in our sample. (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno et al., 2013)

Instead of conducting and analysing multiple case studies of different organisations, researchers might also want to conduct different case studies within one organisation (a nested approach, e.g., Yin, 2003). This occurs, for example, in project-level case studies where the unit of analysis is a specific type of project that is conducted within an existing organisation.

5. Collecting information

Very often, researchers assume that case studies should only rely on qualitative data. This is clearly a misconception, as there are no empirical research methods that only use qualitative or quantitative data. Data in the case study method are collected by multiple means that may consist of potential qualitative data sources, such as interviews, direct observations, including ethnographical and anthropological data collection techniques, documentation, and historical records, as well as quantitative data sources (e.g., surveys). Case study data often provide advantages in being able to integrate both objective and perceptual data. This integration is particularly important in family business research where family relationships and business issues are typically inseparable in decision-making; thus, the use of a variety of different data, including the combination of subjective or interpretative and more objective factual information, can add much to our understanding of organisational processes and outcomes. The use of *multiple data sources* enhances data credibility (Patton, 1990). Each data source is one piece of the “puzzle”, with each piece contributing to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon. This convergence adds strength to the findings, as the various components of data are interweaved together to promote a wide-ranging understanding of the case. The two examples from our studies already discussed in the previous section offer an illustration of the use of multiple sources of data in a case study:

We undertook interviews and gathered non-participant observations and archival documents from 19 family firms, thereafter analysing these qualitative data to disclose the unexplored dynamics of goal setting in family firms. (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

As regards data collection, we gathered information mainly through direct interviews, undertaken between October 2009 and December 2010. Specifically, the following steps were taken: At the outset of each case, a relationship was established with a senior manager from the selected firm. This person was briefed about the research project through a written project summary and a telephone meeting. During this meeting, we asked the respondent to introduce us to the entire top-management team and the staff in charge of product innovation. Then we personally interviewed at least two informants for each company. We undertook two semi-structured interviews for each respondent (each lasting on average one and a half hours), for a total of more than 35 hours of personal interviews. Direct interviews followed a semi-structured replicable guide that comprised a set of open questions for

each area of the product innovation process included in the theoretical framework. Secondary information was collected in the form of company reports and project documentation. In particular, we gathered and analyzed all the available company documents, catalogs, family information and reports of product innovation projects. This informed the researchers with background information about the selected firms, the type of product innovation they undertake and the approaches they use to administer product innovation activities. Above all, these secondary information sources were integrated, in a triangulation process, with data drawn from the direct interviews, in order to avoid post hoc rationalization and to ensure construct validity. (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al., 2013)

Another remarkable example of use of multiple data sources in a single-case study in the family business field is the article by Astrachan (1988), where the author integrates data collected from a wide range of sources (interviews, historical records, financial data, production data, observation, and media accounts) to provide a thorough exploration of how the culture of a parent company affects the culture and performance of the family firm when a family firm is acquired. The studies by Steier (2001), Steier and Miller (2010), and Lambrecht (2005) are other illustrative examples of family business case studies combining multiple sources of data.

Interviews are often the primary data source in case studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). They are a targeted, insightful and highly efficient means by which to collect rich, empirical data, especially when the phenomenon of interest is highly episodic and uncommon. However, interviews are often characterised by several weaknesses, such as bias due to poorly articulated questions, response or personal interpretation bias. In addition, other sources of error may contaminate interviewee reports, especially retrospective accounts (Golden, 1992; Huber & Power, 1985; Schwenk, 1985). Interviewee reports may suffer from informants’ memory failure or inaccurate recall of past events (Golden, 1992) as well as from memory distortion (Nutt, 1986). The latter can result from hindsight bias, attributional bias, subconscious attempts to maintain self-esteem, or impression management (Huber & Power, 1985; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). The challenge presented by interview data is best mitigated by data collection approaches that limit bias. A key approach is using *many different and well-informed interviewees* who view the focal phenomenon from different perspectives. These interviewees can include family and non-family members, organisational actors from different hierarchical levels, generations, organisational functions, and geographies, as well as actors from other relevant organisations and outside observers such as management consultants. It is unlikely that these varied interviewees will engage in convergent retrospective sensemaking and/or impression management. Table 1 illustrates the demography of interviewees in our two studies on product innovation in family versus non-family firms and on the role of early adopters in the diffusion of new products in platform versus non-platform innovations.

Another key approach to mitigating bias is to *combine interviews with direct observations*. For example, in the study on goal-setting processes in family firms (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013), direct interviews were combined with non-participant observations. Specifically, informants were followed during family and business meetings (e.g., meetings of the board of directors, family meetings, and casual meetings such as family dinners), formulating general observations of how goals form part of everyday family and business life. Interviews are appropriate when family business scholars seek to gain a broad understanding of what interviewees consider important or when the research topic focuses on deeply held values or beliefs and complex dynamics of family and business that require

Table 1
Examples of the demography of interviewees in case studies.

