Death and entrepreneuring in family businesses: a complexity and stewardship perspective.

Based on the works of Alistair Anderson, this article explores entrepreneuring in the context of entrepreneurial families prior to, and following, the death of a leading family member in business. Until now, literature has suggested that the loss of a leading family member may bring complexity and chaos to ongoing entrepreneurial efforts. Drawing on a complex adaptive system and stewardship perspective, this study examines the role of death in entrepreneuring in four entrepreneurial families. With the loss of a leading family member in business, social processes of adaptation in entrepreneurial trajectories are revealed. Our analysis shows that these processes allow members to *reorganize, recalibrate,* and *reconnect* aspects of family and business. Our study contributes to understanding social processes in entrepreneuring by capturing how death can influence entrepreneurial choices and progression over time, focusing on what family entrepreneurs do. Conceptualizing the family as a complex adaptive system contributes to a theoretical perspective of stewardship as fluid and collective.

Keywords: Entrepreneuring; Family business; Complex adaptive systems; Death; Stewardship

Introduction

The work of Alistair Anderson has guided and encouraged entrepreneurship and family business scholars to extend knowledge where entrepreneurship and family meet (Drakopoulou Dodd, Anderson, and Jack 2013; Anderson, Jack, and Drakopoulou Dodd 2005). As a result, there has been an increasing interest in capturing the richer aspects of the complex processes involved in the context of family entrepreneurship (Randerson et al. 2015). Earlier arguments advocated by Alistair positioned entrepreneurship as a creative process, involving ongoing, dynamic interactions in relation to changes in circumstances over time (Anderson 2000, 2006). A significant challenge that families experience is the death, often untimely, of founding entrepreneurs (Popp and Holt 2013; Heinonen and Ljunggren 2020). Whilst prior work indicates that family losses can complicate business and ownership dynamics, there is little insight into how, or whether, entrepreneuring by surviving family members will be manifested thereafter.

Work by Alistair and colleagues (Anderson 2005; Nicholson and Anderson 2005) hints that families facing the anticipated death of founding entrepreneurs may channel events in an expedient way that allows them to shape what they do next as entrepreneurs (Discua Cruz, Hamilton, and Jack 2021). Yet how this occurs remains elusive. Prior theoretical perspectives suggest that safeguarding behaviour may unfold when entrepreneurial families face such a loss (Davis et al. 2010). Nevertheless, this perspective alone would be insufficient to explain how families, as a social system, adapt to the transition demanded by the imminent loss of a family member in business. Studies by Alistair focusing on relationships and change encourage us as researchers to consider the complexity of the family system when such a shock is anticipated and/or experienced, and the ability that families have to adapt to such transitions (Anderson and Jack 2002; Anderson and Miller 2003; Anderson, Park, and Jack 2007). While substantial studies have been undertaken to understand how families deal with grief, loss, and the process of an anticipated death (Titelman and Reed 2018; Walsh and McGoldrick 1991), little has been advanced in terms of how surviving members of an entrepreneurial family adapt to the transition when they engage in pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities. Therefore, in this study we aim to shed light on: *How does the anticipated death and loss of a family business leader influence what surviving members do as entrepreneurs?*

To address this knowledge gap, we are inspired by Alistair and colleagues, who established the view of entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon accomplished through activities and relationships (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012; Anderson and Jack 2000). We focus on the processes of entrepreneuring as a conceptual attractor (Steyaert 2007) that links ideas, people, narratives, and stories (Dodd, Anderson, and Jack 2021). We consider entrepreneuring as a process where changes and connections have meaning for entrepreneurial families that face a crisis (e.g. death), as they embrace the potential for change and adaptation in the entrepreneurial process (Anderson 2000; Anderson, Jack, and Drakopoulou-Dodd 2005). We argue that by understanding the transition that entrepreneurial families face when losing a key family member in business (Heinonen and Ljunggren 2020; Brown 1993), we can theorize entrepreneuring as a social process that is deeply influenced or affected by family transitions. Guided by Anderson et al. (2012), we draw on complexity perspectives and stewardship theory to build an appreciation of entrepreneuring amidst changing circumstances in an entrepreneurial family. To address our research question, we offer a qualitative longitudinal study in order to investigate four entrepreneurial families in the alternative context of Latin America (Anderson and Ronteau 2017), where family participation in business is widespread (Botero et al. 2019). We examine the accounts of surviving members of entrepreneurial families prior to, and following, the death of a leading family member. This approach allowed us insight into the actions of the entrepreneurial family members, focusing on what they do rather than on predicting how they would behave (Dodd et al. 2021).

Our findings make three important contributions to social perspectives in the entrepreneuring literature. First, unlike much of the existing literature focusing on single individuals, our findings highlight how entrepreneuring, based on Alistair's work, is an important concept that helps to understand how an entrepreneurial family, as a social system, is influenced by family transitions such as death. Second, we show that by adapting to an imminent yet unwelcome family transition, members of an entrepreneurial family socially construct solutions prior to, and following, the death of the leading family member in business, which influences what they do as entrepreneurs, thus responding to Alistair's call to provide empirical evidence of entrepreneuring. Finally, we elaborate on a conceptual model, based on earlier work by Alistair, illustrating how entrepreneuring manifests through a continuous social engagement within, and across, generations. We uncover parallel processes where order and stability in the entrepreneurial family system are facilitated by processes of *reorganization, recalibration* and *reconnection*. We analyse how these processes offer surviving family members an opportunity to deploy their entrepreneurial skills, competencies, and knowledge to deal with multiple challenges, yet are guided by common objectives. In doing so we contribute to fresh understanding of the family as a complex adaptive system in times of transition. We also uncover how entrepreneurial stewardship can be transferred across and between generations. This study contributes a new theoretical perspective of stewardship as a fluid and collective element in family business. Entrepreneurial stewardship is not bounded in one individual or one generation, but collectively constructed in social processes.

Our paper is structured as follows: first, we review the literature of entrepreneurial families, death, stewardship, and complexity, and highlight the relevance of looking at the entrepreneurial family as a social system; second, we provide a brief overview of the context of our study; third, we elaborate the research method and offer our key findings organized by themes; and fourth, we provide a discussion, outline contributions, and summarize with pathways for future research.

Literature analysis

Entrepreneuring and entrepreneurial families

Entrepreneuring relates to a processual view of entrepreneurship, which situates phenomena in space and time, focusing on how and why change occurs for an individual or group of individuals (Champenois, Lefebvre, and Ronteau 2019; Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen 2009; Johannisson 2011). In this study, entrepreneuring focuses on processes and practices relating to how members of an entrepreneurial family adapt to changing circumstances and act entrepreneurially. The term entrepreneuring connects concepts such as entrepreneurial families, enterprising families, entrepreneuring families, entrepreneurial households, families in business, or business families (Nordqvist and Melin 2011; Jones and Li 2017; Estrada-Robles, Williams, and Vorley 2021). The common denominator in these conceptualizations is the existence of a social unit, composed of different members of a family who behave and act entrepreneurially over time; that is, they engage in entrepreneuring.

