

Exploring Sustainable Entrepreneurship among Family Members in Family Firms, Cooperatives, and Rural Communities: A Multilevel Approach

Abstract

Little is still known about the approach and rationale of family members' entrepreneurial behaviors for sustainability on the nexus between family, firm and community. Our study helps to fill this void by examining a multilevel web that links a family firm, a cooperative and a rural community. We rely on an inductive semi-grounded approach guided by conceptual ideas from sustainable entrepreneurship literature. We conducted 54 in-depth interviews within a Cypriot cooperative composed of small rural family businesses. Our findings reveal that sustainable entrepreneurship revolves around family members acting as sustainable entrepreneurs. They draw on collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability and spillover sustainable entrepreneurship, which are key mechanisms for generating sustainable value at the family firm, cooperative and community levels. Family members' affective attachment and sense of responsibility serve as motives behind these mechanisms. Our findings offer a model depicting family members' motives and mechanisms of sustainable entrepreneurship across family firms, cooperative, and rural communities. This study extends understandings on family entrepreneurship and sustainable entrepreneurship and offers practical contributions and opportunities for future research.

Keywords: Family business, family entrepreneurship, sustainability, sustainable entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneur, cooperatives, rural communities.

1. Introduction

It has been argued that family entrepreneurship, which refers to the entrepreneurial behaviors of family, family members and family businesses (Bettinelli, Fayolle, and Randerson 2014; Randerson et al. 2015), may be closely associated to sustainability (Bau et al. 2021; Ramírez-Pasillas and Nordqvist 2021; Sharma and Sharma 2021; 2024). Sustainability relates broadly to “systems and processes that are able to operate and persist on their own over long periods of time” (Robertson 2017, 3) while meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). As it encourages a balance between economic growth, environmental preservation, and social welfare (Krajnc and Glavič 2005; Sharma and Ruud 2003) it can generate ‘sustainable value’ (Hart and Milstein 2003; Jetzek et al. 2019). Notwithstanding, the connections between family entrepreneurship and sustainability are still largely underexplored and undertheorized (Ramírez-Pasillas and Nordqvist 2021). Understanding these connections is crucial to leveraging the potential of family businesses – enterprises where family and business objectives intertwine (Melin et al. 2014) – to transform into core regional actors and contributors to economic and socioenvironmental sustainability (Basco 2015; Scherrer and Binz-Astrachan 2018; Hadjielias et al. 2023).

Around the world, business families, family businesses, and individual family members are deeply embedded within their communities (Hadjielias et al., 2022; Sharma and Sharma 2024). Interdependent relationships within communities facilitate economic contributions, encompassing social and environmental initiatives that can benefit the local population (Hadjielias et al., 2023). For instance, due to the development of strong ties to the communities where family businesses operate (Khavul et al. 2009), family members in business are likely to take entrepreneurial actions independently, such as the creation and support of diverse activities (e.g., creation of folkloric

events, local sourcing initiatives), to prevent social decline and environmental degradation (Aragón-Amonarriz et al. 2019; Hadjielias et al. 2023). Within local communities, family members can also associate with other businesses through cooperatives (Hadjielias et al. 2022; Hadjielias 2024) – jointly owned enterprises centered on shared socio-economic goals (ICA 1995) – to engage in joint entrepreneurial activities that address sustainable goals, such as greener supply chain management (Hadjielias et al., 2022; Muller et al., 2022). Such dynamics suggest that family entrepreneurship and sustainability can be concurrently addressed at multiple interconnected levels. Yet, little is still known about the approach and rationale of family members' entrepreneurial behaviors for sustainability that occurs at different interconnected levels, such as the intersection of the family firm, cooperative, and community. To address this gap our study focuses on understanding *why and how family members engage in entrepreneurial behaviors for sustainability at the intersection of the family firm, cooperative, and community?*

To research family entrepreneurship for sustainability, we rely on 'sustainable entrepreneurship', defined as the "*preservation of nature, life support, and community in the pursuit of perceived opportunities to bring into existence future products, processes, and services for gain, where gain is broadly construed to include economic and non-economic gains to individuals, the economy, and society*" (Shepherd and Patzelt 2011, 137). This concept, which links entrepreneurship with sustainability within a multilevel web of actors and entities (Munoz and Cohen 2018), can be used to theorize family entrepreneurship for sustainability, with a focus on the nexus of family firm, cooperative, and community as interconnected levels. Recent work has pinpointed that sustainable entrepreneurship and family businesses are closely interlinked (Woodfield et al. 2017) and family members are motivated to seek out entrepreneurial opportunities to generate sustainable value (Scherrer and Binz-Astrachan 2018). Hence, in a

multilevel web of family firm, cooperative, and community, sustainable entrepreneurship may allow conceptualizing the motives and processes through which family members in business engage in entrepreneurship to benefit society and the environment, while generating also economic gains.

We rely on a nested case study research approach (Thomas 2011) and focus on a single retail cooperative, the Coop-Grocers, for our research. This research design is particularly suitable to analyze interactions and actions of actors at multiple units of analysis (Rodríguez et al., 2016), which makes it appropriate to shed light on the dynamics of sustainable entrepreneurship within a multilevel web. The Coop-Grocers agglomerates 35 family businesses in the rural eastern region of the Republic of Cyprus. For this study, we have selected seven family businesses. We conducted 54 in-depth interviews with people in a variety of roles in the cooperative, the sampled firms, and the communities connected with the sampled firms. In line with the nested case study approach, we considered multiple levels of analysis (Gupta et al. 2007) – families (sub-subunit), family firms (subunits), and cooperative (primary unit of analysis).

Our findings reveal that family members play an instrumental role at the nexus of family firm, cooperative, and community as sustainable entrepreneurs. Findings reveal collaborative and spillover-based sustainable entrepreneurship mechanisms that generate value at the family firm, cooperative and community sustainability levels. Family members' affective attachment and sense of responsibility serve as motives behind these mechanisms. Our contributions are manifold. First, we contribute to the understanding of family entrepreneurship in sustainability by elucidating the role of family members as sustainable entrepreneurs and their entrepreneurial mechanisms that generate sustainable value (Munoz and Cohen 2018; Woodfield et al. 2017). Second, we contribute to the field of sustainable entrepreneurship through a multilevel perspective that connects

sustainability at the micro levels (e.g., business) with sustainability at the larger, societal level (Johnson and Schaltegger 2020; Lüdeke-Freund 2020). Third, we contribute to the family business literature and specifically the literature on family business sustainable entrepreneurship through a new mid-range theoretical perspective that conceptualizes family members' motives and mechanisms of sustainable entrepreneurship across family firm, cooperative, and rural community. Taken together, we answer recent calls for theorization, grounded on empirical evidence, around entrepreneurial behaviors for sustainability at multiple interconnected levels (Munoz and Cohen 2018).

The remainder of this study continues as follows: A focus on a theoretical background followed by a depiction of the methodology used. Then, the findings followed by a detailed discussion are presented before offering opportunities for further research.

