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Abstract

Over the last few decades the interest of scholars in habitual entrepreneurship has grown progressively. In-depth studies of the phenomenon have brought to light the widespread presence, in several industries, of entrepreneurs developing and managing more than a business, either simultaneously or in succession, during their working lifetime. Likewise, within the context of family business, scholars usually find members, belonging to the family, creating subsequent or parallel businesses.

Therefore, in the family business context is frequent the presence of members, acting as habitual entrepreneurs, that create new businesses by leveraging values, resources, experiences cumulated in the existing business and belonging to the family.

The investigation presented in this paper, carried out in the field of habitual entrepreneurs that owned, or had owned, at least two family firms, yields initial promising results regarding the widespread presence of habitual entrepreneurs in the context of family business.

The aim of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of how the family business is a context where habitual entrepreneurs create and develop new businesses. Following a qualitative analysis, some possible combinations of the two phenomena are presented and the different paths in which they may overlap over time.

The habitual entrepreneurship may easily extend into the realm of family business when a single entrepreneur acting as habitual decides to increase his portfolio of firms involving members of his own family hitherto not present in the business, thereby giving birth to a group of firms within the family context.

Key words: family business, multi-firm ownership, habitual entrepreneur, new venture creation; business groups.

1. Introduction

In recent years, most of the contributions on entrepreneurship have been related to individuals who have founded, simultaneously or sequentially, more than one firm during their working lifetime. Attention has been focused on the nature of the different entrepreneurial profiles, comparing the behaviour and performance of the novice and the habitual entrepreneur, the serial and the portfolio (Ucbasaran, Westhead, Wright, 2006; Amaral, Baptista, 2006; Rerup, 2005; Ucbasaran, Wright, Westhead, 2003; Carter, Ram, 2002; Alsos, Kolvereid, 1998; Rosa, Scott, 1999).

Our investigation, carried out within the context of family business, yielded a significant finding: the widespread phenomenon of multi-firm ownership frequently originates and develops within a family business context, where family members act as habitual entrepreneurs (Randerson, 2016).

As a result of these findings, the simultaneous presence of some characteristics linked to the family business environment and others connected with habitual entrepreneurship assumes a new importance. The two phenomena often coexist, albeit in a variety of combinations and manifestations since each business is distinguished by its own history, culture and values. This may be partially explained by statistical evidence. In the first place, empirical studies carried out in different geographical areas have pointed out the presence of firms created by entrepreneurs who have already acquired experience in the field, conferring an important dimension on the phenomenon of entrepreneurship. The percentage of business founders with previous entrepreneurial experience ranges from 36% to 52% in the UK (Birley and Westhead, 1993, Westhead and Wright, 1998). High proportions of habitual business founders, ranging from 49% to 63%, have been identified in the USA, (Ronstadt, 1986, Schollhammer, 1991), 49% in Australia, 38% in Malaysia (Taylor, 1999) and 34% in Norway (Kolvereid and Bullvag, 1993). In the second place, the ratio of family to non-family businesses is high; in developed economies family-run firms are a widespread reality (Müller, Neergaard, 2009).

Moreover, there are 4 million of businesses in Italy operating with the involvement of close family members and more than 25% of these, around 1.2 million, are still active owing to the entry into the firm of a second generation . From a comparison with European data we can see how the family tradition in Italy is the strongest motivation for creating a business in one case out of four (26%) (Chamber of Commerce in Milan, 2008), while the European percentage is 23%.

Despite these evidences, research regarding family businesses has taken into account prevalently aspects regarding family relationships and dynamics within a single company, whereas little attention has been paid to these same aspects in a potential multi-business setting created by new

initiatives taken by family members. At the same time, longitudinal studies on habitual entrepreneurship have focused their attention more at length on the career of the single entrepreneur and his personal skills in seeking and starting new initiatives, overlooking the features concerned with the possible family dynamics.

As a consequence, the need to study in more detail the connection between the two phenomena may assume importance.