By focusing on entrepreneuring in the context of an entrepreneurial family we can examine entrepreneurship as involving complex social mechanisms and multiple entrepreneurial actors (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012). Entrepreneurial families experience complexity when they engage in creating and developing one or several businesses over time (Rautiainen et al. 2019). Recent studies have pointed out that a collective family approach benefits from the diversity of skills, knowledge, and resources within the family, as well as shared values or understandings shaped by prolonged family interaction and socialization (Jones and Giordano 2020; Ko, Wiklund, and Pollack 2021). Yet, such perspectives are limited in explaining how family members might act as they engage in the entrepreneurial process when a leading family member is no longer able to function due to illness or death. We speculate that when a key member of the entrepreneurial family dies, surviving members must deal with the complications that such loss entails, and either abandon the entrepreneurial effort altogether or adapt their approach to the entrepreneurial process and act accordingly. Understanding the way that entrepreneurial families adapt to changes as active participants in a social context, responding to diverse constraints and opportunities, can help us theorize the social perspective of entrepreneuring.

The family business, succession, and entrepreneuring

A family business, the most widespread organizational form around the world, is broadly defined as an enterprise associated with the involvement of family members in its emergence, ownership, and management (Howorth et al. 2010). The entrepreneurial dynamics that lead to the emergence of a family businesses embrace wholeheartedly the concept of entrepreneuring (Randerson et al. 2015). Alistair's work suggests that entrepreneuring is critical for family business emergence and development over time (Drakopoulou Dodd, Anderson, and Jack 2013). Entrepreneuring may be particularly relevant to address family business transitions, such as succession, which revolve around a social process that may be influenced by illness or death (Ramírez-Pasillas, Lundberg, and Nordqvist 2021; Howorth and Robinson 2020). This underscores the role of families in business as flexible, choosing patterns of behaviour to act upon family events that could limit family options and behaviour in business., rather than as merely reacting to circumstances (Moen and Wethington 1992).

Succession in family businesses may become extremely complex when expectations about who may take over the leadership of existing firms are challenged or ambiguous (Le-Breton Miller, Miller, and Steier 2004). It is not uncommon to find that succession is deeply affected by tensions emerging following the death of a family successor or incumbent, as surviving family members may be reluctant to succeed them (Davis and Harveston 1998; Lansberg 1999). They may lack the necessary preparation for the realities of death (Brown 1993) and the entrepreneurial skills and impetus to carry on (Ucbasaran, Westhead, and Wright 2001). When these issues are not addressed appropriately, uncertainty and stagnation may ensue, jeopardizing the continuity of a family business and an entrepreneurial family (Litz 2008). Prior studies point out that in the case of the sudden death of a leading member of an entrepreneurial family, we can expect a shock in the expected succession process, an interruption in business operations, emotional upheaval, and complications for a family, as unresolved tensions may emerge (Brown 1993). Thus, the death of a leading family member could impact upon the vision or development of a family re-engaging in the entrepreneurial process (Lansberg 1999). Whilst for some families the death of a leading family member may be so intense that remaining members become unable to make entrepreneurial decisions, for others, their response to imminent loss may result in entrepreneurial decisions that influence business continuity, diversification, or renewal (Rutherford, Muse, and Oswald 2006).

In entrepreneurship, Alistair's work highlighted how families provide skills and access to resources within networks, which can be crucial for entrepreneuring (Anderson and Miller 2003; Anderson, Jack, and Drakopoulou Dodd 2005). In the next section we discuss how members of an entrepreneurial family may engage in safeguarding the welfare of a family and a business when facing a crisis.

Entrepreneuring and entrepreneurial stewardship

Prior studies reveal that some entrepreneurial families experiencing the sudden death of family members engage in different entrepreneurial practices to safeguard the continuity of an existing enterprise (Heinonen and Ljunggren 2018). Safeguarding or looking after the interest of a family or a business has been theoretically understood through a stewardship perspective (Davis et al. 1997), based on the recognition that family members are not always self-serving, and that goals and motivations can be aligned by looking after the common good of existing businesses and a family (Davis et al. 2010).

Stewardship theory assumes a relationship-based system with a focus on non-financial objectives, explaining situations in which individuals serve the organizational good, based on an intrinsic desire to pursue collective goals (Madison et al. 2016). Long-term commitment to existing enterprises and shared identification with core cultural values may explain why family members engage in practices that safeguard existing enterprises or engage in new pursuits (Dodd and Dyck 2015, 314). In particular, entrepreneurial stewardship may explain why, following the death of a family member, the remaining members, as a social unit, could mobilize collectively and grow the family assets entrepreneurially, not just safeguard them for the next generation (Discua Cruz, Howorth, and Hamilton 2013, 39). The remaining family members may act as entrepreneurial stewards integrating shared interests, acting upon a concern for the long-term welfare of the family and the business rather than self-interest, and become more involved in the creation and leveraging of key resources when engaging in the entrepreneurial process (Discua Cruz, Centeno Caffarena, and Vega Solano 2020). This approach resonates with prior works by Alistair that argue that a shared vision and commitment, the use of existing resources, and the creation (and activation) of exchange networks based on diverse relationships can facilitate the entrepreneurial process for family members (Anderson et al. 2005).

Yet, whilst an entrepreneurial stewardship perspective offers a starting point to explain why families may behave entrepreneurially through a crisis created by death in the family, it is insufficient to explain how an entrepreneruial family, as a social system, could address the complexities that emerge following the death of a family member and adapt in the process of entrepreneuring.

A complex adaptive system perspective in family entrepreneuring.

The key theoretical advantage offered by a systems perspective is to conceptualize entrepreneurial families as a world of meaning-processing social systems, which moves us away from focusing on individuals as the elements of a social system (von Schlippe and Frank 2013).

Prior studies suggest that the family has to be considered first as a system in functional equilibrium, where each member is functioning at some level of efficiency (Bowen 1991). Bowen (1991) explains that the equilibrium of the entrepreneurial family can then be disturbed by either the addition of a new member or the loss of a member. Early work describes the disruptive impact of death on a family's functional equilibrium, viewing the intensity of the emotional reaction as governed by the level of emotional integration in the family at the time of the loss and by the functional importance of the member lost (Walsh and McGoldrick 1991, 4). There is a sense of physical loss when a member leaves home or dies, and that can disturb the family equilibrium. A functional loss is also implied when a member becomes incapacitated, due to illness or injury, preventing them from conducting functions that the family depends upon. Knowledge of an imminent loss due to a terminal illness may reverberate throughout an entire family system, causing a disturbance that the family has to act upon. Thus, the family reaction to the loss of a central figure in the entrepreneurial life and stability of the family can be intense (Nerken 1993; Titelman and Reed 2018).

