Auto-ethnography in qualitative studies of gender and organisation: A focus on women successors in family businesses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines autoethnography as a research method to study women in family business. Prior studies suggest that family businesses may provide a harbour where women have the opportunity to manage existing businesses and create new ventures. Yet, whilst scholars have noted the crucial input of women in the creation, development and continuity of family businesses, their experience as successors is not unproblematic. This chapter argues that the perceived role of women could remain unchallenged unless methods that allow fresh understanding of the complex narratives and emotional components of family business succession are considered. The study presented in this chapter uses an autoethnographic illustration of a son and expected successor of a family business as he reflects on the memories and experiences related to a women becoming the successor of his family in business. This chapter will be of interest to academics who seek new approaches to understand complex gendered relations in family businesses.

Key words: autoethnography, gender, family business, research methods, succession

BACKGROUND

In the last 40 years, there have been changes and developments in the way gender is theorized (Acker, 1992, 1995; Wharton, 2005; Gatrell and Swan, 2008). What we have seen is gender theorized in terms of specific traits and behaviours associated with women or men, as a form of social construction and more recently gender as performance, continuously produced through every day practices and social interactions (Richardson and Robinson 2008). These various theoretical approaches lead to different debates and new conceptual understandings but more work is needed to incorporate cultural and historical variation. A growing body of scholars have made progress in understanding how gender is socially constructed, with particular attention paid to the dynamics of the subordination of women through the study of language and texts (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Hamilton, 2014). The post-structuralist stance has challenged essentialist assumptions of gender, and encouraged a view of gender identity as fluid and constructed within prevailing discourses and their associated power relations

(Hamilton, 2013a; Stead, 2017). Grounding research in feminist theory has revealed how gendered normative practices are produced and reproduced and has encouraged new methodological approaches (see for example, Stead and Hamilton, 2018).

A drawback in the field of family business is the absence of methodological approaches that connect personal experience with a nuanced understanding of underlying, and relevant, processes (Howorth, Rose, Hamilton & Westhead, 2010; Hamilton, Discua Cruz & Jack, 2017). This is also the case for the study of gender, where the need for more critical methodologies and greater reflexivity in research design and practice is recognized (Stead and Hamilton, 2018; Díaz García and Welter, 2013; Henry et al., 2016). Stead and Hamilton (2018) argue for empirical studies in gender to consider drawing more widely on accounts of people's experiences in the micro-practice of the everyday, and to adopt a broad critical intent. In doing so, they argue, researchers must explore techniques that challenge dominant theoretical understandings by unearthing critical gender issues.

This chapter focuses on autoethnography (Adams et al., 2014; Holman Jones et al., 2013) as a research method to study women in family business. Such an undertaking is important, as most businesses around the world are family businesses (IFERA, 2003; Melin et al., 2014). Prior studies suggest that family businesses are often an incubator for new entrepreneurs (Craig and Moores, 2006), and may provide a safe harbour where women have the opportunity to manage existing businesses and create new ventures (Dumas, 1998). Yet, whilst scholars have noted the crucial input of women in the creation and development of family businesses (Alsos et al., 2014), their engagement is not unproblematic (Hamilton, 2006, 2013b). Women in family business are rarely considered as serious contenders to take the helm of established family firms (Dumas, 1998; Martinez Jimenez, 2009). Recent studies argue that the expected role of women in family businesses, believed to be co-constructed over time, could remain unchallenged unless unrestricted insider access is granted (Discua Cruz, Hamilton and Jack, 2019).

There are calls to conduct further qualitative studies in organizations from the perspective of those studied (Pratt, 2009: 856), aiming to provide nuanced explanations of what is going on (Howorth et al., 2005). Such calls are appropriate for the study of gender, as earlier studies point to the centrality of the boundary between family and work in organization for understanding gender relations (Acker, 1998) and the need for a nuanced in-depth

understanding of gender dynamics in the family business (Fletcher et al., 2016). The aim of this chapter is to examine autoethnography, which broadly relates to a qualitative approach that helps describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Adams et al., 2014; Chang, 2016; Holman Jones et al., 2013), as a practical methodology to study gender in family businesses. Therefore, this study focuses on the following question: is autoethnography a viable methodology that can help answer underexplored questions about gender relations in the succession process of family businesses?