Firm	Interviewees	Age range	
A:			
Firm A	CEO (father)	61–80	
	Chief Commercial Officer (son)	25–40	
	Chief Technical Officer (son)	25–40	
Firm B	CEO (father)	61–80	
	Head of R&D (brother-in-law)	41–60	
	Chief Commercial Officer (son)	25–40	
Firm C	CEO (son)	41–60	
	Chief Technical Officer (father)	61–80	
	HR Executive Officer (non-family manager)	25–40	
Firm D	CEO (father)	61–80	
	Chief Technical Officer (son)	41–60	
Firm E	CEO (father)	61–80	
	Head of R&D (father's brother)	41–60	
Firm F	CEO	41–60	
	Director of Technical Department	41–60	
Firm G	CEO	61–80	
	Head of R&D	41–60	
	Chief Commercial Officer	25–40	
Firm H	CEO	61–80	
	Chief Technical Officer	41–60	
Firm I	CEO	41–60	
	Head of R&D	25–40	
	Chief Designer	25–40	
Firm L	CEO	61–80	
	Director of Innovation	41–60	
	HR Executive Officer	41–60	
Company	Key informants in the innovating firms	Key informants in early adopters	Key informants in late adopters
B:			
Company A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing manager • Sales agent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility manager of a large bank 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility manager of an industrial firm
Company B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product manager • General manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientific director of a large public research institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professor with responsibility for managing a university laboratory
Company C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chairman and chief marketing manager • General manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General manager of one of the most well-respected and high-quality Italian wool producers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of operations of a textile manufacturer
Company D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product development manager • Product manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of the engineering department of a medium-sized biscuit producer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of operations of an Italian pasta manufacturer
Company E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing developer • Sales agent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General manager of a well-respected wine producer from the North of Italy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owner of a winery
Company F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business team manager • Marketing manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of the purchasing department of a large Italian bank 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was not possible to interview any late adopter
Company G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General manager • Marketing manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was not possible to interview any early adopter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical director of a large manufacturer of plastic components
Company H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of clinic engineering of a large public Italian hospital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General manager of a private hospital

A: Adapted from De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al. (2013); B: Adapted from Frattini, Bianchi, De Massis, and Sikimic (2013).

potentially unexpected, thoughtful responses from interviewees. For example, we relied extensively on interviews with family business CEOs in our multiple-case study on social capital in family firms (De Massis, Kotlar, & Frattini, 2013) because our aim was to understand CEO perceptions of competitive advantages and disadvantages deriving from social capital resources.

Direct observations require that researchers spend time observing and experiencing organisational life in a firm or in a sample of firms. Thus, these observations are very time-consuming and costly, but they allow researchers to obtain “rich insights into the human, social and organisational aspects of business organizations” (Myers, 2013, p. 92). This data source is particularly suited to studying aspects of organisational culture because it is only by experiencing organisational life that the underlying values and philosophies commonly held by organisational members can even begin to be understood. Researchers must *spend protracted periods of time immersed* in the organisation (e.g., attending business meetings, family councils or boards of directors meetings or observing R&D work or corporate classrooms) and are typically overwhelmed by very large volumes of data. For example, in our study on goal-setting processes in family firms (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013), we observed at least three meetings in each of the 19 family

firms. These observations provided a large volume of data that allowed the confirmation of informant descriptions of their organisational roles, an assessment of the general family business environment, and observation of the processes through which organisational goals are set as closely as possible. Both participant and non-participant observations can be used in a case study. The former occurs when the observers take a role and involve themselves in the group or process being studied. The main problem associated with participant observations is the risk that the researcher becomes too closely involved and loses detachment, which deteriorates the impartial reporting of collected evidence. On the other hand, a non-participant observer is detached from the group or process being investigated, so the potential for bias is mitigated. In addition to observing, it is important that researchers *make field notes* to record their observations. This data source can be particularly useful to answer research questions about family firms that relate to their organisational culture, such as “How do family values and the family tradition play a role in shaping the innovation process of family firms?” or “How do family values and goals are transferred over generations?”

Every firm records a substantial amount of information about itself, and there is often a large amount of information about an

organisation that is recorded by others. *Documentation* is a stable, unobtrusive and exact source of data, but its weakness stems from low retrievability, biased selectivity and potentially difficult access to such documents. This difficulty in accessing documents can be exacerbated in family firms that are known to be protective of their privacy (Gersick, Davis, Hampton, & Lansberg, 1997; Tagiuri & Davis, 1996). For example, in our study of goal setting in family business, we made use of different types of documentation:

We gathered archival documents from various sources in all firms, including contracts, historical books about the organization and the family, corporate websites, news articles about the firm and the family, and firm pamphlets. (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

In case study research, documents are typically used to corroborate and augment evidence from additional sources, as we did in the example mentioned previously: “*Taken together, these secondary sources of data provided a richer context to understand goal setting in family firms [...] and corroborate the collected evidence*” (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013).

Historical records are documents that have been amassed over time in the span of an individual's or organisation's existence. Historical analysis is the process of assembling, critically examining, and summarising these records of the past (e.g., articles, books, business reports, and periodicals) that are typically gathered through publicly available, published sources of information. It is worth noting that historical analysis does not only mean digging into the past to recover data but also frame the evidence collected into the proper context, which may be extremely different from the present (Colli, 2012; Colli, Howorth, & Rose, 2013). This data collection technique is characterised by several advantages. First, it focuses on information collected at the time in which the events occurred (not retrospective). It uses information gathered from multiple sources (i.e., different reporters, scholars, and market experts), allowing the collection of primarily factual data (not interpretative). It is particularly well suited for studying the chronological dimensions of past events. More specifically, historical records allow family business scholars to consider time horizons that are longer than a standard research project and even longer than a particular individual's lifespan. In addition, the analysis of historical records is increasingly considered to be relevant not only because it provides longitudinal evidence but also because it has the potential to develop and extend existing theory and to build new theory thanks to the mastery of “two key comparators” – time and space (Buckley, 2009). As such, historical records can be very useful for family business researchers who are interested in long-term trends (e.g., generational transitions over lengthy periods of time) or multiple generations of family involvement and prove to be particularly useful in some critical areas of family business research that directly deal with the “long run”, such as intra-family succession, knowledge transfer and accumulation, and corporate values. Ibrahim, Soufani, and Lam (2001), for example, use historical records to study how intra-family succession occurred through multiple generations:

First, a study of public documents was conducted. Second, to reduce the amount of data to a manageable form, critical decisions, actions, and incidents were identified in chronological order. Third, investigation of each generational period was carried out and a case history was developed. Finally, critical actions and incidents were triangulated to establish validity.