Alistair's work makes us wonder about the scenario whereby if an individual family entrepreneur dies whilst pursuing an entrepreneurial opportunity with other family members, surviving members may be able to carry out the entrepreneurial effort by adapting to their absence, making decisions and leveraging existing or new resources (Anderson et al. 2005). In essense, members of an entrepreneurial family, as a social system, could potentially adapt to the circumstances and cope with the changes brought by the absence of that member. From that perspective, family can be conceptualized as an open system that adapts to the complexity that shocks to the immediate environment bring, and then displays an adaptive quality (Morel and Ramanujam 1999).

Alistair and colleagues advocated that entrepreneurship might be better understood by seeing the entirety of the entrepreneurial effort as a complex adaptive system (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012). In mainstream literature, complex adaptive systems (or CAs) relate to systems with many moving parts and pieces, with each component having an impact on other components in the system. Broadly, CAs are helpful in understanding entrepreneuring, as they incorporate turbulence or change as a creative force and exemplify the tenets of non-equilibrium (Dooley 1997). CAs represent the dynamic interactions of diverse agents who self-organize and produce adaptations that emerge in ways that can neither be predicted nor controlled (Holden 2005). This perspective supports a view of entrepreneuring as a complex, non-linear process, where order emerges through diverse processes that shape new subsystems of entrepreneurs (Verduyn 2015).

McKelvey (2004) suggests that entrepreneurial families could be understood as CAs, consisting of diverse elements, where the level of interaction is rich and dynamic, with loops in their interconnection, operating under conditions far from equilibrium and with shared histories. These interacting and overlapping components, systems, and structures may generate an emergent order that is able to adapt to new situations (Gare 2000). Their complexity has implications for the way entrepreneurial families may behave when experiencing turbulence or crisis (e.g. the imminent death of a leading member in the business), as it can complicate the (re)engagement of remaining family members in the entrepreneurial process. As adaptive systems, an entrepreneurial family needs to cope with the increasing complexity coming from the outside (e.g. the environment), but most importantly with internal complexity emerging from within the family system (e.g. the loss of a family member) and a business system (e.g. existing businesses) (Lansberg 1999).

An important question arising from Anderson et al. (2021) is what happens with the entrepreneurial family unit, as a complex adaptive system, when they experience the imminent loss of a family member to illness. It prompts us to ask how adaptation might occur through social processes that allow surviving members to deal with the loss, make decisions, and act (or not) on any ongoing entrepreneurial efforts.

Research Context and Methodology

Honduras

In the study of entrepreneurship, Alistair inspired scholars to explore alternative contexts (Tehseen and Anderson 2020; Lent et al. 2019), particularly to find out more about entrepreneuring (Anderson and Ronteau 2017). In that regard, this study focuses on Honduras, a developing Latin American country (World Bank 2018). In Honduras, most businesses emerge amidst a complex and resource limited environment, with family participation in business being commonplace (Discua Cruz and Halliday 2020). Honduras is a relevant context to the study of entrepreneuring by entrepreneurial families, as recent studies highlight that the entrepreneurial process may be replete with challenges and adverse situations that require the action of family members (Arias and Discua Cruz 2018; Discua Cruz et al. 2019). These characteristics suggest that particular approaches to the entrepreneurial process, supported by family, may provide insight into how entrepreneuring manifests (Lent et al. 2019).

Methodology

To answer our question – *How does the anticipated death and loss of a family business leader influence what surviving members do as entrepreneurs?* – this study has sought to explore the phenomenon over time. Detailed and in-depth insight from members of an entrepreneurial family was needed. An inductive, qualitative approach was preferred because it provided the opportunity to have a fuller picture about what entrepreneurs do (van Burg et al. 2022). An interpretivist perspective and a focus on entrepreneurial narratives are relevant in theorizing about entrepreneuring (Larty and Hamilton 2011; Toledano and Anderson 2020), as they acknowledge its relevance as a conceptual tool in what is being studied (Steyaert 2007) and increase the interaction between researchers and practitioners (Dodd et al. 2021).

As we wanted a closer look into what members of an entrepreneurial family do following the loss of a leading family member, and our interest was to build theory, we followed Eisenhardt's (2021, 149) recommendation to select a theoretical sample of cases where the focal phenomenon is likely to occur, where we could find common antecedents, and where the similarities and differences across cases are likely to improve theory building. Thus, we purposely sought entrepreneurial families that had experienced the loss of a senior family member (e.g. a business founder) and were experiencing collective re-engagement in the entrepreneurial process (e.g. the creation of a new venture). By selecting entrepreneurial families using these criteria, we aimed for rich data to emerge, based on their narratives (Hamilton et al. 2017), and we also aimed to address criticisms around distortion and insufficient breadth in purposive sampling (Patton 2014). Four entrepreneurial families were selected out of twelve families who are part of an ongoing research study of the entrepreneurial dynamics of families in business since 2006. The cases selected exemplify entrepreneurial families that own and control family firms moving beyond the first generation, representing the Honduran family business landscape (Discua Cruz et al. 2016). All names (participants, businesses) have been changed to ensure anonymity, at the request of participants.

Alistair's work highlighted narrative methods as central to understand what entrepreneurs do (Toledano and Anderson 2020). Thus, to gain a nuanced and complete understanding of the social world of entrepreneurial families when a family member dies during the entrepreneuring process, we used a qualitative design supported by narratives, involving observation, conversations, and in-depth interviews (Hamilton, Discua Cruz, and Jack 2017; Discua Cruz et al. 2021). A strength of qualitative interviewing is its capacity to access self-reflexivity among interview subjects when talking about sensitive subjects, leading to the telling of stories that allow authors to understand and theorize their social world (Ryen 2016, 56). Such an approach acknowledges the sensitive nature of death and loss in a family (Walsh and McGoldrick 1991), with interviews allowing family members to construct their social context and to generate data that provide an authentic insight into their experiences (Silverman 2016).