In the context of family businesses, we argue that autoethnography allows the generation of "theoretically relevant descriptions of a group to which one belongs based on a structured analysis of one's experiences and the experiences of others from one's group" (Karra and Phillips, 2008: 7). Badley (2015) calls it a form of adventurous writing arguing that autoethnographic studies are intended to be truthful and detailed accounts of their authors' embodied experiences. To support our argument and address our overarching question, we engage in an autoethnographic approach to understand how, why and when might women be considered as successors in the management of existing family businesses. To our knowledge, there are no autoethnographies in family business research that deal with the study of gender and succession.

We focus on the context of a family business in Latin America. More specifically, to generate rich data for analysis, a family business was deliberately chosen (Miles et al., 2013) where we could reflect on the family gender dynamic where one of them was an "insider". We also reflect on the implication of a male "insider" in the context of a study focusing on women in the succession process. Insider research is a category of autoethnographic practice where practitioners are academic researchers and use their insider position as a methodological and interpretive tool (Butz and Besio, 2009). By being an "insider" the first author had access, knowledge, and freedom of movement which allowed particular access and insight not available to "outsiders" (Karra and Phillips, 2008). Data was gathered through memory, for example, memories of events, conversations, meetings, emotions, as well as other sources such as field notes and interviews (Holman Jones et al., 2013). The first author, supported by his co-authors (Guyotte and Sochacka, 2016), followed the suggestions of Ellis et al. (2011), to write retrospectively and selectively about reflections on personal experience made

possible by being part of a family in business. This material is presented as a vignette (see Table 1).

In this chapter, our interest lies with women in family business and processes of succession. It is helpful in this study to consider the concept of gender identity, performed and interpreted at the individual level, alongside the broader concept of gender relations. Gender relations provide the structural arrangements that shape the material conditions of what it means to be men or women in a particular society (Fletcher and Ely, 2003). Gender relations underpin understandings and assumptions of what is acceptable and what is possible. Gender relations intersect with other social relations such as race, ethnicity and class and may be culture-specific and bound up with complex disparities in terms of power relations. In family business, a distinct feature of gender relations is the discourse and practice of primogeniture, i.e. the assumption of the right of the eldest son to inherit. This study throws light on the 'stubborn and enduring assumption' of primogeniture, a strategy and practice that has been called one of the foundations of patriarchy (Hamilton, 2013b: 92).

The chapter contributes to knowledge by arguing the relevance of authoethnography as a methodological tool in the study of gender in family business. We argue that developing an understanding of gender dynamics in family business research might benefit from the features of autoethnography (Knijnik, 2015; Adams et al., 2014). Karra and Phillips (2008) highlight ease of access, reduced resource requirements, increased ability to establish trust and rapport, and reduced problems with translation as strengths of the approach. Conversely, difficulty maintaining critical distance, ongoing role conflict, and the limits of serendipity are acknowledged as difficulties of conducting autoethnographic research. Our chapter highlights that whilst existing family business autoethnographies offer a good start to appreciate the value of the approach, the challenge remains for autoethnographies to be developed by those who experience phenomenon in family businesses firsthand in a co-collaborative effort. Our chapter argues that autoethnography is beneficial for the study of gender in family business reflecting on our own experiences as gender beings can be a powerful form of developing and sharing knowledge.

The remainder of this chapter continues as follows: first, a brief review of autoethnography is offered followed by a discussion of its relevance around the study of gender in family businesses. Thereafter, an autoethnographic vignette is used to illustrate autoethnography as a

method to examine challenges in the continuity of a family business. We then provide a discussion of the challenges and opportunities of this methodology and offer avenues for further research.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Definitions, origins and relevance

In recent years, autoethnography has become a significant and legitimate method in many disciplines and research contexts (Holman Jones et al., 2013). The term was first used to describe a method of ethnographically studying a group of which the researcher was a part of. Nowadays, while it encompasses a multitude of approaches and writing forms, researchers agree that autoethnography gravitates around the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience (Adams et al., 2014: 22). Autoethnography allows researchers to produce "meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience…" (Ellis et al. 2011: 2). It is a research method that relies on lived experiences connected to the broader social and cultural context, and thus can contribute to knowledge by theorising experiences so that they become embedded in theory and practice (McIlveen, 2008).