Miller, Steier, and Le Breton-Miller (2003) offer another example of exploratory inductive study based on historical book accounts of thirteen major family firms as well as a series of newspaper and journal articles that the authors compiled on what

happened to the strategy and organisation of these family firms during 5–10 years after succession.

In sum, the use of multiple sources of data is a strength of a case study. By using different data sources, researchers can *triangulate*, that is, adopt, different angles from which to observe the same phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Jick, 1979; Pettigrew, 1990; Stake, 2013; Yin, 1984), thus making their findings more convincing and accurate (Tracy, 2010). The triangulation of evidence from multiple data sources is especially important in the family business setting, where it is particularly difficult to separate family relationships and aspects related to the family sphere from business decision making. However, the prerequisites for using multiple sources include the availability of resources and sufficient knowledge in different data collection techniques. Moreover, the views of different types of organisational members in the family business may be very heterogeneous. For example, the views of family members may systematically vary from those of non-family members because the family status or organisational roles of both influence their interpretations. Two practical problems that are typical of multiple-informant studies may therefore occur (Kumar, Stern, & Anderson, 1993): (i) the selection problem, that is, the challenge of identifying two or more informants competent to report on a particular dyadic relationship and (ii) the perceptual agreement problem, that is, the frequent dissimilarity of the reports of competent multiple informants. A consensual approach to reconciling multiple informant reports can thus be important in order to ensure correspondence between informant reports and actual events (Glick, Huber, Miller, Doty, & Sutcliffe, 1990) even though to our best knowledge, this approach has never been applied in family business research.

A useful way to organise and document the data collected through multiple sources is the creation of a *case study database*. Using a database increases the reliability of the research because it enables the researcher to track and organise data sources including notes (e.g., results of interviews, observations), key case study documents, tabular materials (e.g., quantitative data), narratives (e.g., open-ended answers to the questions), photographs and audio files so that they can be easily retrieved at a later date. Doing so makes the process through which findings are obtained extremely explicit and replicable, thereby permitting the constant replication of the study across time, researchers, and analysis techniques. For example, while collecting the data about goals and goal formulation processes in family firms (see Kotlar & De Massis, 2013), we tracked the emerging research design and kept an “audit trail”, that is, an exhaustive chronology of research activities and processes as well as the emerging themes, categories, models, and analytic memos. In the final article, we then followed the graphic approach proposed by Gioia and Thomas (1996) to show key aspects of the process through which the main constructs and relationships in our study were derived. As another example, Karra et al. (2006) organised case study data “into an ‘event history database’ [...] by chronologically ordering descriptions of events taken from the raw data—interview transcripts, interview and field notes, and secondary sources such as journalists’ accounts of the political and economic context—and by juxtaposing multiple accounts against each other to ascertain the degree of convergence” (pp. 865–866).

A typical pitfall that qualitative researchers fall into is that they fail to *establish a “chain of evidence”* in their studies. This is unfortunate because we strongly believe that case study research should unambiguously allow an external observer to follow the derivation of any evidence from the initial research questions to the ultimate conclusion. We therefore encourage family business researchers to pay particular attention to this aspect, clearly explaining and showing how the empirical evidence is obtained, linking such empirical evidence to the data sources from which it is derived, and unequivocally clarifying the circumstances of data collection.

6. Analysing information

In addition to following ordered and transparent data collection procedures, it is also important to analyse qualitative data systematically and explain the data analysis process. As for other qualitative methods, data collection and analysis often occur concurrently. An illustration is provided by our study of goal-setting processes in family firms:

We iteratively analysed the qualitative data by moving back and forth between the data and an emerging structure of [empirical evidence and] theoretical arguments that responded to the theory questions presented above, according to three key steps. (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

While the overlap between data collection and analysis allows researchers to make on-going changes to some aspects of the research design and to identify new issues that are relevant for the research objective, it also involves potential risks related to data manipulation.

There is a vast array of techniques for analysing qualitative information: explanation building and within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, and pattern matching.³ Very often, qualitative family business researchers devote substantial space to report that they collected multiple sources of data, but forget to explain how they analysed anything other than the interview data. This is unfortunate because a *clear and detailed explanation of how the collected data have systematically been analysed* is very important for reviewers to better evaluate the strengths of a case study method. One further risk associated with the data analysis phase is that each data source would be treated independently and the findings reported separately. This is not the purpose of a case study. Rather, the researcher must *ensure that the data are converged in an attempt to understand the overall case, not the various parts of the case, or the contributing factors that influence the case*. To this aim, a potentially useful strategy may include involving other research team members in the data analysis phase and asking them for feedback on the ability to integrate different data sources and link them to the research findings. A hallmark of high-quality case study research is a *clear and unambiguous explanation of how the researcher evolved from the data to the findings of their study*. We strongly believe that the more systematically qualitative researchers are able to perform the data analysis phase, the more successful they will be in developing high-quality case study papers.

Before being analysed, information collected through a case study method must be “prepared” by relying on *data reduction*, *data display*, *data categorisation* and *data contextualisation* techniques.⁴ *Data reduction* involves selecting, focusing, condensing, and simplifying the collected material in order to ease the analysis of the case study evidence. The process should be guided by thinking about which data best answer the research questions. *Data display* involves creating an organised, compressed way of arranging data (such as through diagrams, charts, matrixes, images or texts). The aim is to make the information as accessible as possible in order to facilitate the identification of themes and conclusions. This step usually involves data coding, where the researchers mark passages of text (or parts of images or sections of a video, etc.) that have the same message or are connected in some way and then write an accompanying explanation of what the selected passages have in common. *Data categorisation* involves distinguishing and grouping

³ Explaining each of these techniques is beyond the scope of this article, but the most used references are Eisenhardt (1989), Yin (2003), and Stake (1995). All of them provide useful support, and we encourage qualitative family business scholars to reference these sources in order to justify the data analysis procedures that have been followed.