To address the difficulty of accessing information from family businesses in Latin America (Jones 2004), personal relationships of the first author with the selected businesses facilitated the setting up and engagement of open, active, and rich interviews (Holstein and Gubrium 2016). The lead author is familiar with the context and has developed strong rapport and trust with the entrepreneurial families, which allowed extensive and open interviews over time (Ryen 2016). In this way we aimed to maintain consent, confidentiality and trust in our research approach. The lead author remained neutral and non-judgemental in the interviewing process by being theoretically sensitized, and by having skills needed to conduct qualitative work (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Given the sensitive nature of our study, which could bring emotional stress, we focused on aspects of consent, confidentiality, and rapport, to ensure interviewees could share their views openly (Ryen 2016). Following Konopaski et al. (2015) and Discua Cruz et al. (2021), the other members of the research team were involved and engaged throughout the research process, being on hand to discuss the data, emerging patterns and themes.

The data collection involved several in-depth interviews in the locations and through channels preferred by interviewees, including business premises, homes, cafes, and online channels via VOIP. Interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours, with multiple respondents who were involved in the entrepreneuring process when a family member died. Interviews were recorded verbatim in Spanish (the first language of the interviewees and the lead author). The interviews were held in 2006, 2010, and 2016 through face-to-face interviews, and in 2020/2021 through online interviewing, due to the restrictions caused by Covid-19 (Tremblay et al. 2021).

Initial and subsequent interviews allowed families who experienced the loss of a family member during an ongoing entrepreneurial process to be identified. Relying on phenomenological interview guidelines (Neergaard and Leitch 2015) and building rapport, the first author was able to produce unrestricted accounts of the approach and rationale behind entrepreneuring. A longitudinal approach was used to understand what entrepreneurial families do following the death of a leading member (Table 1), which provided insights into the narratives and helped triangulate data. Emerging perspectives were shared with participants in order to clarify meanings around the phenomena (Stake 2008), adding rigour to our approach and addressing potential issues of retrospective accounts (Loftus and Hoffman 1989).

The interviews started by asking participants to talk about their story in business and what they did to create new ventures. Such initial questions facilitated the recollection of vivid and often emotional accounts (Discua Cruz et al. 2021), facilitating the understanding of what entrepreneurial families do (Reay and Zhang 2014) when critical family events occur. In all cases, the prior role and functioning of the deceased member in the family systems was important. All deceased members were founders of family ventures and parents of surviving members. Therefore, their role in the family as a leading member and as a habitual entrepreneur (Rosa, Howorth, and Discua Cruz 2014) was significant in understanding entrepreneuring.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Data analysis

In analyzing the findings, emphasis was placed on the meanings of research participants, both within and across case studies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana 2013). Rigorous analysis of the data provided two intertwined set of findings: (1) evidence of the nature of the phenomena under investigation, including the contexts and situations in which it emerged; (2) insight into the cultural frames that people use to make sense of these experiences (Miller and Glassner 2016). Combined, they offer important insights for the theoretical understanding of social perspectives of entrepreneuring. Following qualitative research guidelines for entrepreneurship (Neergaard and Leitch 2015), the data were analysed as descriptions of experience, as representations of a particular reality. We systematically grouped and summarized the descriptions, providing a coherent organizing framework that encapsulates and offers an understanding of experience or the social world that respondents portray, aiming to understand what is said in relation to how, where, and when, and also by whom (Holstein and Gubrium 2016, 77)

Based on Alistair's work, the analysis was iterative in that ideas emerging from the narrative data were compared with the literature, using the constant comparative method to review data with emerging categories (Anderson and Jack 2015). As Anderson and Jack (2015, 16) argue, in entrepreneurship research this method works for analysing data and explaining social situations, links, and relationships, because it allows for flexibility and adaptability. Thus, perspectives were corroborated, resulting in an iterative process where data were reviewed, discussed, and debated, resulting in further triangulation and validity (Neergaard and Leitch 2015).

Manual methods of analysis were employed. Matrices were used to organize data and to improve comparisons across entrepreneurs, while field notes, margin notes, summaries, vignettes, and diagrams were all used in the analysis (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2013). Guided by recent works using this technique, we moved from empirical data to description, thematic categorization, interpretation, and finally, theoretical implications (Konopaski, Jack, and Hamilton 2015; McKeever, Anderson, and Jack 2014). The data in tables support the key themes emerging from the analysis (Pratt 2009). Compelling excerpts from the data within and across cases were used to illustrate arguments. Such an approach was undertaken to increase transparency and address validity (Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010). To address reliability, a case study protocol and the development of a case study database were used (Yin 2018).

The case vignettes of the four cases are as follows (see also Table 1).

The *Educators* family business started in 1960 in the retail sector. Conrado began a career in the merchant navy and travelled to many countries in the 1950s. Upon his return he married Luisa and together they started a small retail stand in the local market. They had three sons: Santiago, Mateo, Nicolas, and a daughter, Martina. The junior generation, educated in accounting, business management, and marketing, started careers outside the family business. In 2011, as Conrado started to create two new businesses in hospitality and private education, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Further complications meant his health deteriorated and he died in 2013.

The *Chemists* started with Carmen establishing a shoemaking shop in 1972, based on the skills she had learned from her father. Carmen married Lucas, who was then finishing his engineering degree. Lucas continued to pursue his professional career as a chemical engineer in the public sector until the mid-1980s, when the shoemaking store grew and the business needed additional support. Carmen and Lucas grew the business to reach regional markets. Savings were used to buy property, aiming to start new businesses with her older daughters Brenda and Samanta, and her son Tomas, who had developed careers in industrial, chemicals, and systems engineering respectively. All grew up in the business, yet decided to take on separate careers after finishing university. In 2012, as Lucas wanted to start a new business with Samanta, he was diagnosed with cancer and died two years later.

The *Manufacturers* business was started in the 1970s by Ignacio and Ivette, who created a small business in garment making. In the 1980s they diversified into retailing, while raising a family of two sons – Franco and Diego - and a daughter, Renata, who specialized in law, industrial engineering, and business management respectively. Each member of the second generation wanted to develop a career in business when they finished university. Ignacio was diagnosed with cancer in 2009 at a time when Diego wanted to start a new business with him. He died in 2012. In 2021, Ivette died due to COVID.

The *Builders* family started in the construction sector in the 1970s. Leo, a civil engineer, and Marcela, an accountant, started a civil engineering firm. They had two daughters - Irene and Amelia - and one son, Sergio. The daughters studied business and operations management and the son studied civil engineering. The junior generation developed a career outside the family business until Leo was diagnosed with kidney failure in 2008, due to diabetes; he died in early 2010.