As a qualitative method, autoethnography offers specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people (Adams et al., 2014: 22). The intentional use of personal experience allows the creation of nuanced, complex, and comprehensive accounts of cultural norms, experiences, and practices (Adams et al., 2014: 39). Autoethnographic studies facilitate an understanding, and often a critique, of cultural life by encouraging readers to think about taken-for-granted norms, experiences, and practices in unique, complicated, and challenging ways.

Qualitative researchers are searching for more transparent, reflexive, and creative ways to conduct research (Adams et al., 2014). A movement towards personalized research called for greater emphasis on the ways in which researchers interacted with the culture being researched (Holt, 2003). Thus, rather than deny or separate the researcher from the research and the personal from the relational, cultural, and political, qualitative researchers embrace methods that allow them to explore and understand personal experiences and their relationship with context. Those interested in research that explains how the 'self' interacts

with 'culture' using their own experience to reflect on self-other interactions and the extant cultural meaning would be drawn to writing autoethnograpic texts (Holt, 2003). Autoethnographic texts are usually written in the first person and showcase dialogues, emotions, and self-consciousness as relational stories affected by history, social structure, and culture (Ellis et al., 2011).

Accordingly, Adams et al., (2014: 1-2) advocate autoethnography for several reasons, First, it uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences. Second, it acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others. Third, it uses deep and careful self-reflection - typically referred to as "reflexivity" - to name and interrogate the intersections between self and the social context. Fourth, it shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles. Finally, it balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity.

Ellis et al., (2011) highlight that the underlying features of autoethnography lie in its combination of ethnography and autobiography and its methodological and theoretical rigor that illuminates aspects of a cultural experience and makes both (culture and experiences) familiar to others. Autoethnography may appear comparable to ethnography first in terms of following a similar ethnographic research process by systematically collecting analyzing and interpreting data, and second in attempting to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2016: 47).Yet, autoethnography differs from ethnographic inquiries in that autoethnographers use their personal experiences as primary data. Chang (2016) argues that the richness of autobiographical narratives and autobiographical insights is valued and intentionally integrated into the research process unlike conventional ethnography. Autoethnography celebrates individual stories framed in the context of the bigger story, a story of the society, to make autoethnography ethnographic. In doing so, it focuses on human connections and emphasizes the importance of personal stories (Doty, 2010).

Autoethnographies also rely on autobiographical features in its written representation. The ethnographic process can provide an essential way of studying culture, including organizational culture (Fletcher, 2002). Chang (2016: 47) argues that like ethnography, autoethnography pursues the ultimate goal of cultural understanding underlying autobiographical experiences. To achieve this ethnographic intent, autoethnographers

experience the usual ethnographic research process of data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing. They collect field data by means of participation, observation, interview, and document review; verify data by triangulating sources and contents from multiple origins; analyze and interpret data to decipher the cultural meanings of events, behaviors, and thoughts; and write ethnography. Yet the purpose of autoethnography is not only to write and reflect on personal stories, but to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of a researcher's personal experiences (Chang, 2013: 108).

Autoethnography and gender studies

There are a growing number of autoethnographic studies that have focused on gendered issues. For example, McClellan (2012) describes how her gendered identity as a leader was formed when reflecting on experiences of black men. Her study highlights that identity can be reflected upon when exploring experiences of the opposite gender. McParland (2013) relies on autoethnography to make visible the overlooked experiences of women in sports, highlighting that issues dealing with power structures and conventional theories in male dominated circles can be problematized through reflection. Sobre-Denton (2012) considers her experiences as a white woman in terms of workplace bullying, highlighting contexts where business ownership and power positions were held by men. These studies highlight the usefulness of autoethnography in gender studies in organizations and show how it provides an opportunity to critique and engage whileexploring differences in the study of gender (Boylorn, 2014). Yet, whilst autoethnography has been used in the study of gender, there is much work to be done to develop methodologies and theoretical approaches to understand the relevance of gender in the study of family businesses.

Autoethnography is a reflexive means by which a researcher-practitioner can consciously embed himself or herself in theory and practice, and by way of an intimate autobiographic account, based on personal lived experiences, explicate a phenomenon under investigation or intervention (McIlveen, 2008; Adams et al., 2014; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Chang, 2016). Autoethnographers are expected to treat their autobiographical data with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to notice cultural suggestions of what is remembered, observed, and told. Thus, the researcher/participant is vital to the story, serves as the primary data source, and provides a provocative account of experiences (Holt, 2003).