⁴ Commonly used references for qualitative data preparation are Miles and Huberman (1994) and Tesch (1990).

different categories of information. The aim is to decompose information, aggregating them into categories that allow comparisons and distinctions. Finally, *data contextualisation* involves assembling the collected information and the external contingencies and identifying links and connections. The aim is to enlighten the likely relationships with events and contextual conditions. Here follows a brief illustration of the data manipulation and analysis procedures that we followed in our study on the product innovation process of family versus non-family firms:

Before being analyzed, information gathered through the case studies was manipulated by applying data categorization and contextualization techniques [...]. We then followed a structured process for data analysis, made up of a preliminary within-case study, an explanation-building investigation, followed up by a cross-case comparison. These structured procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as the use of the semi-structured interview guide, helped enhance the reliability of the research [...]. (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al., 2013)

The following is how we analysed information in another study on the role of early adopters in the diffusion of new products in platform versus non-platform innovations:

The collected information was manipulated before being analysed by applying data categorisation and contextualization techniques [...]. We then followed a structured data analysis process consisting of a preliminary within-case study and an explanation building investigation, followed by a cross-case comparison. We used different categorizations to search for similarities and differences between the cases by creating several partially ordered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1999). We then interpreted the observed differences regarding the role of early adopters and launched decisions in light of the distinctive characteristics of platform and non-platform innovations. We decided to consider as reliable a piece of information only if it was reported in at least two interviews with key informants from different classes of firms (i.e. innovating firm, early adopter and late adopter) or it found confirmation in the data collected through secondary sources, such as company reports and product literature. The integration of these different data sources in a triangulation process [...] was done to reduce post hoc rationalization and personal interpretation biases from the interviewed people. These structured procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as the use of the semi-structured interview guide, helped enhance the construct validity, internal validity and reliability of our research approach. (Frattini et al., 2013)

The use of qualitative data analysis software (NVIVO, HyperRESEARCH and ATLAS.ti are only some examples) can be very useful to bring rigour to the data analysis phase, as it supports researchers in systematically coding and organising voluminous amounts of data and in managing the analysis work of developing categories, tracing linkages between concepts, and understanding relationships among categories, which is what we did, for example, in our study of goal setting in family firms:

In order to understand the goal formulation processes in family firms, we independently read interviews, observations and archival data, applying open in vivo coding using the qualitative data analysis program NVIVO (QSR International, version 9), which also enabled exchanging memos to capture themes and broad observations. (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

The studies by Graves and Thomas (2008) and Irava and Moores (2010) are further examples of family business case studies using NVIVO software for coding and for exploring patterns across cases.

Table 2
Synoptic representation of the case study evidence.

Company	Family business	Strategy		Organisation		Climate	
		Radical vs. incremental	Closed vs. open approach	Cross-functional team vs. functional organisation	High vs. low decisional autonomy	Risk-taking vs. risk-averse	High vs. low formalisation
Firm A	Yes	Incremental	Open	Functional	High	Risk-averse	Low
Firm B	Yes	Incremental	Open	Cross-functional	Low	Risk-taking	Low
Firm C	Yes	Incremental	Open	Functional	High	Risk-averse	Low
Firm D	Yes	Incremental	Open	Functional and cross-functional	High	Risk-averse	Low
Firm E	Yes	Incremental	Closed	Functional	High	Risk-averse	Low
Firm F	No	Radical and incremental	Closed	Cross-functional	High	Risk-taking	High
Firm G	No	Radical and incremental	Closed	Cross-functional	Low	Risk-taking	High
Firm H	No	Radical and incremental	Closed	Cross-functional	Low	Risk-taking	High
Firm I	No	Radical and incremental	Closed	Cross-functional	Low	Risk-averse	High
Firm L	No	Radical	Closed	Cross-functional	Low	Risk-taking	High

From De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al. (2013).

Nevertheless, there are also some potential concerns associated with the use of qualitative data analysis software (Barry, 1998). These include progressively deterministic and rigid processes, privileging of coding and retrieval techniques, increased pressure on researchers to focus on volume and breadth rather than on depth and meaning, time and energy spent on learning to use computer packages, and distraction from the real work of analysis. In our experience, qualitative data analysis software is particularly useful for coding when dealing with massive amounts of data. A useful feature of many software programmes is also the possibility to export data after the coding procedure in order to take advantage of other software for data analysis and presentation.

7. Presenting results

A critical aspect of case study research is presenting the rich body of empirical evidence and results of the study. The presentation of results is a key challenge for qualitative family business scholars (Chenail, 2009), who too often produce manuscripts that are excessively long and result in massive, unreadable documents.

It is important to distinguish between two types of data to be displayed: the *raw material* and the *synthetic evidence*. The challenge of presenting the rich body of qualitative *raw material* can be addressed by presenting a relatively complete rendering of the story within the text. The story typically consists of a *narrative description of the case studies* that is *interspersed with quotations from key informants and other supporting evidence*. The following quote, extracted from our study on goal setting processes of family firms, is illustrative of how we accounted for a piece of the story about how bargaining emerged from social interactions among organisational members:

[Our data allowed us to] observe two major stages that characterize the practical patterns through which organizational members interacted: the bargaining mode [...], and stabilization of their goals [...]. Bargaining was observed when organizational members conveyed interpersonal interactions in the form of either settlements or disputes. Settlements consisted in negotiations of goals among two or more organizational members with symmetrical influences. For instance, a settlement episode was observed during a meeting between a CEO and a minority owner who also serves as a professional manager. The parties were discussing an issue related to next year's budget and, when the professional manager expressed some concerns relating to the dividend policy, the two started negotiating until the percentage of profits to be reinvested in the firm was increased. After the meeting, the professional manager commented: "This is not the

first time our views have differed, but after all, we respect each other and both believe we can always find a compromise as long as we want it" (Professional Manager). (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013)

Sometimes, extensive tables that report the raw material are also included in the text. Even if these tables are not shown in the final submission, the use of tables is an effective way to show that a rich body of evidence supports the findings. Qualitative family business scholars should pay particular attention then *to interlace their story with the emerging theory* to prove a close connection between empirical evidence and emergent theory. This interlacing is extremely important in order to come up with a high-quality case study paper.