Findings

In this section, we present empirical evidence about how these entrepreneurial families articulated what happened prior to, and following, the death of a leading family member in business. The illness and subsequent death of a leading family member posed significant challenges for surviving members of the families as they dealt with decisions regarding existing business ventures and whether to continue a shared entrepreneurial effort. The findings suggest that when we consider the multiple, fluctuating, and often conflicting responses of members of an entrepreneurial family, we can appreciate the complexity that such a loss brings to entrepreneuring. The findings highlight that social processes that we have called *reorganization*, *recalibration,* and *reconnection* influence continued entrepreneuring for families. Following Konopaski et al. (2015) and Discua Cruz et al. (2021), we use 'power quotes' from the participants' accounts to illustrate how death influences what surviving members of an entrepreneurial family do – that is, how they go about the process of entrepreneuring.

Reorganization: A shift in the entrepreneurial family system

The challenges posed by the illness and death of a leading family business member required deliberate approaches to family reorganization and, as a consequence, change in the entrepreneurial family definition of its identity and purpose. As such, the reorganization represents a shift in the entrepreneurial family system. These shifts, as Table 2 shows, implied a redistribution of role functions to compensate for the loss in existing ventures and to carry on with ongoing entrepreneurial processes, supporting the view of the combined entrepreneurial effort as part of a complex adaptive system.

The *Chemists* illustrated such a shift as influential for the short- and long-term approach of a family. Brenda stated in 2016:

> ... when Dad told us about his cancer I was working as an engineer in another company, but my world crumbled. I knew how many things he did for Mom for her business to be successful and he was helping my sister to get her business started. I had to help by doing

at least something that my Dad did for my Mom and for my sister… He did not have to ask me. We [surviving members] all agreed to meet and decide on what our role was going to be without telling him [Lucas] as he still wanted to be involved until the day he could no longer do it… we knew we had to carry on.

As Table 2 shows, prior to the death of a leading family member, surviving members of the entrepreneurial family may focus on how a redistribution of functions previously conducted by the ill family member could be tackled. Such approaches emerged either from direct requests from ill family members or proactively from surviving members. In doing so, surviving members were able to set goals that were attainable and focus on how other tasks could be completed for the benefit of the entrepreneurial process. Such reorganization also allowed family members who had not recently been involved in existing family enterprises to become reacquainted with the demands of diverse roles.

An expected shift in the entrepreneurial family system allowed members not only to address roles within existing enterprises, but also offered an opportunity to showcase how their knowledge, skills, abilities, and commitment could be critical for ongoing entrepreneurial efforts. This is best exemplified in the power quote from Amelia (*Builders*, 2016):

… you cannot be in two places at once. I knew that I could oversee the financial functions in our existing business and also how enthusiastic my Dad was for this new business idea [residential real estate] with my sister. I told them I will go part-time in my current job as financial advisor to help them get the business off the ground. Once it started and I'd quit my job to become the financial director of the new business and also help Mom to run our family business… my Dad just had a big smile in his sickbed and I knew what that meant, my sister just hugged me whilst crying! We knew there was much to do and so little time left.

Similar accounts were found in all cases, as Table 2 shows; members were either asked by other family members to get involved in new entrepreneurial efforts or they personally suggested how they could form a family team to handle both existing businesses and become involved in the new family enterprises. In doing so, family members acted on the knowledge they had of others, based on their caretaking function of existing businesses, and also on the skills and abilities that they could bring to the entrepreneurial effort.

At the time of the death, illustrations from the participants' accounts elaborate on how the loss disrupted the family equilibrium and expedited the shift of the family system. Following a period of mourning and family rituals (e.g. funerals, wakes, and subsequent visits to the cemetery), surviving family members engaged in promoting cohesion in the family system around the wishes of deceased members for surviving members to help each other in the business. The illustrations in Table 2 show that the patterns of interaction prior to the loss cemented the grounds for surviving members to adapt and self-organize in order to engage in family entrepreneuring. Roles previously undertaken facilitated the shift in the functional structure of the entrepreneurial family when re-engaging in the entrepreneurial process. This was showcased when different members agreed with others on the skills, knowledge, and abilities they would bring into the entrepreneurial process. For example, for the *Builders*, Sergio used his engineering knowledge to procure official permits for the start-up of a residential construction firm, while his sisters – based on their experience and agreed roles as financial officers – developed the financial documentation necessary to apply for bank loans. For the *Chemists*, Brenda handled the health and safety requirements check from the government, based on Sergio's experience as an industrial engineer and her agreed role as operations manager. Similar accounts were found in all cases.

A key decision for surviving members following the reorganization and prior to the start of the new venture was to agree on the date that they would start trading. In this study, entrepreneurial families legally constituted their new firms around dates that related them to the memory of the deceased/surviving members – for example, on the wedding anniversary of the senior generation (*Chemists*), the birthday of the deceased member (*Builders*, *Educators*), or the anniversary of their death (*Manufacturers*). Taken together, the aspects described above suggest that entrepreneurial families may engage in the act of reorganizing their functional structure in order to look after existing firms and move on in the entrepreneurial effort while establishing a date that permanently acknowledges the founder.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Recalibration: Giving family aspirations a chance to be fulfilled

The participants' accounts, as displayed in Table 3, suggest that when faced with the illness and subsequent death of a leading family member, entrepreneurial families may drift off-course in the entrepreneurial process if surviving family members fail to find a point of reference to recalibrate, that is, agree about where they want to go as a family in business and what needs to be done to move the entrepreneurial effort forwards.

A representative power quote comes from the *Educators*, who highlighted that knowledge of the progression of their dad's illness prompted a rethink about what they wanted to do to fulfil a family dream. Santiago (*Educators*, 2016) explained:

> …It was not easy to deal with Dad's Alzheimer's, he slowly faded away until the day he died. It was difficult because we did not want to forget his memories and dreams. He wanted us to realize the importance of education. Once, in a family gathering, he mentioned how our city was missing a private school that really catered for family values and trilingual education; he described how it was a great business opportunity. He started the process with me, we had the location to build it, the financing from the banks if we wanted to. We just

did not see how we could do it once he got sick. It was that memory that provided a lighthouse for me and my siblings to start, thinking back to every lesson he taught us.

Recalibration, started by surviving members prior to the death of the leading family member, confronts the reality of a death in the family. Table 3 shows that surviving family members dealt with the news of terminal and life-threatening medical conditions in different ways. Surviving members shared the experience of dealing with the process of dying (e.g. looking after sick members at home, taking them to hospital appointments and treatments, discussing options) of a loved member, and as illnesses progressed, family communication became critical. Clear and direct communication facilitated family members being able to talk about the imminent loss and what that would mean for them as entrepreneurs.