The origins and increasing relevance of autoethnography relate to a crisis of 'representation' and 'legitimation' (Adams et al., 2014; Holt, 2003), concepts which have significance in terms of gender studies. The crisis of representation refers to the writing practices, i.e. how researchers write and represent the social world (Holt, 2003), and related to researchers recognizing the limits of knowledge claims made about the contexts, subjects, and findings of their research. Such an approach considers the limits of what can be discovered, understood, and explained about identities, lives, beliefs, feelings, relationships, and behaviors through the use of empirical or experimental methods (Adams et al., 2014). Unlike scientific design, the nuance and complexity of gendered identities and gendered relations do not translate easily to experiments, surveys, or a structured list of interview questions. Chang (2016: 18) argues that autoethnography emerged as a response to claims that qualitative research (or any research) cannot maintain a distanced, objective, self-serving stance. As autoethnography focuses on a "self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (Spry, 2001: 707), researchers cannot avoid accounting for their own gendered identities, experiences, relationships, intentions, and formative assumptions in their approach to research and the reporting of their "findings".

Autoethnography calls scholars to acknowledge their potentially contradictory positioning as researchers studying subjects of the opposite gender (e.g. women studying men and vice-versa) (Besio and Butz, 2004; McClellan, 2012). In this chapter the "insider" and main autoethnographer is a son and expected successor. In the succession process of a family firm, there is a strong family and social expectation for sons to succeed their fathers in business with women expected to support this process and the outcome (Gupta et al., 2008).

As previous studies suggest, the relevance of autoethnography for gender studies is that it allows the exploration of a personal gendered position as a family business member and researcher and the challenges of succession in academic inquiry (Metz, 2011). As family relationships are so intertwined and knowledge is deeply connected to the cultural context (Howorth et al., 2010), a man, son and successor could reflect on the experiences that connect the narrative of family in business over time (Hamilton et al., 2017). Autoethnographies position researchers as a privileged other, interlocutors and often as advocates (Barrett, 2019). A man can reflect on experiences with family members and about family members in

business, as they become the focal point for examining rigid notions of gender (McClellan, 2012).

Autoethnography as a method for family business research

Autoethnography provides a method for exploring and understanding personal experiences in relation to the experiences of others (Adams et al., 2017). Chang (2016: 52) suggests that methodologically speaking, autoethnography is family-business researcher friendly. It can allow family business researchers' easy access to the primary data source from the beginning as the source is the researchers themselves. In autoethnography, "proximity, not objectivity, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return "and thus autoethnographers are privileged with a holistic and intimate perspective on their "familiar data" (Adams et al., 2014: 23). This initial familiarity gives autoethnographers an edge over other researchers in data collection and in-depth data interpretation. Adams et al., (2014) advocate that underlying reasons for family business researchers to engage in autoethnography may relate to their desire to: critique, make contributions to, and/or extend existing research and theory; disrupt taboos, break silences, and reclaim lost and disregarded voices and finally, make research accessible to multiple audiences.

Examples of applying the method

Current applications of autoethnography in family business research have focused on the processes of entrepreneurship, business identity and succession. Yarborough and Lowe (2007) explored the benefits of autobiographical awareness and managerial development in a family business. By revisiting personal experiences these scholars reflected on dilemmas experienced when considering whether or not to succeed the incumbent generation in a family firm. Meek (2010), relying on an autoethnographic approach, uncovered some of the complexity that arises when business creation and continuity is influenced by the involvement of family members. The active part supporting families play in entrepreneurial ventures was described and theorised. In such studies, autoethnographies allowed the exploration of what happens to family business members, how sensibilities around business decisions circulate and become collective (Stewart, 2013: 661).

More recently, Kuehne (2012) presented personal experiences when selling a family farm. In his study Kuehne reflects on the cultural influences from family farming that influence

continuity and the thoughts and feelings associated with a decision to sell the family business and exit the industry. Emotions experienced are explored and placed in a theoretical context that makes them more accessible to others. The examination of the experiences leading to the decision to sell the family firm also contributes to the limited literature on farmers and retirement. Kuehne's study suggests that autoethnography has the potential to create knowledge through "relational – familial – connections, focusing on local action and attending to personal experience" (Mingé, 2013: 427). Stewart (2013: 661) identifies that autoethnographies allow the describing of a world "disturbed by the singularities of events" inherent to family businesses in ways that can be generative or disruptive (e.g. succession). More importantly, previous studies highlight that autoethnography is a methodology that acknowledges "contingency, finitude, embeddedness in storied beings, encounters with otherness, an appraisal of ethical and moral commitments, and a desire to keep conversations going" (Bochner, 2013: 53).