2. Background

2.1 Family Entrepreneurship and Sustainability

Family entrepreneurship relates to the entrepreneurial behaviors of family, family members, and family businesses (Bettinelli et al. 2014, p. 4). It examines the way family relationships, interactions, configurations, and other family dynamics shape entrepreneurial behaviors and outcomes at multiple levels, including the individual family member, the family, and the family business (Brumana et al. 2017). Several outcomes have been associated with practices and actions deriving from family entrepreneurship, such as innovation in family business (Bendig et al. 2020), the creation of new ventures (Edelman et al. 2016), and corporate entrepreneurship (Riar et al. 2022). However, most research on family entrepreneurship has focused on the business dimension (Randerson et al. 2015) showing how family members' unique

goals, resources, and modes of business governance, influence the motives, mechanisms, and outcomes of their entrepreneurial processes within the family business (Minola et al. 2021). While family entrepreneurship has mainly focused on the family business per se, recent studies hint for its relevance on the sustainability of communities and regions (Ramírez-Pasillas and Nordqvist 2021). A focus on family entrepreneurship can help identify entrepreneurial motivations of family members that can foster sustainability (Birdthistle and Hales 2022), as family enterprises and the families that control them become more sensitive to sustainability and increasingly engage with their immediate communities (Ramírez-Pasillas and Nordqvist 2021; Ramírez-Pasillas and Lundberg 2019),

Whilst sustainability for some is largely synonymous with shifting environmental factors and regulations that require business adaptation (Tyler et al. 2023), it is a grand challenge that considers economic and social considerations in addition to environmental ones (Isil and Hernke 2017). Hence, we understand the concept of sustainability as one that relates to contributions that concurrently produce economic, social, and environmental benefits – typically framed around ‘sustainable value’ – for companies, citizens and the society (Hart and Milstein 2003; Jetzek et al. 2019).

Compared to non-family counterparts, family factors influence family businesses' and family members' efforts to pursue sustainability through the integration of economic, social, and environmental goals (Craig and Moores 2006; Hadjielias et al. 2023). First, economic sustainability relates to the performance of family businesses to develop, produce and market products/services that ensure the long-term continuity of the firm over time (Olson et al. 2003). This includes the development of strategies that leads to a long-term improvement in revenue and market capture (Discua Cruz et al. 2020).

Second, environmental sustainability for family businesses relates to the effective management of natural resources (Muller et al. 2022). Due to family-related goals and ethical values, family businesses tend to exhibit greater significance and responsibility for the environment (Clauß et al. 2022). Yet, some family firms may still adopt unethical environmental practices (Kariyapperuma and Collins 2021). For example, to enhance efficiency and productivity, some family firms might introduce harmful chemicals and processes to the environment (Cousins et al. 2019).

Finally, Sharma and Sharma (2021, 4–5) argue that family businesses vary significantly in their endeavors to address societal challenges. While some may comply with existing regulations and demands imposed by external stakeholders (e.g., customers, suppliers and special interest groups) others may invest time and resources to develop processes, products, business models and solutions to address several social challenges. For a family business, social perspectives in sustainability have related mostly to the approach family members take in developing social links with stakeholders within their immediate environment (Kurland and McCaffrey 2020) catering to not only the needs of the family but also the concerns of a diverse set of stakeholders (Olson et al. 2003).

2.2 Sustainable Entrepreneurship and the Family Business: a multilevel view

Sustainable entrepreneurship examines how entrepreneurial opportunities can be pursued or created to generate sustainable value for a variety of stakeholders, including organizations and communities (Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019; Lüdeke-Freund 2020). Recent studies theorize that family businesses may illuminate how sustainable entrepreneurship occurs through examining multiple levels of analysis related to the interplay between family, the firm and their immediate community (Woodfield et al., 2017). The family level highlights a focus on individual family

members as entrepreneurs (Discua Cruz and Basco 2018). Recent work theorized that sustainable entrepreneurship can be engaged by ‘sustainable entrepreneurs’, influenced by diverse motivations to generate sustainable value (Munoz and Cohen 2018). The motivations of sustainable entrepreneurs may range from pressures in the environment in which their firm operates to a conscious desire to address social or environmental challenges in their regions (Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019; Munoz and Cohen 2018). In the context of a family business, family members may be motivated to act entrepreneurially by seeking out opportunities to generate sustainable value which may impact actors at multiple levels (Scherrer and Binz-Astrachan 2018).

Moreover, to significantly affect the sustainability of their communities or regions, sustainable entrepreneurs are expected to collaborate with other local actors (Bischoff 2021). Such expectation highlights an inter-dependence between businesses which may have common motivations to act for the benefit of their community (Johannisson et al. 2007). In many communities around the world, such interdependence may be created through participating in cooperative associations (Hadjielias et al. 2023; Hadjielias 2024). A cooperative, broadly defined as “*an autonomous association of persons or firms united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise*” (ICA 1995) plays an important role in developing the socio-economic status and sustainability of its members and local communities (Dana and Dana 2008). As families act as economic bedrock of many communities, when involved in business, they are uniquely positioned at the intersection of diverse networks (Seaman 2015; Watts et al., 2006). Such a position can facilitate frequent interactions and foster a collective engagement in entrepreneurial practices that impact on a community (Basco and Suwala 2020). However, interaction between

family members, their firms and members of a cooperative may be also influenced by the settings in which they operate.

Whilst multiple level settings (e.g., urban, rural) exists to study sustainable entrepreneurship (Munoz and Cohen, 2018) in this study we focus on rural communities, which broadly relate to a group of people who live in a rural area (geographically distanced from urban areas, often with no more than 10000 people) and who share similarities such as language, customs, geographical proximity and values (Lewis 1983). Rural communities feature location-specific features in the form of material, social and cultural amenities, which result from natural, social, cultural and historical elements accumulated over time (Arias and Discua Cruz 2018), which may influence entrepreneurship (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015; Johannisson et al. 2007). As family businesses are found to be preponderant in rural communities (Backman and Palmberg 2015; Fitz-Koch et al. 2018) such features may influence the approach and rationale to entrepreneurship and sustainability based on a complex web of interdependencies between family firms, a community, and diverse entities or stakeholders (Sharma and Sharma 2021; Hadjielias et al. 2023).

Recent studies suggest that sustainable behavior at diverse levels may also embody the role of norms and obligations (Krueger et al. 2011). Such aspects are important as firms and communities may be bound by a sense of responsibility. A sense of responsibility, which broadly relates to an obligation that individuals have toward other people, one or more organizations or society as a whole, has extensive connections of interdependence and mutuality (Lawson 2007). It is important in formal contexts, such as feeling responsible to fulfill family and professional obligations within a family business, as well as feeling responsible to provide help for others, such as family members (Maclagan 1983). For example, prior studies have theorized that cooperation

and a sense of responsibility may be higher when people identify with a group (e.g. family), a community or organization (e.g. firm or cooperative) (Wetzel and Gallagher 1990; Robinson 2009). A sense of responsibility may translate into business leaders nurturing long-term relationships at diverse levels (e.g. firm, industry) to help their communities (Spence 2016; Discua Cruz, 2020; Fitzgerald et al. 2010).