A recalibration also meant, as Table 3 accounts show, that family members organized and shaped their visions of entrepreneurial action by constructing family narratives about what needed to be done and why. This was approached through a common view of actions in existing firms, based on a common understanding of their *raison d'etre* whilst considering contextual factors from diverse angles. All members of the *Builders,* for example, aimed to continue delivering construction services with the same approach as the deceased family member, yet at the same time introducing changes: discussing the new roles within the business with employees; expanding by participating in new construction bids; acting on knowledge of changing legislation and expertise in construction to establish the new residential construction business. For the *Chemists,* a point of reference meant looking after the shoemaking business with a clear objective to keep it operationally stable, based on the deceased member's approach and expanding its customer base through new products, whilst analysing new import regulations and employment laws based on their new roles in order to procure materials for their new pharmaceutical business. For the *Manufacturers*, this meant building on knowledge about how to re-tool existing machinery and redeploy employee skills during idle times in order to manufacture new plastic products that complied with new environmental production requirements.

Communication between members not only strengthened a shared understanding of what could be done for existing firms, but also created a narrative about their approach to their roles as surviving family members and entrepreneurs. Table 3 suggests that such stories, shared by participants, each highlighted a supportive family network that could build on family business assets entrepreneurially prior to and after the imminent loss of a leading family member. In most cases, as the ill family members' health deteriorated, actions that affected the use of goods and resources of the family were first agreed between remaining members and then, if possible, discussed with the ill member as a way to keep them involved. Surviving members suggested that they took every available opportunity to refine their approach by asking for advice and guidance and then discussing it all together prior to acting. This was first suggested by Franco from the *Manufacturers* (2020):

> … I knew he [Ignacio] was getting worse; when he had any strength and got the chance to talk we asked him to remind us of any of the business start-up stories he used to tell us. The lessons in every story had a different meaning then… sometimes he could not finish the story, so we all filled in from what we remembered and learned from it…it was something that we all shared. He would then remind us of a family dream to have each one of us owning and leading a firm. Those lessons and dreams became a filter for our decisions on what we needed to do to help my brother to start his plastic moulding business.

Similar accounts were found in other cases, suggesting that the time prior to death served as a shared experience for surviving members to reassure ill members of the importance of the knowledge that had been passed down over any previous interaction or socialization and its relevance for future entrepreneurial efforts. Moreover, Table 3 shows that shared understandings allowed family teams to approach the entrepreneurial process with a common objective, and agreed decisions about who to contact, what resources were needed to materialize a venture, and why.

Following the death of the family member, illustrations in Table 3 suggest that a mourning process influenced the surviving members' recalibration by sharing attempts to put the loss into some meaningful perspective that fitted coherently into the rest of the entrepreneurial family life experience system. This required dealing with the implications of the loss, including the perceived loss of family entrepreneurial dreams of starting and developing a business in the future. Recalibrating meant that adapting to loss was achieved through the cohesiveness of the family unit for mutual support, balanced with tolerance of, and respect for, different responses to loss by family members. Such processes appeared to be quite variable, with diverse responses, and often lasted much longer than the interviewees themselves expected.

For many interviewees, the painful experience allowed surviving members to develop a better appreciation of, and perspective on, life as an entrepreneur, which resulted in clearer priorities prior to and following the member's death. Active creation of opportunities replaced procrastination and passive waiting for the 'right moment' (*Builders*) or when things 'got better' (*Manufacturers*) or 'waiting for a miracle' (*Chemists*) or 'holding on' (*Educators*). Yet, the active approach in the aftermath of a loss led some family members to make swift moves in the entrepreneurial effort, such as starting to build facilities without agreement (*Chemists*), talking to potential employees without proper legal advice (*Educators*), or acquiring new construction machinery without asking other members for approval (*Builders*). For some, it was a way to minimize the sense of loss and disruption in family life and accelerate their move in the entrepreneurial effort.

Sharing the experience of losing a leading family member granted surviving members the opportunity to confront fears about loss, and also constructed a narrative that allowed them to readjust their approach to the entrepreneurial process. Over the years, holidays, anniversaries, or special family occasions were likely to re-evoke the loss, but they also served as an opportunity to once again share family narratives of the deceased member, reinforce an identity as an entrepreneurial family, and recalibrate their actions based on their shared stories.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Reconnecting: An opportunity to reset, restore and realign relationships

Participants' accounts suggested that the level of family functioning and the state of family relationships prior to and following the loss are crucial for entrepreneuring. Entrepreneurial families experienced a diverse range of feelings, depending on the meaning of the relationship with the dying member and the implication of the death for the family unit. The participants suggested that the process produced a realignment of relationships, where members of the entrepreneurial family reconnect with each other, with their extended family, and with a wider social network that is relevant to their entrepreneurial effort (Table 4). This is best represented through the power quote by Diego (*Manufacturers*, 2020):

> … Dad was very ill one time, and he asked me to call a family reunion with each of his sisters and their families. That was something my siblings or I were not looking forward to. My cousins and I did not have a good relationship growing up, and we lost contact. When we went to the first meeting, it was heart-breaking to see how Dad was basically saying goodbye to everyone in his own way. We all sat down at a long table and he reminisced with his sisters and their offspring about our story in business - how each one of us was involved before and how proud he was of what we had achieved. I just wanted to leave!

> Later on, my cousins approached and we began to talk. Some of them apologized for stuff that I now consider silly. It was as if no problems had ever happened between us. It was not time for pity parties or childish conflicts, it was time to connect again with family. It was just sad that it had to be done under such circumstances. They [cousins] have kept in touch since and have been really helpful when we started this new business in hospitality, as they are professionals in diverse fields and with great connections to government and the private sector. We get a lot of customers now from them [for the new plastic venture].

Prior to the death of family members, all cases suggested that ill members, perhaps acknowledging and coming to terms with the expected outcome of their illness, wanted surviving family members to restore any family connection that had been unattended, or to reinforce relationships within their extended family. At the plea of the ill members or other members of the senior generation (spouses), surviving members were asked to make every effort to reconnect and repair strained relationships before the opportunity was lost. Table 4 reveals that resistance was found, because some members did not want to stir up painful emotions or revive old conflicts, yet they were persuaded do so for fear that a negative approach might bring on death prematurely.

The imminent loss, as suggested in Table 4, emphasized life fragility, yet provided family members with an opportunity to heal unresolved issues not only with dying members but also to develop more immediate caring relationships with members of their immediate and extended family. For the *Builders*, several family reunions invigorated a family approach and served to coalesce the effort to support the ill member and encourage family caretakers. For the *Educators*, traditional celebrations such as birthdays offered an opportunity to affirm and improve all family relationships. In most cases, members reflected on putting aside previous hurts and conflicts due to the imminent death of the leading family member and the potential for loss of support from family if such matters were not resolved. Reconnection meant a deliberate approach to recover some caring aspects of family relationships and to update and renew relationships that were affected in past conflicts.