In family business gender relations and gender dynamics in the everyday influence long-term decisions within a family business (Hamilton, 2013b). An autoethnography will call upon family and history (Giorgio, 2013). Because autoethnography acknowledges how and why identities matter and interrogates experiences tied to cultural differences (Adams et al., 2014), it can enhance understanding the link between the individual and an organization or a group (e.g. family business) effectively due to the intensely reflexive nature involved (Boyle and Parry, 2007). Family business autoethnographers can turn to narrative and storytelling to give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, and to create relationships between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences in the context of a family in business. Using narrative and storytelling to research and represent experience, family business autoethnographers may also attend to how narratives and stories are constructed (Hamilton et al., 2017; Adams et al., 2014). Moving forward, autoethnographers may explore diverse questions related to gender (Discua Cruz, Hamilton and Jack, 2019) and underlying processes in family businesses, such as succession (Howorth et al., 2010), using their own experience to reflect on self and other interactions and the wider cultural meaning.

How to apply the method

Similar to other qualitative methodologies, autoethnography is guided by a specific intention and approaches to data collection, analysis, and representation (Butz & Besio, 2009). Chang (2016: 122) suggests that activities often take place concurrently or inform each other in a cyclical process. For a family business and gender autoethnographer this may occur as follows, as was experienced by the first author.

First, family business and gender researchers can begin with a purpose or specific area of inquiry involving a level of critical reflexivity (Cooper et al., 2017). Such purpose or area of inquiry may relate to personal experience and/or professional interests in the family business. This approach will demand knowledge and critical reflection on roles occupied (e.g. during a succession process), cultural influences (e.g. social expectations) and how reality is constructed (Spry, 2001). For instance, such initial steps allowed the first author to identify cultural signifiers such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status within a context, which can influence a researcher's identity, informing feelings, emotions, and actions (Holt, 2003).

Second, authoethnographic data collection will demand family business and gender researchers to provide a personalized account or narrative of the experience. Autoethnographies can benefit from several types of data such as fieldnotes, personal documents and artifacts as well as interviews (including memories and narratives) (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013: 65). Of all these data types, Giorgio (2013: 409) advocates that personal memories are the foundations of autoethnography. Memory represents the act or instance of remembering or recalling; the mental faculty for retaining and recalling a past event; something remembered. In autoethnography, memory becomes the primary data to be collected. Memories open a door to the richness of the past and the past gives context to the present. Giorgio (2013) argues that memory is triggered and stored in various forms: stories, secrets, artifacts, transcripts, observations, journals, conversations. The first author had recorded over time in different items that allow memories of events, discussions and emotional meetings with different members of the family in business (father, mother, grandmother) which could be interpreted and evaluated.

Family business and gender researchers can then use memory to delve into the social (and gender) dynamics of a family in business. Journaling, photography, blogs, drawings, letters, conversations, documents, artifacts, and interviews with others can serve as a way of recalling and describing experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Through memory, the

first author was able to recall and interpret family stories and secrets and reflect on the use of artifacts that created a connection between him and his father (e.g. stories about ancestors) or the building of memorials (e.g. stone inscriptions on the family farm for our grandparents), revealing meanings within the social world of his family in business. Memory can also help researchers relive tragedies and traumas in a family in business and understand why persons or events deserve to be "remembered and memorialized" (Giorgio, 2013: 411). The meaning in recalled shared stories is a core part of who family business members are in this world, how they became who they are – their identity, including their gender identity. Identity – a collage of meanings – can come through the sharing of stories. At this stage, data collection and interpretation may occur simultaneously. For example, Chang (2016) argues, when autoethnographers recall past experiences, they do not randomly harvest them. Rather, they select some and discard others according to already-set criteria. The lead author engaged in an analytical and interpretive activity of evaluating memories related to the decisions that had to be made after his father was diagnosed with a terminal disease. Memories and letters that ensued about family, a network of businesses and the role of his mother in leading the family in business (Rosa et al., 2014) helped the first author to examine the validity of the criteria set for analysis and revise these experiences accordingly.