Other studies have also suggested that affective attachment – a relationship-based construct that reflects an affective bond between an individual and a target (e.g. another person, family, an object, nature, community) (Bowlby 1979; Knoll and Redman 2016) as well as a sense of belonging and identification to an entity (e.g., organization, community) (Knoll and Redman 2016; Lawler, 1992) – can encourage individuals' discretionary behavior and desire to assist others (Mikulincer et al. 2001). Such affective attachment could manifest in the motivations or mechanisms that help to engage in sustainable entrepreneurship. Attachment is not a novel concept in the family business or entrepreneurship field. A focus on attachment has explained how entrepreneurs act towards the nourishment of their business (Cardon et al. 2005), the welfare of a place (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016) or the pursuit of opportunities (Delgado García, De Quevedo Puente, and Blanco Mazagatos 2015). Various studies have theorized the role of attachment in the commitment of family members to the family and the firm over time (Basly and Saunier 2020) suggesting that attachment may develop when family members are provided with opportunities aligned with their interest within the family business (Dawson et al. 2014). Yet whilst both a sense of responsibility and affective bonds have been found to influence separately the interactions between family members, firm and community there is limited understanding as to their influence in the motives (why) or the mechanisms (how) that influence sustainable entrepreneurship in the nexus of family, firm, cooperative and community.

Scholars argue that a comprehensive approach to examining sustainable entrepreneurship needs to consider the interaction of diverse actors at the intersection of multiple levels of analysis, ranging from micro (such as individuals and organizations) to macro (such as society) (Johnson and Schaltegger 2020; Lüdeke-Freund 2020). Such an approach could illuminate how sustainable entrepreneurship occurs in a setting where several actors may benefit by integrating economic, social, and environmental goals (Shepherd and Patzelt 2011; Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019).

3. Method

This study examines *why and how family members engage in entrepreneurial behaviors for sustainability at the intersection of the family firm, cooperative, and community* by drawing on an inductive research logic (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and a nested case study research design (Thomas 2011). Our approach involves a ‘semi-grounded approach’ which uses core techniques of grounded theory (e.g., theoretical sampling) but allows existing concepts from the literature to guide data collection and analysis (Branicki et al. 2021; Bueechl et al. 2023). As per earlier research utilizing a nested case study design (Perschina et al. 2019; Thomas 2011), we are considering multiple levels of analysis – the cooperative (unit), family firm (subunit), and family member (sub-subunit) – in order to obtain a holistic understanding (Perschina et al. 2019) of how family members engage in sustainable entrepreneurship within a web where a family firm, a cooperative and a rural community intersect.

3.1 Research site and context

The case under examination is labelled Co-op Grocers, a retail cooperative operating in the rural, eastern region of the Republic of Cyprus (South-Eastern Europe). Co-op Grocers was established

in 1991 as a cooperative association and serves as a collective entity that is owned and governed by 35-member grocery stores. The purpose of this cooperative is to allow its member stores to take advantage of their collective bargaining to enhance their competitiveness and sustainability within a market that is becoming increasingly competitive. Co-op Grocers employs nineteen people in its headquarters, and deals, amongst other, with joint purchases and agreements with suppliers, centralized warehousing, and logistics, coordinated branding and marketing, and enhancement of the stores' operational processes. All member firms in Co-op Grocers are small family owned and managed rural firms which employ no more than thirty people each. Table 1 provides the profile of Co-op Grocers.

[Insert Table 1, here]

Table 2 presents the profiles of our participant family businesses. These are seven small independent grocery stores, which function under Co-op Grocers and are situated in villages in the rural, eastern region of Cyprus. Skalia Grocery was established in 1972, it is a second to third generation family business that employs 17 people. Landa Grocery is a second to third generation family business that was established in 1978 and has a workforce of 19 employees. Stahi Grocery was founded in 182, employs 18 people, and is again a second to third generation family business. Kremmos Grocery was at the time of interviews just taken over by the third generation. It was established in 1969 and employs 14 people. Anodos Grocery started in 1980, is second to third generation, and has a workforce of 13 employees. Kilada Grocery, founded in 2001, is a first to second generation family business that employs 16 people. Finally, Vouno Grocery comprises of 21 employees, was founded in 1986 and is a first to second generation family business.

[Insert Table 2, here]

The eastern region of Cyprus is home to the rural villages connected to the participating family firms, each with less than 3000 inhabitants. Skalia is a rural village of 1900 inhabitants where potatoes are the main crop grown. Landa is a rural village of 1700 inhabitants, well-known for craftsmanship and the production of traditional lace crafts. With 2300 inhabitants, Stahi is famous to produce Cyprus Taro (known as Kolokasi), a root vegetable that was approved by European Commission as a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) product. Similar to Skalia Village, Kremmos has 2000 inhabitants and an emphasis on potatoes as its main crop. With 2500 residents, Anodos is a touristic rural village that offers lodging, sea and sun tourism, and scenic landscapes to visitors. Kilada has 2100 inhabitants, and it is primarily a farming community known for livestock (cattle and pigs) raising and slaughtering. Vouno, another farming village, has 2700 inhabitants and it is home to both cattle raising facilities and units that deal with the production of dairy products.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

We chose to study Co-op Grocers for two main reasons. First, this Cooperative *has “rare and unique qualities that make it a logical candidate for theoretical sampling”* (Karra, Tracey, and Phillips 2006, p. 865). It is a rural cooperative comprised of and controlled by small rural family businesses and, hence, well suited for our study. Second, due to the personal relationships that the first author maintained with the general manager and board members of the cooperative, a “very high level of access” (Karra et al. 2006, p. 865) was secured. We selected family businesses

(subunits) within the cooperative using snowball sampling (Saufi et al. 2014). We were able to connect with managers of member family businesses within the cooperative through the Co-op Grocers general manager and board members. Using theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007), seven subunits (i.e., businesses) within Co-op Grocers were sampled (see Table 2).

To identify research informants a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed (Hadjielias et al., 2022). First, in line with purposive sampling, we set certain pre-defined criteria (Yin, 2018) to select informants. A key criterion was to select interviewees that had diverse roles to get a saturated understanding of the researched phenomenon within each subunit (Hadjielias et al. 2022) and at the level of the broader cooperative (i.e., case) (Pershina et al. 2019). Selected interviewees had to be in a position to elaborate on the entrepreneurial behavior of family, its participation in a cooperative and community engagement. Second, snowball sampling (Saufi et al. 2014) was used to access individuals fulfilling the above criteria. The general managers of subunits (i.e., family businesses) who agreed to participate in our study were the primary contacts through which eligible individuals within each subunit were reached for interviews (Hadjielias et al. 2022). The final sample of research informants within each subunit is presented in Table 3. Interviews were carried out with family members involved in business, non-family employees, as well as external stakeholders such as community council members, managers of local charity organizations, community citizens, and local entrepreneurs. Overall, fifty-four interviews (54) (including follow-up interviews) were carried out with thirty-seven (37) unique individuals between January 2015 and August 2017.