Reconnecting was not confined to family circles but also included strong relationships nurtured by the ill member in exchange and professional networks. Analysis of the data revealed that the death of the leading family member did not imply the end of their close relationships with surviving members (Table 4). Ill members had many friends in diverse networks and it was assumed that their imminent absence would bring an unavoidable loss of connection with them. The illustrations suggest that a process of reconnection with wider networks occurred, where either the ill member reached out to their closest contacts or encouraged surviving members to do so. The intention behind this approach was to afford surviving members the benefits that such ties could bring. This was best exemplified by Renata (*Manufacturers*, 2020):

> …one morning my Dad called me to contact one of his closest friends, who is a very prominent transportation business owner. Dad had not told him about his terminal condition. He wanted me to tell him about it as he was going into the hospital for more treatment. I knew this person as Dad had introduced him to the family in the past. I just did not know why Dad wanted me to do it. As I called and explained, he just started crying over the phone. I never expected that! He said, "I have your phone number now, and I will be calling you to check on how you are doing, anything you need you let me know". A few years after Dad died we wanted to ship our very first production and called him to arrange a contract. He said "We are now business partners, same as your Dad and I were, I will honour my friendship to him through you" … we have been business associates since then and he has introduced me to many clients.

Similar situations were found in other cases where connections outside the family circle were encouraged by dying members. Illustrations in Table 4 suggest that this process was intended to sustain existing relationships in diverse exchange networks through surviving members. This occurred in the *Educators,* through friends who were school principals, in the *Builders,* through the introduction to several material providers in the construction industry, in the *Chemists,* through the introduction to leaders of the chemical industry, and in the *Manufacturers*, through the connection to major import agency owners and logistics providers. In most cases, such reconnection meant accessing a wider network of contacts through the family ties of the deceased member's relationships. For example, the *Builders* had contact with the offspring of material providers who imported new residential construction items. The *Educators* were able to contact bilingual and trilingual teachers who were part of the extended family of school principals, while the *Chemists* were able to connect with legal advisors with vast experience in the chemical industry.

Following the death of founder or senior members, surviving members were encouraged to reconnect and steward such relationships in order to further an entrepreneurial effort. This is exemplified by a power quote from Tomas (The *Chemists*, 2021):

> … Dad asked me before he died to return several books that he had borrowed from his university friends. One of them, a large carton box manufacturer, invited me over for coffee. We had a nice chat about all the adventures my Dad and he had when they were younger and the technical work my Dad helped him with …he asked me what my sisters and I were up to after Dad died. I mentioned how were setting up the new pharmaceutical firm. He quickly offered his help and explained what the government would require in terms of boxes for later shipping. He also offered to take a look at the product once we had a sample. He would design the shipping boxes and advise on the best distribution network for free.

Similar accounts illustrated how surviving members, through reaching out and then stewarding these relationships, fostered the development of changing networks, which influenced their approach in the future entrepreneurial process. Table 4 shows how such connections in a wider network reciprocated good relationships by supporting surviving members in the set-up of a new venture and continuing a connection through business. It appears that surviving members found support and resources outside their family circle, which advanced their entrepreneurial journey and also captured additional narratives of their deceased members that could be shared among members. The process of reconnection allowed them to discover 'unknown stories' (*Educators*), or 'funny aspects' of their family member lives (*Manufacturers*), or the 'ingenious solutions' that deceased members helped friends with (*Chemists*), but the process also allowed them to gather additional information crucial to starting a venture in an uncertain industry.

Discussion

Building on the social process perspective so strongly advocated in the work of Alistair Anderson, our findings indicate the significance of death for theorizing social processes of entrepreneuring. This study supports the concept of entrepreneuring (Steyaert 2007; Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012) and helps us understand the family as a social system influenced by family transitions (von Schlippe and Frank 2013). This study reveals that death may affect entrepreneurial families in profound ways, as they *reorganize* the family and the business, *recalibrate* the business portfolio and *reconnect* to networks, both family and non-family. The findings illuminate how surviving members of entrepreneurial families might act prior to, and following the death of, leading family entrepreneurs. The empirical material challenges the notion that they may lack the skills or competencies necessary to re-engage in the entrepreneurial process (Brown 1993; Ucbasaran et al. 2001). Our findings highlight complex social processes of entrepreneuring (Anderson et al. 2012) that link surviving family members to their social context (Anderson and Jack 2000), and which also influence their actions and shift the way that they engage with others in the entrepreneurial process (Anderson 2000).

Entrepreneurial stewardship

In terms of entrepreneurial stewardship, the findings contribute further to the view that death may encourage entrepreneurial stewardship behaviour in family members (Discua Cruz et al. 2013) in a process of entrepreneuring. This was particularly noted prior to the death of the family members, where there was a *reorganization* of existing family assets and actions taken to *recalibrate* and build those assets through entrepreneurship. This study contributes to understanding how the stewardship of assets might be managed between generations in family businesses. It shows how *reorganization* of the family assets prepares for the transfer of stewardship from one generation to another. In examining the social processes of entrepreneuring, our findings suggest that entrepreneurial families are made of intricate connections and relationships (Anderson and Jack 2000; McKeever et al. 2014), which are crucial to what entrepreneurs do as stewards in existing family firms. In social processes of *reconnection* within the family and with external networks we see a form of stewarding for the future, a projection into the future, and a form of transgenerational handover of stewardship.

In this study, intergenerational relationships were reinforced when members of a senior generation were absent or became too ill to be able to join a collective entrepreneurial effort. The loss of a family member in business left surviving members in charge of diverse resources that needed to be looked after. Decisions needed to be made as to what to do with such resources. This prompted further entrepreneurial efforts based on skills, knowledge, and resources influenced by changes in the family's social context (Anderson 2000).

The social processes uncovered suggest that a collective family approach to entrepreneuring may be characterized by shared understandings of how entrepreneurship is enacted in the present and the future (Anderson 2005), shaped through changes that the experience of death brings to an entrepreneurial family. Surviving family entrepreneurs are forced to realign existing relationships, and are afforded the opportunity to develop new ones through the social links nurtured by deceased family members (Anderson and Jack 2002). The *reorganization* and *recalibration* of roles within a social unit encouraged by a physical and functional family loss suggest that surviving members have to decide on what to do with family resources for existing firms (Estrada-Robles, Williams, and Vorley 2021) aiming to build on existing resources entrepreneurially. This study shows how death influences entrepreneuring through social processes that can turn family entrepreneurs into entrepreneurial stewards who channel resources to look after existing firms entrepreneurially and create new ventures.