The challenge of presenting the *synthetic evidence* can be addressed by using synthetic tables or figures to organise the findings. A separate table that provides a synoptic representation of the collected evidence is usually an effective way to present the case study evidence. For example, Table 2 summarises the evidence that we collected in our study on the differences in the product innovation process between family and non-family firms.

A table indicating the scope and types of the focal topic under investigation and how it is "measured" can sometimes be reported. Continuing with the same example, we reported Table 3 as follows in order to display an excerpt of comprehensive information regarding the scope and type of product innovation activities carried out in the 10 sampled firms.

To provide additional illustration, Table 4a-c displays a synthetic view of some of the findings that emerged from our study on goal-setting processes in family firms.

Often, the findings of a case study take the form of *theoretical propositions*. For example, in our study on goal-setting processes in family firms, we inductively developed seven theoretical propositions that are reported in Table 5. The use of propositions that inspire future confirmatory research increases the "testability" of the findings and allows the creation of a particularly strong bridge from the qualitative evidence to theory-testing research.

Finally, we strongly recommend using figures to help interpret the various concepts and their relationships in the qualitative data. Figures can be a very effective way of capturing the chain of evidence or depicting how a process unfolded. For example, in our study on goal-setting processes in family firms, we constructed Fig. 1 to help make sense of the various concepts that emerged from our study and their relationships in our data. This figure summarises and generalises the main findings of our study, graphically presenting the observations and propositions that emerged from our analysis.

Figures are very helpful to *visually represent the study findings*. Continuing with the same example, Fig. 2 illustrates how we visually showed the empirical evidence supporting our proposition

Table 3
Product innovation in the studied cases.

Company	Type of product innovation projects	No. of resources in R&D (full-time equivalent)	Annual R&D budget (Euro)	Product innovation performance
Firm A	Ninety-five per cent of NPD projects the firm has initiated in the last five years (approximately 20) has been motivated by the attempt to satisfy a latent need in the market. Very often, customers get in touch with the firm to ask for improvements or modifications to their current products. These improved products are then also transferred to other clients of the firm. It happens less frequently (in 5% of product development projects) that the firm develops new solutions or technologies for which a market application is sought. Eighty per cent of NPD projects consist of on-demand manufacturing new plastic moulds by applying the firm's knowledge in the field of thermosetting to new materials and cutting-edge technologies that are purchased from corporate partners. The average budget per NPD project is 160 kEuro, and the average project duration is 8 months.	4	800,000 (~80% for product innovation)	40% of sales from new products sold in the last 3 years; product innovation is the main issue in the firm's industrial plan 2010-2012
Firm B	Classic product innovation projects (70% of the total) entail developing new products that better satisfy customer needs by improving the superficial material of wooden products. Five years ago, the firm decided to leverage the increasing attention of its clients towards the environment to innovate its products and manufacturing processes by reducing their environmental impact. Since then, the firm's innovation efforts have been directed towards improving the sustainability of its offering, to take advantage of the growing demand for "green" products and services. Environmental innovations (30% of the total) are carried out by co-designing ecological and socially sustainable new products with universities, research centres, suppliers and customers. Four new projects are launched every year, the average budget per NPD project is 40 kEuro, and the average project's duration is 6 months.	6	160,000 (~70% for product innovation)	The whole range of products has been completely renewed in the last 3 years; winner of several awards for product innovation
...
Firm L	Product innovation projects are usually triggered by the identification of new technologies, which are then developed so that they can be applied to the firm's products. The functionalities enabled by the new technologies are tested with selected clients to understand how they can be better integrated in the firm's offering. Ninety-five per cent of projects consist of the development of new cutting-edge technologies, materials and product architectures characterised by very innovative functionalities and exceptional performance. The remaining 5% of projects consist of making gradual improvements over existing products. Two new product innovation projects were started in 2010. The average budget per innovation project is 100 kEuro, and the average project duration is 30 months (6 months for the minority of projects implying simple improvements over existing products).	4	750,000 (~70% for product innovation)	50% of profits invested in activities related to product innovation every year

Excerpt from Appendix 1 reported by [De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al. \(2013\)](#).

that goal diversity is expressed more strongly when an intra-family succession is imminent.

As an additional illustration, [Fig. 3](#) visualises the findings of our study on the management and organisation of the product innovation process in small family and non-family firms.

[Murray \(2003\)](#) offers another interesting example of use of figures in a case study. She plots longitudinal case study data along a timeline and illustrates the sequence of phases through which the family firms progress over time, providing specific figures to visualise the three different types of succession journeys that emerged from her study.

In sum, reporting the results of a case study can be a difficult task for any family business researcher due to the complex nature of this method. It is challenging to report the findings in a concise manner that is appropriate for publication in management and organisation journals, and the researcher's ability to condense and convert a complex phenomenon into a format that is readily

understood by the reader is very important. A typical pitfall in presenting the results of a case study is being overwhelmed and distracted by the huge amounts of interesting data that are superfluous to the research questions. A suggested way to avoid this pitfall and report a case study is by *telling the reader a consistent story* in which the researcher not only describes the themes, but *how those themes fit together*. Providing a clear and convincing description of the context within which the phenomenon occurs as well as the phenomenon itself is a common trait of high-quality case study articles.