[Insert Table 3, here]

Interviews were carried out in Greek, which was the language of the research participants (Hadjielias et al. 2021). Interviews had an aggregated duration of 3020 minutes, lasting on average 56 minutes each (see Table 3). In line with other inductive, semi-grounded, studies drawing on case study design (e.g., Cillo and Verona 2008), our semi-structured interview protocol was loosely guided by conceptual ideas from sustainable entrepreneurship literature. The interview protocol included open questions on the following items: (a) information about the firm, the Cooperative, and the rural community in which the firm operates; (b) the roles and influence of controlling family members on the firm, the Cooperative, and the rural community; (c) perceptions of sustainability at the nexus between firm, cooperative, and rural community; (d) family member entrepreneurial initiatives contributing to the sustainability of firm, cooperative, and/or rural community; (e) practices used by family members to generate economic, social, and environmental value for the sustainability of firm, cooperative, and/or rural community; (f) links between sustainable value creation and sustainability of firm, cooperative, and/or rural community. The interview protocol was pilot tested in advance of our study (Hollensbe et al. 2008) with three general managers (family members) of Co-op Grocers family businesses that were not part of our sample.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of research informants (Hadjielias et al. 2021) and subsequently transcribed verbatim (Silverman 2005). The transcripts were translated into English by a bilingual translator (Harzing et al. 2011).

3.3 Data Analysis

Our analysis proceeded in three steps: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), whilst engaging in an iterative process between data collection, data analysis, and theorizing (Gioia

et al. 2013). Following a semi-grounded approach, our analysis and thematic coding considered certain pre-existing conceptual ideas (Branicki et al. 2021; Bueechl et al. 2023) from sustainable entrepreneurship literature. Yet, sufficient room was provided in the analysis for developing emerging theoretical insights that are grounded in the original data (Bueechl et al. 2023).

The first analytical step involved open coding, analyzing transcripts sentence by sentence with the aim of obtaining insights relevant to our research phenomenon (Gioia et al. 2013). Many first-order codes were developed as part of this stage, which were labeled using short phrases that encapsulated the essence of participants' responses (Lamine et al. 2021). For example, the parts where the text (in the transcripts) was referring to family members affective connections and attachment with the family business, were coded as "family members' firm attachment" (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1, here]

The second analytical step involved axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). It focused on the first-order codes to get a sense of their meanings, and the similarities and differences between them in order to understand how they could be grouped in fewer overarching categories (Gioia et al. 2013). For instance, a new conceptual category labeled as 'sense of responsibility' was created by bringing codes that shared similarities such as "*family's sense of obligation to 'give back' to the firm*", "*family's sense of obligation to 'give back' to the community*", "*family's sense of duty to sustain/preserve community*", "*family's sense of duty to sustain/grow the Cooperative*", and "*family's desire to help other co-op members*". At this stage we were also constantly moving between our data and the literature on sustainable entrepreneurship, in line with our semi-grounded

approach, to better understand and frame theoretically our emergent findings (Branicki et al., 2021). For instance, the categories on economic, social, and environmental sustainability were informed by the sustainable entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Tilley and Young 2009). The second stage concluded with the creation of eleven second-order categories, as indicated in Figure 1.

During the third and last analytical step, we used selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), teasing out our second-order categories to distill them into fewer aggregated dimensions (Gioia et al. 2013). For instance, it made sense to bring together the categories ‘affective attachment’ and ‘sense of responsibility’ since they were referring to the motives of family members to engage in entrepreneurial practices leading to the generation of (economic and non-economic) value for sustainability. Hence, we created an aggregated dimension based on these categories, which we labelled as “family members’ sustainable entrepreneurship motives”. Additionally, pre-existing conceptual ideas were incorporated into the process leading to the formation of aggregated dimensions. For instance, the dimension on “sustainable value generation”, was formed by combining the categories on economic, social, and environmental value generation. These conceptual linkages are framed within the sustainable entrepreneurship literature (Jetzek et al. 2019; Tilley and Young 2009). The end aggregate dimensions reflected four themes. Figure 1 presents the coding structure resulting from our 3-step data analysis. Methods consistent with within and cross-case analyses are employed (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

Following Miles and Huberman (1994), we created matrix tables (see Tables 4 and 5) to enable a more focused, streamlined, and systematic display of the distilled data (presented in Figure 1) to aid conclusion drawing. By crossing out aggregated dimensions and sub-dimensions that we distilled from the coding process (see Figure 1) and filling them in with short blocks of text and interview extracts, these tables were created in a format suitable for answering our

research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Therefore, to shed light on family members' entrepreneurial behaviors for sustainability at multiple levels, we have crossed out the dimensions of sustainable value generation and sustainability inter-dependencies with the family firm, cooperative, and community levels of sustainability (Table 4). We have also crossed out the dimensions regarding sustainable entrepreneurship motives (why) and mechanisms (how) against these sustainability levels (Table 5).

4. Findings

4.1 Sustainability across family firm, cooperative, and rural community: An integrated web

Consistent with a multilevel web approach of sustainability (Dyllick & Muff 2016; Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019), our findings highlight important interdependencies between firm, Cooperative, and community-level sustainability. Table 4 offers a summary, examples, and interview extracts which depict how economic, social, and environmental sustainability manifest at the levels of family firm, Cooperative, and rural community and uncover interdependencies between the different levels of sustainability. Findings focus on key actors (i.e., family members), motives, and mechanisms underpinning sustainable entrepreneurship at the interconnected levels of firm, Cooperative, and rural community.

[Insert Table 4, here]

4.2 Sustainable entrepreneurs and their motives

Data analysis revealed that family members controlling rural family firms associated with Coop-Grocer integrate “the goals of economic, social and environmental entrepreneurship” (Tilley and

Young 2009, 88) into the family firm, the cooperative, and the rural community. They play an instrumental role in facilitating sustainability at these levels. Table 4 provides evidence of the centrality of family members in pursuing contributions within the firm, cooperative, and community that simultaneously yield economic, social, and environmental benefits, or sustainable value as it has been previously defined (Jetzek et al. 2019). Family members play a major role in choices that promote the financial performance of their company and address non-economic (i.e. social and environmental) goals. As Coop-Grocer is comprised of family businesses, family members across firms made collective decisions to generate sustainable value for the cooperative. Moreover, family members are actively involved in their community, frequently creating initiatives (e.g., cultural centers, fundraising programs) that generate sustainable value for the rural community.

Given this capacity of family members, we conceive them as ‘sustainable entrepreneurs’ (Muñoz and Cohen 2018; Tilley and Young 2009) operating at the nexus of family firm, cooperative, and rural community. Data analysis suggests that there are two main motives why family members, as sustainable entrepreneurs, desire to undertake entrepreneurial initiatives (new products, processes, or other types of ventures) that can contribute to sustainability in the firm, cooperative, and local community: Family members’ *affective attachment* and a *sense of responsibility*.