Complex adaptive systems

In terms of entrepreneuring framed as a complex adaptive system (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2012), our findings show that members of an entrepreneurial family can socially construct solutions to address complexity prior to and following the death of a leading family member, and thus move on in the entrepreneurial journey. Prior works introduced a family system paradigm to understand family relationships and the influence that events such as the death of a family member can have on a family (Walsh and McGoldrick 1991; Titelman and Reed 2018), yet we know little about how such events would influence what surviving members, as entrepreneurs, would do.

In this study, rather than viewing the death of a leading family member as a cause for disorder and chaos (Brown 1993), our findings suggest that that such events can be interpreted as a normative transition in the family life cycle that can carry the potential for surviving members to act and continue the entrepreneurial effort as a social unit that engages in entrepreneurship (Jones and Li 2019). The findings revealed that the entrepreneurial family can approach and react to a family loss as a relational system, with surviving members participating in mutually reinforcing interactions (James, Jennings, and Breitkreuz 2012; McKeever et al. 2014).

The processes uncovered how order and stability are facilitated by processes of *reorganization, recalibration,* and *reconnection*. This contributes to our understanding of social aspects in entrepreneuring and its portrayal as a complex adaptive system (Dodd et al. 2012). In this study, these processes were identified as surviving family members offered their entrepreneurial skills, competencies, and knowledge (Anderson 2000) to deal with multiple challenges, guided by common objectives as an entrepreneurial family.

In terms of *reorganization*, a shift in the composition of the entrepreneurial family means that equilibrium is sought following the complexity introduced by the loss of a family member, which aims to reallocate roles and functions, thus shaping a new social system (Ko, Wiklund, and Pollack 2021). In terms of *recalibration*, a renewed perspective suggested a different level of reflexivity in the entrepreneurs, making them more decisive (Nerken 1993; Anderson 2000) and aiming to rebuild their world in a direction consistent with the emotional changes or loss that they experienced (Joseph and Linley 2005). In terms of *reconnecting*, social processes allow entrepreneurial families to act through a continuous social engagement across generations, where the potential for change relies on connecting both within and outside the entrepreneurial family circle (Anderson et al. 2005). This study reveals how family members leverage family ties in diverse networks and steward connections initiated by previous generations.

Social processes set in motion around the death of the family member have both an immediate impact and long-term ramifications for members of an entrepreneurial family. It appears that these processes reflect a multigenerational perspective in terms of complexity and adaptation, as family members re-allocate functions or roles to members of several generations (e.g. first and second, second and third) (Dodd et al. 2021). Moreover, dealing with loss can help entrepreneurial families regain a sense of continuity and motion from the past towards the future (Konopaski, Jack, and Hamilton 2015). One way of connecting the past, the present and the future uncovered in this study was the use of significant dates to 'memorialize' the deceased. The entrepreneurial families legally constituted their new firms on dates that related them to the memory of the deceased - for example, on the wedding anniversary of the senior generation, the birthday of the deceased, or the anniversary of their death.

Finally, this study enhances existing entrepreneuring literature by expanding on Anderson's (2000) conceptual framework of the entrepreneurial process in order to explain entrepreneuring influenced by family transitions. The model explains how entrepreneuring occurs in the context of surviving members of an entrepreneurial family prior to and after the death of a family business member (Figure 1). The model acknowledges that entrepreneuring is a process influenced by the social context and external environment (Anderson and Jack 2000). The changes demanded in an entrepreneurial family due to family transitions suggest that surviving members may rely on shared values. Such values are supported by socialization, enculturation, and specific experiences with other members (Anderson 2000). The model illustrates that social processes prior and following the death of a family member allow individual members to showcase abilities, skills, and knowledge. The social processes of *reorganization*, *recalibration*, and *reconnection* are inextricably linked, allowing family members to move through time (Drakopoulou Dodd et al. 2013). By addressing the complexity that the loss of a family member entails, they can approach opportunities collectively and move on in the entrepreneurial process. Conceptualizing the family as a complex adaptive system contributes a new theoretical perspective of stewardship as fluid and collective.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Limitations and further research

This article has some limitations that provide opportunities for future research based on the legacy of Alistair's work. First, although we have examined death following an illness, we have not focused on sudden death. Moreover, we are aware that the timing of a loss may have a different effect on the entrepreneurial effort, which may put an entrepreneurial family at a higher risk of dysfunctional consequences, with complications more likely in cases of untimely loss, concurrence of multiple losses, or of loss through other major family stresses and past traumatic experiences, which can have a transgenerational effect (Walsh and McGoldrick 1991, 18). An enacted perspective may allow further theoretical development of such complexity (Anderson et al. 2005).

To achieve further understanding of entrepreneuring as *reconnecting*, scholars should focus on the dynamics that take place in the relationships between entrepreneurs and their social context (Dodd et al. 2012; Anderson and Jack 2000). Prior work by Alistair suggests further focus on the relational bridges and the weight they carry (Anderson and Jack 2002) for the various processes that entice entrepreneuring. Such social processes create an entrepreneurial legacy for successors and non-successors alike that span beyond the lifetime of a business founder (Combs et al. 2021; Drakopoulou Dodd et al. 2013). Thus, scholars need to explore further the actual dynamic interaction between family members when family transitions occur. In other words, to understand the relationship between people in a family social system in terms of entrepreneuring, we must be able to appreciate the ‘traffic’ within its intertwined links (Anderson and Jack 2002).

Conclusion

This study has illuminated how families engage in the entrepreneurial process prior to, and following, the death of a leading family member. In examining accounts of death in the entrepreneurial family, the study has contributed to understanding the social processes involved and uncovered how a family response to loss is as critical to future entrepreneuring as the death of a family member. The response can include a *reorganization* of the family as a complex adaptive system in preparation for the transfer of stewardship within and across generations. This study uncovers how family systems are strengthened and *reconnected* internally and externally. There is evidence of the transgenerational handover of business networks as the terminally ill family member engages in a form of stewardship for the future. The family and the business undergo a social process of *recalibration* as they negotiate the future and adjust to the shifting opportunities and challenges. Drawing on a complex adaptive system perspective reveals theoretical insights of stewardship as fluid and collective in the family business. Entrepreneurial stewardship is collectively constructed in social processes between and across generations.

The loss may strengthen remaining family members, spurring them to accomplishment, or it may leave a destructive legacy. Surviving family members may be bound to a special role to carry out endeavours or dreams left incomplete by the loss, or they may be constrained by the surviving members' inability to commit themselves to move forward in the complex entrepreneurial process. This work resonates with the wish of scholars to continue Alistair's legacy. This Special Issue offers an opportunity to set out some future research agendas to support the continuation of his life's work. Further work that examines entrepreneuring through people, relationships, histories, practices, narratives, and their connections (Dodd, Anderson, and Jack 2021) is needed to facilitate and develop the future of entrepreneurship research.

Disclosure statement

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