8. Ensuring validity and reliability in research findings

There are four main criteria that have been adopted to assess the rigour and trustworthiness of case study research (e.g., [Campbell, 1975](#); [Eisenhardt, 1989](#); [Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008](#); [Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010](#); [Yin, 1981](#)). [Table 6](#) provides an

Table 4
Summary of empirical evidence emerged from the study on goal-setting processes in family firms.

a. Organisational member goals in the family firm by goal content and goal recipient							
Goal content	Goal recipient						
	Family			Non-family			
Economic	Family control over the company Family wealth			Firm growth Firm survival Firm economic performance			
Non-economic	Family harmony Family social status Family identity linkage			Firm internal serenity External relations			

b. Differences between professional and familial social interaction processes							
	Professional social interactions			Familial social interactions			
Setting	Business environment only			Business and family environment			
Norms	Schedules and defined roles			Irregularity and ambiguous roles			
Means of bargaining	Promises of rewards, threats of sanctions			Value abstraction, expressions of affect			
Means of stabilisation	Formal agreement			Social control			

c. Stabilisations and acts of commitment to family-centred goals by organisational membership of informants							
	Acts of conformation to family values			Resource dedication			Total
	Family members	Shareholders	Actively involved	Family members	Shareholders	Actively involved	
Professional social interactions ^a	18%	27%	21%	26%	22%	29%	32%
Familial social interactions ^b	66%	50%	48%	78%	53%	58%	74%

From Kotlar and De Massis (2013).

^a Percentages refer to the percentage of professional interactions concluded by stabilisation; 92 total episodes.

^b Percentages refer to the percentage of familial interactions concluded by stabilisation; 73 total episodes.

Table 5
Theoretical propositions developed by Kotlar and De Massis (2013).

Proposition 1	Goal diversity is more strongly expressed when an intra-family succession is imminent.
Proposition 2	The greater the goal diversity, the higher the occurrence of goal-centred social interaction processes.
Proposition 3	Professional social interactions involve administrative bargaining, whereas familial social interactions involve affective bargaining.
Proposition 4	In professional social interactions, stabilisation is achieved through formal controls, whereas in familial social interactions stabilisation follows social control mechanisms.
Proposition 5	The stabilisation of family-centred goals is more likely to occur through familial than professional social interactions.
Proposition 6	The higher the reliance on professional social interactions, the lower the collective commitment to family-centred goals.
Proposition 7	The higher the reliance on familial social interactions, the greater the collective commitment to family-centred goals.

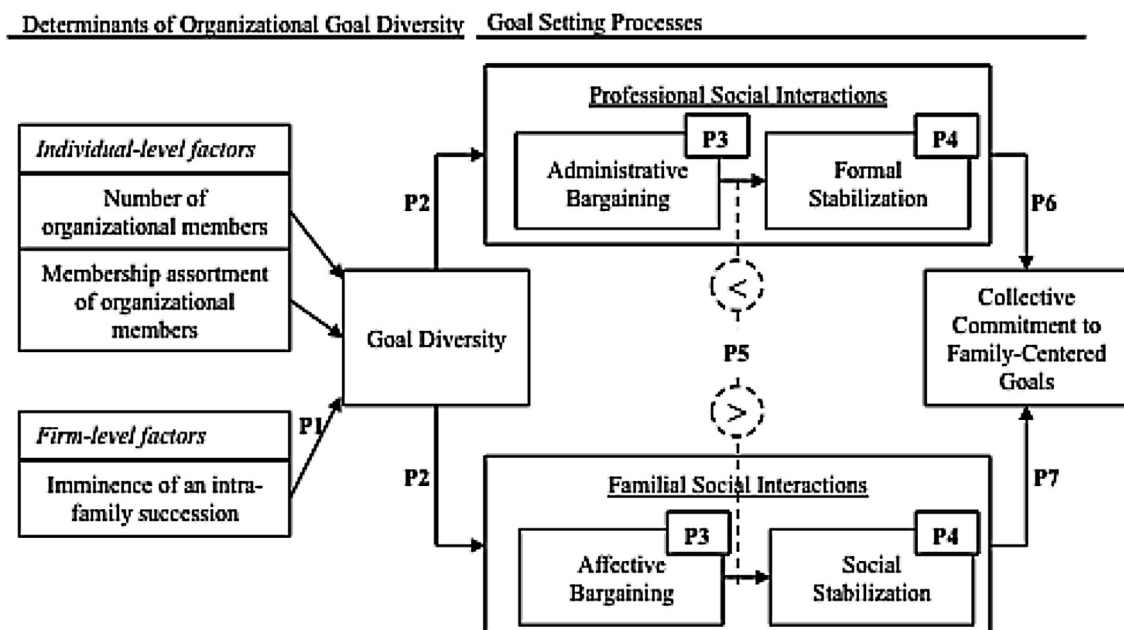


Fig. 1. A process view of goal-setting in family firms.
From Kotlar and De Massis (2013).

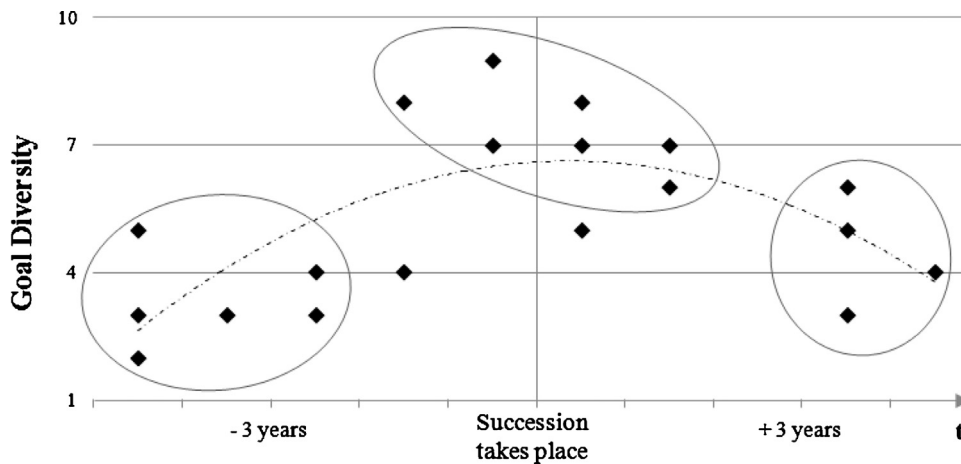


Fig. 2. Goal diversity in the studied firms by stage of intra-family succession. Goal diversity is proxied by the number of different goals that emerged from interviews at the firm level. From Kotlar and De Massis (2013).