4.2.1 *Affective attachment*

Affective attachment involves family members’ affective bonding, identification, and sense of belongingness in relation to their firm, cooperative, and community. It revolves around affective

bonding linked to the place (i.e., firm, cooperative, and rural community), to which family members belong and identify with.

Evidence from the data suggests that family members maintain strong generational connections to their firm and their local community, which strengthens their *'affective attachment'*. This is associated with the relationships established in the rural community where the family business was founded. Because of their strong attachment and affective bonding with the firm and their community, family members are motivated to pursue actions that sustain and safeguard the well-being of their firm and community. One excerpt that exemplifies this notion was expressed by Achilles from Skalia Grocery: *"In a small village like ours, business is not the only end for our family. Community is also a part of our family and wish to see it doing well. Both firm and community are in our heart and minds, and we wish to keep them strong for the future generations"*.

Affective attachment is also extended to the cooperative. Data analysis revealed the influence of the cooperative as a unit to which family members have a strong affective attachment. A deep affective attachment appears to have developed by being a member of a cooperative for many years, having the opportunity to build a cohesive community revolving around friendship and mutual trust. Affective attachment appears to generate a supportive atmosphere where family members pursue interactions and collaborations with other family business owners/successors within the cooperative. This is best exemplified by Cleopas from Vouno Grocery: *"There is a big difference to struggle to work alone, as an individual business, and different to be part of a Cooperative association together with other friends sharing a common vision and purpose. Joining Co-op Grocers was a blessing. It gave us a drive to collaborate with other members to support and grow a shared organization"*.

4.2.2 A sense of responsibility

The second motive involves a 'sense of responsibility', which revolves around family members nurturing strong ethical values and a sense of obligation to contribute to the sustainability of their firm, Cooperative, and rural community. Data analysis revealed that the family's sense of responsibility is different from their affective attachment, explained earlier. Evidence from the data revealed that family members nurture a simultaneous sense of responsibility towards their firm, Cooperative, and rural community. Such an approach is rooted in their family's values and enhances their sense of obligation and duty to contribute to their sustainability.

Family members' sense of responsibility towards their firm involves their sense of commitment and obligation to fulfill their roles and duties within their business and to ensure its long-term well-being and sustainability. Family members appreciate the benefits they have gained whilst being employed in the family business and nurture a strong obligation to responsibly manage their firm. Xenophon from Landa Grocery mentioned: *"We owe a lot to the business - personal and family benefits. This is a strong obligation which translates into a strong motivation for us to stick together and to join our forces to sustain this firm"*.

Family members would often desire to support, and often lead, community value-added initiatives as part of a broader sense of commitment to safeguard the well-being of their community. This sense of community responsibility is nurtured within the family across generations, where family members opted to engage in value creating initiatives within their community. An example of how this occurs was offered by Pythagoras from Anodos Grocery: *"My family, initially my parents and now my generation, is having an instrumental role in the running of community events and activities [...] We feel the obligation to support our church and our community's cultural groups which are the pillars of our customs and traditions and in keeping*

people close to community roots". Within a cooperative, family members nurture a sense of mutual duty with other family business owners to sustain the organization. Achilles from Skalia Grocery mentioned: *"Whoever is part in this [cooperative] has a duty to act in good spirit for the continuation and smooth functioning of this organization [the Cooperative]"*. Thus, a sense of responsibility relates to the fulfilment of duties and obligations on behalf of family members within the units of firm, cooperative, and rural community.

The sections that follow elucidate the ways in which these motives facilitate the mechanisms by which family members generate sustainable value (i.e. economic, social, and environmental) at the firm, cooperative, and rural community levels.

4.3 Sustainable entrepreneurship mechanisms

Data analysis revealed two sustainable entrepreneurship mechanisms, motivated by affective attachment and sense of responsibility. The first mechanism, labelled as "collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability", entails family members drawing on the aforementioned motives to engage in in collaborations to pursue opportunities for the creation of new products, services or processes that can generate sustainable value (i.e. combined economic, social and environmental value) for either the firm, the Cooperative, or the community. The second mechanism, labelled as "spillover sustainable entrepreneurship", involves a process through which (unintended and deliberate) spillovers from collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability in one level (e.g. cooperative) can serve, through the intervention of family members, as valuable sources for sustainable value generation at a different level (e.g. firm or community). This mechanism is also facilitated by the motives discussed in the previous section (see Table 5). In other words, the first mechanism explains how family members create sustainable value at a single level (i.e. a firm,

Cooperative, or community), while the second mechanism explains how sustainable entrepreneurship spills over across levels (e.g., from firm to community). When combined, these mechanisms demonstrate how sustainable value is generated within a multilevel web where the family firm interacts with a cooperative and a rural community.

[Insert Table 5]

4.3.1 Family members' collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability

Data analysis uncovered family members' willingness and predisposition to collaborate with people both inside and outside their firm to create new products, services or processes for their firm, Cooperative, or community. Family members' affective attachment and sense of responsibility motivated them to collaborate with others to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities that, when seized, not only generate economic value but also address non-economic concerns (i.e., social, or environmental) at these levels, thereby promoting sustainable value creation (see Table 5).

Our findings illustrate how family members engaged in collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability, separately within the firm, Cooperative, and community. At the level of the family business, collaborative sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives emerged from family members who were involved in the business (see also Table 4). Daphne from Skalia Grocery used the example of the “messaging system”, to explain how joint multigenerational actions led to implementing a new process that generated social (i.e., enhanced communication with customers) and economic value (i.e., increased sales) for the firm. Daphne expressed: *“I had the idea of introducing a message system to communicate better and more directly with our customers about product offers.*

Discussing with my father and brother, we made some changes on the way. Retrospectively, it proved to be a great tool that increased our sales". Citing the "shop shelves renewal", driven by affective attachment and sense of responsibility, Zeuxis from Kilada Grocery provided another example that resulted in enhanced economic (i.e., sales) and social (i.e. family member closure; customer satisfaction) value for the business. Zeuxis indicated: *"It is customary for us [family's sense of responsibility] to regularly talk about ideas for small or major changes in the business. It also helps that we are close as a family and share a similar passion for the business [family's affective attachment] [...]. Lately we changed all the shop's shelves, which were pretty old, and this resulted from a spontaneous discussion. They (offspring) took it, they researched the pros and cons, the cost and benefits, they took orders and then we had a solid base to take decisions. We did it and we are happy with the outcome; the customers are happy; the sales are up!"*. Table 5 provides additional evidence at the nexus of the aforementioned motives and collaborative sustainable entrepreneurship at the level of the firm.