Third, through analysis of the data the first author became immersed in the related events and emotions and created opportunities to relive details leading to a recursive process of meaning-making (Ellis et al., 2011), which is represented in the writing of the autoethnographic vignette. This often requires a great level of psychological and emotional participation which can later enlighten writing evocative texts to describe traumatic or emotionally-charged moments or events (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). At this stage, triangulation, theory application and epistemology will relate to the broader cultural, political, and social context (Cooper et al., 2017). The constant analysis and interpretation of data allowed understanding the meaning of their experiences. The first author searched for markers in a large amount of data that could explain how his life experiences are culturally, not just personally, meaningful and how such experiences can be compared with others' in society. In this process, the first author was able to examine the details of his life as a member of family in business and relate it to the broader context. This process helped to connect fractured data to create an intelligible story and cultural explanation.

Chang (2016) argues that autoethnographers will then come full circle while writing their texts; beginning from memory, creating meaning for others; and then enact remembering by memorializing stories not to be forgotten. The data is then represented through diverse writing styles that can incorporate a blend of real descriptions, impressionist images, analytical perspectives, and confessional narratives (Chang, 2008). In other words, autoethnographers can combine multiple 'voices' including theory, subjective experience, and even fictional aspects to increase the authentic quality of their accounts (Rambo, 2005). Chang (2016) argues that autoethnographic writing engages in a constructive interpretation process. The first author engaged with existing notions and theoretical perspectives and used them as investigative tools to produce meaning about lived experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The first author experienced that autoethnographic writing does not merely tell stories that are rich in details, but actively seeks to interpret a story to make sense of how it is connected with others' stories. As a result, autoethnographic writings can allow researchers to interweave stories from the past with ongoing self-discovery in the present. Stories from the past are interpreted in the context of the present and the present is contextualized in the past. Autoethnographic writing becomes then a constructive interpretive process because the researcher is transformed during the self-analytical process (Chang, 2016).

Interestingly, analysis can also be engaged through collaborative authoethnography (Guyotte and Sochacka, 2016; Chang, 2016) where the expertise of an 'interdisciplinary team', as experienced by the research team in this chapter, can be pulled together, drawing on diverse areas of expertise. The analysis, as suggested by Chang (2016), can be undertaken by all researchers involved, or partially, where one member engages in collecting the data and writing the autoethnographic text while the others help analyse the data. A recent example can be found in the works of Fernando et al. (2019) where researchers produced vignettes from memory and then engaged in analysis collectively.

Challenges and opportunities

Autoethnographies have been criticized for being too focused on the self to produce research (Poulos, 2013: 476). Scholars point out that the highly personal, creative, and often unruly nature of autoethnography can be alarming for some scholars, raising questions about its legitimacy (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Traditional criteria such as validity, reliability, and transferability are perceived as unsuitable to assess autoethnographies (Ellis et al., 2011). Validity for autoethnography is based on the work presented seeking "…verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true. The story is coherent. It connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives" (Ellis et al., 2011: 282). Reliability relates to the "reader's assessment of the researcher as a primary and reliable source" (Cooper et al., 2017: 46). In terms of transferability, the available nature of the material to its readers is an important component of autoethnographies. When transferability is attained, a reader associates the researcher/participant's experience with their own and considers parallels and disparities, thus converting the 'I' to 'we' (Spry, 2001).

More specifically, Mingé (2013: 429) suggests that challenges for the family business researcher in using this approach may relate, first to "messy, complex and multiple realities and knowledge" and second to "knowledge construction from a particular point of view within a particular context". Mingé proposes that being part of a family in business that is complex and complicated can reveal the messy and multiple intersections of knowledge and truth. Moreover, context relates to place, space and time, local detail, moment-to-moment interaction situated within the personal and the cultural. Knowledge is subjective, deeply connected to the family and in context. The challenge for family business researchers examining gender issues lies in how family business deals with stereotypes for both men and women in the succession process (Discua Cruz et al., 2019). Several studies have highlighted gender issues in family business such as marginality, the role of place, visibility, leadership, expectations, among others (Hamilton, 2006) and thus the challenge for researchers relates to reconciling public and private accounts of family firms (Cramton, 1993) by understanding underlying processes in the family firm through examining the experiences and emotions of those involved.