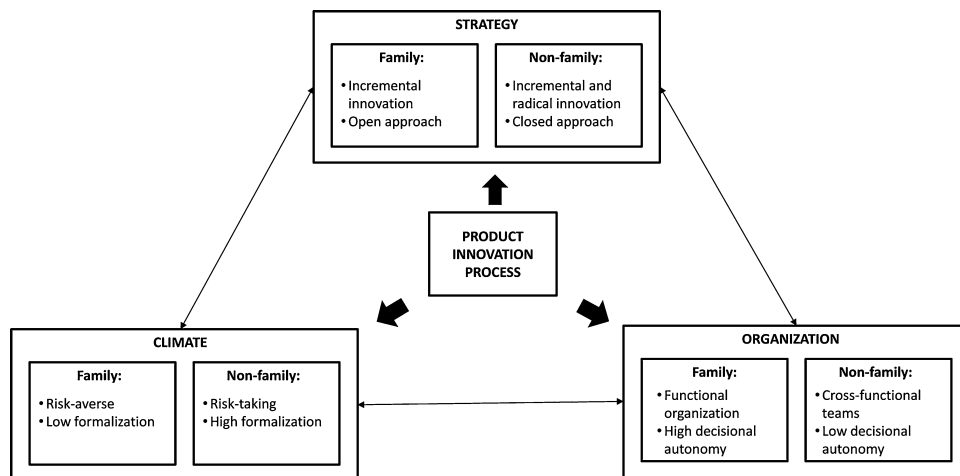


Fig. 3. Differences in the product innovation process between family and non-family firms. From De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al. (2013).

overview of the four validity and reliability criteria and summarises the challenges, issues, and suggested research strategies that qualitative researchers may take for each criterion.

Construct validity refers to the extent to which a study investigates what it claims to investigate, that is, the quality of the conceptualisation or operationalisation of the relevant concept (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). One of the main issues for case study researchers is that these researchers tend to use “subjective” judgments rather than using a well-considered set of measures. Three research strategies can be considered to enhance construct validity. First, researchers should seek to *triangulate* data from multiple sources (Yin, 2003). The collection and comparison of these data ensures that the topic under study is analysed from multiple perspectives and enhances construct validity based on the concept of idea convergence and the confirmation of results (Knafli & Breitmayer, 1989). Second, researchers should share transcripts and drafts with participants (i.e., members of the researched organisation) for consistency and accuracy. Researchers may integrate a process of member checking in which they can check or clarify events that the informant participated in, and the informant can contribute additional perspectives on the relevant topic. Third, researchers should share the transcript and drafts of

their case study with other investigators and have them reviewed by peers (i.e., academics other than the authors of the case study).

Internal validity refers to the data analysis phase (Yin, 2003) and refers to the establishment of causal relationships between variables and results.⁵ Here, the issue deals with whether the researcher is able to establish a plausible causal relationship, logical reasoning that is rigorous and convincing enough to defend the research conclusions. Three research strategies can be considered to enhance internal validity. First, researchers should analyse their case study by building a sound explanation about the case (*explanation building*). More specifically, they should stipulate a presumed set of causal links, which demonstrate, for example, that variable *x* leads to outcome *y* and that *y* was not caused spuriously by a third variable *z*. Second, through *pattern matching*, researchers should empirically compare the observed patterns with either the predicted patterns or the patterns established in previous studies and in different contexts. Third, *cross-case*

⁵ It should be noted, as suggested by Yin (2003), that internal validity as a criterion to assess the rigour and trustworthiness of case study research can be applied only to explanatory studies (not to descriptive or exploratory studies).

Table 6
Approaches to enhance validity and reliability in case study research.

	Construct validity	Internal validity	External validity	Reliability
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking to establish a causal relationship, whereby certain conditions are believed to lead to other conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defining the domain to which a study's findings can be generalised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrating that the operations of a study – such as the data collection procedures – can be repeated leading to the same results
Key issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To choose an appropriate operational set of measures: subjectivity vs. objectivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To make inferences in a case study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To generalise the study findings (from an analytical point of view) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To minimise errors and biases in a study
Research strategies for remedy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Triangulate data from multiple sources Read your conclusions with the participants Conduct your research together with other investigators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explanation building Pattern matching Cross-case comparison 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use replication logic in multiple-case studies Use theory in single-case studies (also rival theories) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a case study protocol Use techniques for data preparation Develop a case study database

Adapted from Campbell (1975) and Yin (1984).

comparison enables a researcher to verify findings by comparing results from multiple cases.