At the level of the cooperative, sustainable value creation is again subject to family members' collaborative entrepreneurial endeavors, driven by affective attachment and sense of responsibility (see Table 5). Family members collaborate to share and implement entrepreneurial ideas that are critical to the sustainability of the cooperative (see also Table 4). Agamemnon, operations manager of Co-op Grocers, offered the example of the "white label" to highlight that the collaboration between family members (across coop member-firms) led to a new initiative (i.e., the white label) that generated essential economic (i.e., sales, profits, cost-efficiencies) and environmental value (i.e. recycling/ reduced plastic pollution, commitment to environmental sustainability) for the cooperative. Agamemnon highlighted: *"We are constantly expanding the organization [Cooperative]. To give you an example, a couple of months ago we introduced an*

eco-friendly white label starting with carton water and recycled tissue products and our intention is to create a very large family of eco-friendly products under this label. The idea started a couple of years ago. It was discussed a lot at the board level, in the presence of different grocery owners, and with the support of the cooperative administration. Many members were involved in the implementation of this endeavor, by either using their contacts to identify factories that produce eco-friendly white labels at low prices, to testing products, or even to voicing their concerns on products or prices". Additionally, Zeuxis from Kilada Grocery, explained how their attachment to the Cooperative is inducing them to work with others to produce vital economic value for the sustainability of the cooperative: *"The cooperative is us [referring to families across member-firms], it is our actions, our decisions. We are a good team, and this teamwork speaks by itself: new premises, new warehouses, our own distribution fleet, strong branding. So many things have been done in the past few years".*

Evidence from the data shows that, at the level of rural communities, family members recognize the value of collaborating with local stakeholders to sustain their community. Family members would often create sustainable value at the community level through joint initiatives with community stakeholders, such as philanthropic events, community clubs, festivals, sponsorships, and community environmental protection initiatives (see Table 4). Efrosini, secretary of Kremmos community council, elaborated on the contribution of the Kremmos Grocery family in establishing an annual community "Clean-up Day". The Clean-up Day was made possible through the financial contribution, and the hands-on role of the Kremmos Grocery family in inviting others and acting as volunteers to help clean-up local parks, public spaces, rivers, and streets. This is an exemplary initiative of how environmental [clean community; preserving natural habitats], social [improved citizen well-being and health], and economic value [to facilitate clean-up efforts] can co-exist at

the community-level through the joint efforts between family members and local stakeholders. Efrosini indicated: *“Since 2015, Mr. Odysseus and his family are helping us (i.e. the community council) to organize a Clean-up Day, which runs every first week of October. They donate the tools, disposable and cleaning material, and snacks and water for the volunteers. They are also helping us to promote the event and use their own networks to invite volunteers [...] During the Day they assume the organization of the event, by setting up teams and assigning relevant tasks. Of course, their whole family is actively engaged in the clean-up efforts”*. Additionally, Kyros from Stahi Grocery, offered another example of the “Green points” to explain how community attachment drives family members’ collaborative environmental value creation at the level of the Community: *“I have lived here all my life, my children have been brought up here. Our memories, our stories, our emotions are linked to this place and its beautiful landscape, which we wish to preserve [...] We are in close cooperation with the local council, already sponsoring important projects for the protection of the local environment, such as the three central green points that we have created across the village, where our fellow-citizens have the opportunity to recycle and compost their waste”*. Table 5 provides additional evidence at the intersection of motives and collaborative sustainable entrepreneurship at the level of the community.

4.3.2 Spillover sustainable entrepreneurship

Data analysis identified a sustainable entrepreneurship mechanism that we call “spillover sustainable entrepreneurship”, in which family members use spillovers (in the form of ideas, knowledge, or best practices) from their collaborative sustainable entrepreneurial endeavors at one level (such as firm) to collaborate for sustainable value creation at a different level (such as the Cooperative or community). Stated differently, this mechanism connects family members’

collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability (described in the previous section) across levels and explains the sustainability interdependencies within the multilevel web in which the levels of the firm, Cooperative, and community are found.

For instance, Kassandra from Landa Grocery explained that while her family is engaging in initiatives with others at the level of the cooperative, this exposure can provide them with ideas and inspiration to facilitate joint entrepreneurial actions that can enhance the sustainability of their own firm: *“Whilst sharing ideas with others during a board meeting of the Cooperative, we [family] can also write down ideas which may prove useful for the sustainability of our own firm”*. The “organic products section” project provides a great example of how a collaborative effort that generated sustainable value at the level of the cooperative was leveraged by family members to engage in collaborations for sustainability with local stakeholders. This kind of endeavor not only generated sustainable value at the level of the cooperative, but it also led to spillovers that helped the community and individual businesses to generate essential economic, social and environmental value. According to Demetrius, GM of Co-op Grocers: *“A successful initiative that was brought to the board (of the cooperative) for discussion and subsequently was implemented with success was the idea to create an organics section in each Co-op Grocer’s store. This was done as part of the responsibility efforts of the cooperative, which we thought it would be good to also include aspects concerning organic farming and healthier alternatives to the conscious consumers [..]. Our members (i.e., store owners) then exploited further this development to establish closer links with local producers to source products locally to support small farmers in their areas and encourage organic farming. Obviously, this was an initiative that also brought broader benefits to our local communities, such as the preservation of local agriculture and the strengthening of community bonds between local customers and local farmers”*.

The above illustrations elucidate that family members deliberately transfer ideas and knowledge from one entity to another to engage in sustainable entrepreneurship. Data analysis revealed situations in which the entrepreneurial actions of family members in one level may unintentionally generate spillovers that can influence sustainable value creation at a different level. However, family members needed to be alerted to exploit these accidental spillovers. Penelope from Vouno Grocery offered the example of the “service desk”, developed initially by family members for the commercial purposes of their firm. Nevertheless, these days this space is mostly used for community get-togethers and collaborative efforts between family members and local stakeholders to develop social and environmental initiatives for the community. Penelope, mentioned: *“When expanding our Grocery, we made provisions for a service desk with a lobby to have better communication with customers and run better our bonus scheme. But in the end, it turned into a coordination hub for the community citizens to voice, note, and take action on issues that affect the community, such as littering, the need for financial assistance for some individuals’ medical needs, the support of impoverished families and other problems”*.

Further, data analysis illuminated how family members’ affective attachment and sense of responsibility function as the driving motives to take advantage of spillovers from their initiatives in one level to generate sustainable value at another. For instance, family members are motivated to exploit spillovers from their joint endeavors within the firm to support the Cooperative’s sustainability, as they feel it is their duty to do so. Euphemia, from Stahi Grocery, explained: *“We see ourselves working with good people in this Cooperative. As a result, when we do something of value within our firm, we feel obliged to share it with others in order to help them improve their businesses and lay the foundation for Co-op Grocers to be sustainable”*. In another instance, Aglaia, from Kremmos Grocery, explained how their family’s affective attachment towards their

local community was motivating them to spillover value from their firm to enhance the economic and non-economic pillars of their community: *“Our business does a lot of things, generates revenue, and performs well. This is not, however, the ultimate end for our family. Because we care and we are very close to this community, we make sure a portion of this success is returned back to our community in the form of infrastructure, environmental projects and other initiatives”*.

Table 5 offers more evidence at the intersection of motives and spillover sustainable entrepreneurship.