Advice on how to overcome potential pitfalls has been offered, for example avoiding excessive focus on self in isolation from others; avoiding exclusive reliance on personal memory as a data source and avoiding overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation (Chang, 2016: 52). Researchers suggest several opportunities in applying autoethnography to the study of gender in family business research. First, autoethnography provides insight into social experiences that we cannot observe directly,

because the experiences occur in their own time, uninterrupted by a researcher's presence. As autoethnography is considered a rigorous ethnographic, broadly qualitative research method that attempts to achieve in-depth cultural understanding of self and others, it has much to offer social scientists, especially those concerned with raising cross-cultural understanding, particularly in a culturally diverse society (Adams et al., 2014). Second, it can foster a process of collaboration, with scholars "as others", as well as with the persons we love, work with, and study (Adams et al., 2014: 675). Autoethnography is a method of inquiry but also a method of relating as it allows the opportunity to navigate the world of a family in business through the writing of relationships. Finally, autoethnography offers opportunities for researchers of gender and family business worldwide because of its "relatively low cost compared to other more mainstream quantitative and qualitative methods", making it particularly suitable for researchers in "resource-poor institutions," thus creating a space for marginalized groups to produce knowledge (Adams et al. 2014: 44).

Table 1 - An autoethnographic vignette

For women to become leaders of a family business in Honduras it is not easy. I watched how my mom had to sort out issues in terms of management, ownership and family leadership. Reflecting on these experiences suggested a chain of critical events or situations over decades. Several crises appeared unexpectedly and it was assumed that they would be addressed, led and solved by the men in the family. Yet every time a crisis appeared, the responses provided an opportunity to demonstrate that being a woman was no impediment to lead a growing group of family businesses.

My earliest recollection of such an experience related to the financial management of existing ventures. On several occasions my father took my mom and I to the bank when the final repayment of loans were made. We always celebrated such milestones as a family. I remember watching how my dad was well received by bank officials. In the 80s, all bank officials were male. They always congratulated my dad for paying loans on time. I thought it was very unfair for the officials to assume that my mom had nothing to do with it. I knew that it was my mom who administered the businesses and ensured that every penny was paid back. Yet, bank officials assumed that it was my dad who handled all the financial matters with my mom only supporting him as a house mom. It was just expected. I recall that in 1991, as my parents wanted to expand one of the businesses they asked for a large loan with

better terms and conditions. For such a large loan the officials wanted to negotiate the terms with my father. But then I recalled him saying in that bank meeting "Well, I am willing to sign those papers but it is not me who will negotiate those terms, my wife will". Bank officials were expecting my dad to take responsibility for all financial matters. That incident would reveal my mom as the financial manager of the firms - the person the banks had to convince to take on new loans. Upon reflection, I realise what my dad was doing. Over the years, I was always present in the meetings with men customers and suppliers and knew how tough my mom was as a negotiator. They always thought they would fool mom because she was a woman. Yet actually such expectation allowed my mom to get the best terms. She would negotiate a deal and get it half-price or with better terms. Many times, when I went with my dad to sign the deals my mom had negotiated, suppliers mentioned how tough my mom was and that they had underestimated her. I realised that my mom had to demonstrate that she was a good negotiator and that she knew how to steward the family business money to be taken seriously in a business context dominated by males. Such reputation would prove crucial when a major transition in ownership happened.

In 2006, dad died. In Honduran society this meant that the leader of the family was no longer around. A month before this death he made a decision that would not be common in Honduran culture. He transferred the property rights of our oldest venture, the 111 year old family farm, to my mom. Mom asked for those rights to be transferred to me as the first-born son, that was the tradition under which such property was passed down for generations. Ownership of that property would position mom as the head of a family in business. It was a symbolic transmission of trust in the eyes of society and the business world. It would send a signal that she could not only be trusted to steward the family heirloom but that she could improve it for the next generation – for my sister and I. That was the expectation in our family, an ownership responsibility that was always associated with men. Being the owner of such property would legitimize her in business. Soon after dad died, we received formal letters from our business network (customers, suppliers) expressing they were looking forward to working with mom as the owner and manager of our family ventures.