External validity refers to the definition of the domain to which a case study's findings can be generalised. It is important to note that case study research does not allow for statistical generalisation, for example, inferring conclusions about a population (Numagami, 1998; Yin, 2003). Rather, case studies allow for *analytical generalisation*. Whereas statistical generalisation refers to the generalisation from observation to a population, analytical generalisation denotes a process that refers to the generalisation from empirical observations to theory, rather than a population (e.g., Yin, 2003). Eisenhardt (1989) argued that case studies can be a starting point for theory development because they allow new theoretical understandings or clarifications regarding the phenomenon of interest. Building theory with case study research is a bottom-up approach such that the specifics of empirical evidence produce the generalisations of theory. Two research strategies can be considered to enhance external validity. In multiple-case studies, researchers should use *replication logic* as a strategy for building the sample in an iterative process one case at a time. In single-case studies, researchers should use *theory (also rival theories)* to raise the level of generality of the emerging theory describing the phenomenon. Often, family business scholars, as a "defensive" reporting strategy, problematise generalisability in their methods section and then again in the conclusion section when discussing the limitations of the study. For example, in the method section of our study on product innovation in family versus non-family firms, we write:

Of course it is not possible to statistically generalise results from this type of exploratory case study analysis (Yin, 2003). Our aim is to make analytical and theoretical generalizations to the existing body of knowledge regarding the anatomy of the product innovation process in family-firms. The findings will hopefully inform future theoretical and empirical studies concerning product innovation in family firms, but cannot be generalised to populations of firms or markets (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al., 2013).

In the same study, we then raise the topic of generalisability again briefly in the limitations section:

The main limitation of our study descends from its exploratory nature. Because our objective was to gain theoretical clarifications as to how and why the product innovation process in family firms is different from non-family firms, our findings should not be generalized to any populations of companies. However, and this represents the main contribution of our study, these findings will hopefully encourage family business

and product innovation scholars to examine whether the results of our analysis can be statistically generalized. (De Massis, Frattini, Pizzurno, et al., 2013)

Reliability refers to the extent to which subsequent researchers arrive at the same results if they conduct the study again with the same steps (Yin, 2003). Here, the issue involves minimising errors and biases in the study. It should be noted that reliability in case study research often boils down to a sufficient presentation of the evidence/data such that the reader has enough of a background to be able to agree or disagree with the researcher's interpretation of the data. Three research strategies can be considered to enhance reliability. First, researchers should use a *case study protocol* – a report that transparently clarifies the research procedures and specifies how the entire case study has been conducted. Second, researchers should use *techniques for data preparation* that increase the transparency of the study. Third, replication can be accomplished by developing a *case study database*, as already discussed in the Collecting Information section.

In sum, there are concrete research strategies that qualitative scholars may consider to overcome the typical criticism of case study research and increase the validity and reliability of the results.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was 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.

On the one hand, case study research offers family business scholars significant opportunities to contribute to the family business literature by advancing the theoretical understanding of family firms. This theoretical development will likely expand our knowledge on whether and how firms with family involvement display particularistic behaviours, develop distinctive resources or produce dissimilar performances compared to other types of firms (De Massis, Kotlar, Chua, & Chrisman, 2014). We argue that many of the features and dimensions that make family firms' resources, behaviours and performances unique are especially possible to capture and grasp through the richness, depth, and closeness of the case study method. For example, case studies can be particularly helpful to understand how processes are deployed in family firms, which is an area that has been rather neglected so far. Process case studies on intra-family ownership and management succession processes might shed new light on hard-to-get-at phenomena at the micro-level of social interaction and organisational development in family firms (De Massis, Chua, & Chrisman, 2008; Salvato &

Corbetta, 2013). Likewise, we still know little about the mechanisms and dynamics through which family-centred non-economic goals enter decision making in family firms (Chrisman, Chua, Pearson, & Barnett, 2012) or how the evolution of family dynamics and/or unique endowments of family firms' social, human, and financial resources along the firm life cycle shape their innovative behaviour and performance over time (De Massis, Chirico, Kotlar, & Naldi, 2014; De Massis, Frattini, & Lichtenthaler, 2013; Kotlar, De Massis, Frattini, Bianchi, & Fang, 2013). At the same time, case study research is an appropriate approach with which to gain a more fine-grained understanding of the differences within the heterogeneous population of family firms (Chua, Chrisman, Steier, & Rau, 2012). For example, following case study approaches, prospective scholars may examine the micro-foundations and mechanisms engendered by family ownership dispersion in family firms, which has been argued to be an important source of heterogeneity among the population of family firms (De Massis, Kotlar, Campopiano, & Cassia, 2013). Well-designed, contextualised and properly implemented case studies will help to answer many important yet overlooked questions about critical family firm processes and resources that will in turn contribute to the literature by filling the relevant gaps in our knowledge about the behaviour of family firms.

On the other hand, as the family business field continues to mature, case study research provides family business scholars with growing opportunities to contribute to the mainstream management literature. We believe that family firms are especially apt as a context in which to address some important debates in management and organisational theory. For example, behavioural and stakeholder theorists are currently engaged in questions about how top executives respond to multiple and competing stakeholder claims and how they prioritise such claims in decision making. Family firms are characterised by the need to balance the divergent identities, interests, and priorities of members of the family and the business systems, all of which are aspects that are particularly difficult to capture through quantitative methods. This allows, for example, the investigation of the executives' prioritisation of stakeholders' claims in the idiosyncratic and very insightful situation where divergent identities, interests, and goals of multiple stakeholders coexist within the organisation (De Massis & Kotlar, 2012; Mitchell, Agle, Chrisman, & Spence, 2011). Thus, family firms provide a unique context for case study work aimed at extending or enriching behavioural and stakeholder perspectives on such an important issue.

It is our hope that the guidelines discussed in this article will stimulate and guide future case study work in the family business field, allowing qualitative researchers to take advantage of such opportunities for future research.

In closing, this article suggests important implications for scholars, reviewers and editors of case studies in the family business field. Scholars are encouraged to draw upon our reflection of the key elements for designing and implementing qualitative case study research to prepare increasingly rigorous case studies for submission. Reviewers are encouraged to use our guidelines as a reference framework when evaluating case study work with family firms. Journal editors are encouraged to use these guidelines as a checklist in order to formulate editorial policies that are as clear and transparent as possible for prospective submitters to publish high-quality case study work.

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