5. Discussion

By elucidating the role of family members as sustainable entrepreneurs and the motivations and mechanisms that they employ to generate sustainable value, our findings expand understanding of family entrepreneurship in sustainability (Ramírez-Pasillas and Nordqvist 2021; Sharma and Sharma 2019). Figure 2 offers a conceptual depiction of our findings. It illustrates the motives (why) and entrepreneurial mechanisms (how) that family members (as sustainable entrepreneurs) draw on to generate sustainable value (i.e. integrated economic, social, and environmental value) at multiple interdependent levels (i.e., family firm, cooperative, and rural community). Our findings provide a comprehensive understanding of sustainable entrepreneurship, which involves the entrepreneurship-based integration of economic, social, and environmental value within an interconnected web (Dyllick and Muff 2016; Muñoz and Cohen 2018) of family firm, cooperative, and rural community levels.

Our study reveals the role of family members – motivated and acting as ‘sustainable entrepreneurs’ – in utilizing two important sustainable entrepreneurship mechanisms for generating sustainable value. Although family members are considered to have central role in

entrepreneurship (Bettinelli et al., 2014; Minola et al., 2016) and sustainability (Hadjielias et al. 2023; Le Breton-Miller and Miller 2016) related to their businesses, their role as sustainable entrepreneurs had not been identified. Our study provides evidence of this role.

The first sustainable entrepreneurship mechanism, termed “collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability”, entails family members drawing on collaborations within each level (i.e., firm, Cooperative, community) to identify and seize entrepreneurial opportunities that support the generation of sustainable value. In this way we shed light into how a collaborative feature of family entrepreneurship influences sustainability and generates value (Randerson et al., 2015; Clauß et al. 2022; Muñoz and Dimov 2016). The second mechanism, termed “spillover sustainable entrepreneurship”, portrays a process through which family members exploit spillovers from their sustainable entrepreneurial activities at some levels to facilitate sustainable entrepreneurship at other levels. Such a mechanism connects sustainable entrepreneurship at different levels within a multilevel web (Cohen and Winn 2007; Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019).

[Insert Figure 2, here]

‘Affective attachment’ and *‘sense of responsibility’* motives enhance conversations about the individual motives behind sustainable entrepreneurship. In this study both motivations are built on layers of interactions that have developed over time. To date, most work has focused on an individual’s sense of responsibility and attachment, mostly within a particular setting (e.g. place), in forming partnerships for community sustainability (e.g., Kibler et al. 2015; McKee 2015). In a family, affective attachment has been found to develop out of social interaction and expectations (Rothbaum et al. 2002). Affective attachment, broadly conceptualized in the management

literature as to the emotional significance given to a group membership (Allen and Meyer 1990; Knoll and Redman 2016), appears to influence the motivations of family entrepreneurs in this study not only towards their family group but also their relationships within a cooperative and a community. Such sense of affective attachment seeks to have the community equally share social burdens. Family entrepreneurs who need to decide about which opportunities to pursue would consider what the community and members of the cooperative would say. When members of the community express some social concerns then family entrepreneurs acting as sustainable stewards would then step forward to find a solution and share their approach within a cooperative. Both elements suggest that sustainable entrepreneurs seek to think ahead not only about the next generation that is to come into the business but also their relationships within an association and a community. Our findings suggest that whilst family members don't ignore the short-term impact of their actions, their decisions and actions are also constrained by an awareness of the long-term impact for sustainability and the responsibility they have towards others. Thus, both motivations enhance our understanding of how family members engage in entrepreneurial behaviors for sustainability.

Our findings concerning affective attachment and sense of responsibility illuminate the non-economic motives that drive family members to act as sustainable entrepreneurs (Muñoz and Cohen 2018) and explain their willingness to do so at multiple levels. Hence, these findings showcase further the connection between family entrepreneurship and sustainability (Ramírez-Pasillas and Nordqvist, 2021), under a multilevel view (Dyllick and Muff 2016; Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019; Munoz and Cohen, 2018).

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our study makes three important theoretical contributions. First, we address a theoretical gap in family entrepreneurship and its relationship to sustainability (Randerson et al. 2015; Ramírez-Pasillas and Lundberg 2019; Ramírez-Pasillas and Nordqvist 2021; Sharma and Sharma 2019). Scholars are increasingly addressing the centrality of family members in leading and seizing entrepreneurial opportunities (Minola et al. 2016) as well as the non-economic drivers (e.g., socioemotional wealth preservation, stewardship) behind their sustainable practices (Le Breton-Miller and Miller 2016; Sharma and Sharma 2021). Our findings help to bridge further the gap between these literatures by providing theoretical insights into why and how family entrepreneurs pursue opportunities that generate sustainable value - the motives, mechanisms, and intricate web of interdependencies that family entrepreneurs rely on while engaging in sustainable entrepreneurship.

Our study extends knowledge on how family entrepreneurship influences sustainability by uncovering family members acting as ‘sustainable entrepreneurs’. Family sustainable entrepreneurs are motivated by affective attachment and sense of responsibility, seeking out local collaborations and in doing so, create and exploit entrepreneurial spillovers to generate sustainable value. These insights support current conversations about the importance of non-economic motives in driving family members’ behaviors (Saeed et al. 2023). Yet, they also explain how such motives can spur family entrepreneurs to engage in sustainable entrepreneurial behaviors. The concept of family sustainable entrepreneur that we introduce is rooted in a web where a rural family firm, a rural community, and a cooperative intersect (Muñoz and Cohen 2018). Furthermore, our research offers fresh insights into the mechanisms that can allow family entrepreneurship to manifest as a means of generating sustainable value. The mechanisms of ‘collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability’ and ‘spillover sustainable entrepreneurship’ explain how motivated family

sustainable entrepreneurs can contribute to sustainability outcomes across firm, cooperative, and community.

Second, we contribute to the field of sustainable entrepreneurship by addressing calls to consider a more holistic perspective of sustainability, viewing it as an integrated web that connects sustainability at the micro levels (e.g., business) with sustainability at the larger, societal level (Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019). Inspired by "*the missing integration of the societal macro level with the organizational micro level*" (Dyllick and Muff 2016: p. 158), our research offers multilevel theorization that clarifies the motives and mechanisms by which sustainable entrepreneurship unfolds within a web of interdependent entities or levels. As such, we provide an understanding of sustainable entrepreneurship that is grounded in a multilevel perspective and it is better equipped to tackle the practical complexities of the concept, which include addressing the creation of sustainable value at different overlapping levels (Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019). Our findings illustrate when family members are deeply ingrained within a family firm, a Cooperative, and a rural community, they may tend to be motivated to engage in collaborative entrepreneurial interactions. In doing so, they can exploit spillovers from such interactions to address sustainability issues at the intersection of multiple levels.