Yet the extended family had a hard time accepting my dad's decision. In a family gathering soon after my father died, extended family members questioned whether ownership of the family farm by a woman was the best for the family moving forwards. It was a venture that was still expected to be owned and managed by men. Despite mom having complete property

rights over the farm, I realized she was expected to maintain family traditions and harmony. Mom told the family members that she was mainly the caretaker and that all decisions about the farm would be decided with me as the future successor. The family then expressed their satisfaction as an expectation for ownership by sons in the family succession was deeply ingrained in our family.

I was the son expected to take ownership of the farm and to make the immediate decisions after my dad died. The collective nature of the stereotypical Latin American family, where all business is family business, implied that ownership succession should be from father to son. Yet the decision was taken in the family, my sister, my dad, my mom and I, concerning what would happen in the future in terms of ownership succession. It was agreed during emotional conversations what was going to be the future ownership structure after the death of my father. I recall vividly when Dad said "...look, I am not sure how long I will live, the doctors said it can be a few weeks, a few months or a few years, we have to be prepared. I will not leave you with the burden of not being able to decide what to do… we have met with the lawyers and this is what is going to happen, your mom will become the sole owner of all the firms, with arrangements in place for you and your sister in terms of ownership after she dies". Such experience made me realize that whilst critical incidents would allow women to advance in management and ownership of family business, the family dimension, which carries an anticipation of how things are supposed to be done, was still influenced by gender expectations.

The vignette above depicts not only experiences of the first author, but also demands reflection of such experiences in the social world. It helps to illustrate the use of autoethnography as a method to examine challenges in the continuity of a family business by women, as unintended successors, in a wider social and cultural context. Moreover, there is more than meets the eye in terms of what happens in the private and public sphere of families in business (Cramton, 1993). Writing the vignette brought back many emotional memories about events and conversations that only autoethnographic accounts could shed light on, as I was the only person with the access to such experiences. Such experiences could then also be analyzed and reflected on with my coauthors in response to the review process (Fernando et al., 2019).

Ethical implications

Ethical considerations when studying gender issues apply to autoethnography as we involve others as the source of data or as co-participants (Ellis and Berger, 2003). Hernandez & Ngunjiri (2013: 269-270) suggest that university committees may be more concerned about the reliability and validity of data and therefore both procedural issues and ethics in practice must be acknowledged. The former deals with formal applications to research committees for approval before the commencement of studies involving human subjects, this is a key step in ensuring that research adheres to broad ethical principles. The latter deals with the obligation of researchers to protect the identities and vulnerabilities of those involved or implicated in our studies, calling for critical reflection throughout the research process.

Writing autoethnographies about gender issues in family businesses requires an ethical approach that honors and respects those we write about, while staying true to the meaning of the story (Giorgio, 2013: 413). Giorgio suggests that the ethical implications of conducting autoethnographic studies can be conceptualized as a "balancing act", one that mediates and re-imagines what is remembered and told and that which is forgotten or left out. In multiple reflections this balancing act attends to each person in the story with gentle yet honest treatment, keeping the meaning of the story intact, while protecting those we write about. Moreover, Giorgio (2013: 415) argues that when we use memory as our data, we must take special care to work with it critically and responsibly. Writing from memory also reveals how elusive the memories of our experiences related to gender issues truly are; for we know that our memories are inaccurate "pixels" shared by others who may fairly contest their accuracy. Memories are intangibles, not static as we are not static, taking shape over time and reshaped by circumstances and conversations. Yet, Giorgio (2013), suggests when handled carefully and ethically, such memories reflect the lived experiences as a shared experience with multiple meanings and multiple reflections.

Finally, Chang (2016: 52) argues that researchers should consider the personal, relational, and institutional risks and responsibilities of doing autoethnography. Such engagement requires researchers to work with participants in less researcher-centered and more participant-oriented way, treating participants humanely and respectfully before, during, and after research projects (Adams et al., 2014).

This chapter contributes to literature on research methods on gender and management by shedding light on a unique research method such as autoethnography. With autoethnography, family business and gender researchers can interpret a narrative of a family in business (Hamilton et al., 2017) according to their personal perspectives, without removing themselves from what is being studied. The researcher becomes an actor, and protagonist of the study, and in doing so can understand the meaning of what they think, feel and do (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) in terms of their experiences.

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