Third, our study contributes to the literature on family business sustainable entrepreneurship through a new mid-range theoretical perspective that conceptualizes family members' motives and mechanisms of sustainable entrepreneurship across family firm, cooperative, and rural community. Sustainable entrepreneurship has not received much attention in the family business field (Scherrer and Binz-Astrachan 2018; Woodfield et al., 2017), remaining largely under-researched and undertheorized. We present new theoretical insights on the nature and operationalization of two family member motives – affective attachment and sense of

responsibility – that are important in triggering sustainable entrepreneurship at the nexus of family firm, cooperative, and community. In doing so, we join the conversation about the role of motivated family members that engage in sustainable entrepreneurship (Scherrer and Binz-Astrachan 2018). However, what our findings suggest is a parallel notion to the individual motivations for sustainable entrepreneurship. Our findings reveal that a sense of responsibility and affective attachment are developed towards a cooperative and a community through ongoing social interactions and shared practices over time, building up diverse layers of interactions impacting the motivations towards sustainable entrepreneurship over time (Zelekha, Yaakobi, and Avnimelech 2018; Krueger et al. 2011).

We also theorize how these motives relate to the mechanisms of ‘collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability’ and ‘spillover sustainable entrepreneurship’, filling a knowledge gap on operational elements of sustainable entrepreneurship in family businesses. In our theorization of the intersection between family and sustainable entrepreneurship, we illustrate that family members rely on collaborations to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities, generating sustainable value for their firm, community and cooperative. We also illustrate that family members create spillovers, that is, a process through which they exploit ideas and knowledge from their sustainable entrepreneurial activities at some levels to facilitate sustainable entrepreneurship at other levels, taking into account the wider web in which their firms operate.

5.2 Implications for practitioners and policy makers

The findings provide important practical implications. First, our findings highlight that in a rural context, family firm sustainability may be inextricably linked to the sustainability of associated rural communities and collaborative organizations, such as cooperatives (Hadjielias, 2024).

Family business owners/managers should craft strategies and routines that allow closer interactions and value flows between their firms and their associated socio-economic institutions. Such strategies or routines may allow family businesses to systematically generate, borrow and transfer not only knowledge but also ideas and best practices from/to cooperatives and rural communities.

Second, family businesses should examine how existing entrepreneurial practices influence sustainable entrepreneurial cultures within their organizations. A unique culture, or way of doing things, may empower family and nonfamily employees to think and act as sustainable entrepreneurs (i.e., motivated people that are able to conceive and implement ideas, leading to value creation). Such an approach will then benefit not only the focal firm, but also its immediate community, cooperatives and other local networks. In establishing such cultures and creating environments and work routines that are conducive to sustainable entrepreneurship, family businesses may draw on the expertise of consultants and trainers specialized in sustainable entrepreneurship.

Third, our findings signal the need for the development of new governmental policies and funding schemes, which can encourage the creation of cooperatives amongst small rural family businesses. Such schemes can favor the sustainable development of multiple institutions – a family firm, a cooperative, and rural communities - and therefore help nations to enhance the sustainability of rural regions (Hadjielias and Poutziouris 2005). Funded schemes, which can finance the creation of rural cooperatives, can also offer mentoring and support to cooperative managers to implement business models in ways that are conducive to sustainable entrepreneurship (Lüdeke-Freund 2020).

5.3. Limitations and opportunities for future research

This study has a few caveats, therefore its findings must be interpreted with caution. First, this study relied on qualitative case study research, often criticized for providing a limited basis for scientific generalization and validity (Stake 2008). Yet, our nested case study (Pershina et al. 2019) allowed us to draw on an idiosyncratic web, where sustainable entrepreneurship can be concurrently addressed at the interconnected levels of family firm, cooperative, and community on sustainable entrepreneurship. Given that sustainable entrepreneurship involves intricate interdependencies among various levels of analysis (Muñoz and Cohen 2018), future work can better capture the essence of sustainable entrepreneurship within a multilevel web by utilizing the nested case study research method (Thomas 2011).

Second, this study was conducted in a single country (i.e., Cyprus), and therefore it may be difficult to infer similar results in other countries. Further studies in other countries (Gupta and Levenburg 2010) where small family businesses are simultaneously rooted in cooperatives and rural communities may support, challenge or expand our findings. Future comparative work that focuses on family businesses associated to cooperatives and rural communities across countries that share common or contrasting cultural settings is warranted. The multilevel web nature of sustainable entrepreneurship calls researchers to explore the applicability of our study in countries where cooperatives composed of small rural family businesses exist. Comparative research can help enhance the generalizability of our findings, which can lead to more robust theorization (Chetty et al. 2014).

Third, this study has not explicitly examined or adequately theorized the relationship between sustainable entrepreneurship and place (or the rural context). Although our research highlights the interdependencies that exist between multiple socio-economic levels within a rural community (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015), we believe further studies focusing on a

context-specific theorization of sustainable entrepreneurship in rural contexts, as a place, are needed. While prior studies have argued that a focus on place will deal with several material features (Spielmann et al. 2021), future studies can focus specifically on the place features of a rural context and its influence on sustainable entrepreneurship (Muñoz and Kimmitt 2019). Future studies in the family business field, for example, can examine more closely the ways in which the rural context can influence the sustainable entrepreneurship mechanisms that we revealed – *‘collaborative entrepreneurship for sustainability’* and *‘spillover sustainable entrepreneurship’*. This could lead to a reconceptualization of these mechanisms to provide a more context-specific theorization of why and how they materialize in a rural place. Future studies can also expand on our findings by closely linking affective attachment and sense of responsibility to the place (Zelekha, Yaakobi, and Avnimelech 2018) and examining their impact on sustainable entrepreneurs. This can help research on sustainable entrepreneurship in exploring motivations that delve beyond the non-economic motives of sustainable entrepreneurs to capture motives that involve the place-specific motives of the sustainable actor.

Last, our work has focused on families that have been long established in rural communities. Hence, future work can consider how our findings may be extended or challenged when new actors arrive at a community (Redhead and Bika 2022). Additionally, given that this was an inductive study and research was made in the absence of a framing theory, future research can consider abductive approaches (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Dubois and Gadde 2002) and the use of theories to provide alternative explanations of how sustainable entrepreneurs construct meaning and engage in sustainable behaviors within their context. Future qualitative studies may employ complementary theories or combine theories to explain further the motives, mechanisms, and interactions of sustainable entrepreneurs within overlapping socio-economic systems. One

theory that may have traction is systems theory (Hult 2011). Systems theory may allow attention on the interdependencies of family firms within their broader socio-economic systems (Pieper and Klein 2007) and can help explain how sustainable entrepreneurs engage in interactions and value creating activities having a holistic view of sustainability. Moreover, family entrepreneuring, which calls to examine further the practices of entrepreneurs may expand our understanding of family sustainable entrepreneurs (Al-Dajani et al. 2023).

6. Conclusions

At the outset of this study, we aimed to understand better the nexus between family, firm and community. Our work now conceptualizes the motives and sustainable entrepreneurial mechanisms of family members, who act as sustainable entrepreneurs at the interconnected levels of firm, cooperative and rural community. Family members leading firms associated with a cooperative and operating withing rural communities may be driven by a strong affective attachment and sense of responsibility to engage in sustainability entrepreneurship. Such an approach may facilitate collaboration for generations to come. Further examination of sustainable entrepreneurial dynamics by family members within firms, cooperatives, and rural communities around the world is needed.

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