Since this study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on habitual entrepreneurship and family business, a key empirical question arise from the above-mentioned concerns: what are the processes leading up to the combination of habitual entrepreneurship and family business and how do they evolve over time?

The question aims to explore the processes through with the two phenomena may occur and combine, bearing in mind the time factor, since it may be seen that these processes are subject to continuous change owing to the life cycle of every firm and to the dynamics connected with transfer and succession.

The direction of this empirical question leads us to a more theoretical one: in what way does the process of creating a new firm lead to an extension of the concept of family business towards the field of habitual entrepreneurship?

In the light of these questions, a family business may evolve and extend on a multi-business firm, as a consequence of the presence of family members whose behavior resembles that of the single habitual entrepreneur.

The purpose of this study is to offer an interpretation of the phenomenon of habitual entrepreneurship in the family business context identifying the possible evolutionary paths in order to contribute to a better understanding of the development and implications of such processes.

By means of in-depth interviews targeted on entrepreneurs that owned, or had owned, at least two firms, operating in family context, a comparative analysis of cases of entrepreneurs was carried out with the purpose of illustrating the different situations of development of the habitual entrepreneurship in the family business context.

The investigation has shown that entrepreneurial behavior, characterized by both family and habitual factors, can develop along three different processes, according to the succession of events. The first case is that of a well-established family firm, in which one or two family entrepreneurs decide to create a further business, within the same family context. In the second case, also starting from the well-established family firm, a single member decides to start-up a subsequent business

operating autonomously. In the third case, the original firm is run by an entrepreneur calling on one or more members of the family, not operating in the original firm, to run a subsequent business.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we shortly discuss the literature on the theoretical perspectives employed to observe the different aspects shaping the processes of habitual entrepreneurship and the family business.

Secondly, we analyze the processes characterizing these two phenomena. The third section is the empirical part of the paper, describing the explorative analysis carried out to collect data in the field and providing an interpretation of these data .

Following this, we discuss the findings of the field study and offer a representation of the different entrepreneurial paths in order to define the theoretical and practical implications of the synergies between entrepreneurial behaviors in the family context. The final section shows the conclusion and further prospective points for research.

2. The habitual entrepreneurship and the family business literature

Scholars focusing on the habitual entrepreneurship place at the center of their analyses the skills and competence habitual entrepreneurs acquires during their previous business, in an attempt to establish a link between experience and superior performance in the process of creating and developing a new business. The factor distinguishing habitual entrepreneur from the novice entrepreneur is the possibility to build up a stock of knowledge, practical experience and the ability to relate to the surrounding environment in such a more effective way as to detect or create new business opportunities.

Research on the subject of *habitual entrepreneurship* began about three decades ago, when MacMillan (1986) used the term *habitual entrepreneur* tracing the outline of a type of entrepreneurship hitherto overlooked or underestimated. Recently, scholars have dedicated more attention to this theme, analyzing habitual entrepreneurship through different theoretical perspectives, without however reaching any unanimous conclusions: there is not sufficient evidence to support a single theory, owing perhaps to the complex and heterogeneous nature of the phenomenon.

The literature includes several lines of research exploring the characteristics and behaviour of habitual entrepreneurs compared to those without any prior experience (nascent), or first-time entrepreneurs (novice). Different types of entrepreneur have been identified and classified on the

basis of their prior business background: novice, habitual, serial and portfolio (Ucbasaran, Westhead, Wright, 2006).

Habitual entrepreneurs are defined as those who have owned more than one firm during their working lifetime and fall into two categories: *serial* entrepreneurs, who start a new firm after having exited from a previous one and *portfolio* entrepreneurs, who own more than one firm at the same time.

Attention has been addressed prevalently to the nature of these different forms of entrepreneurship, to the detection or creation of opportunities, and to the behaviour and performance distinguishing the novice from the habitual entrepreneur, the serial from the portfolio (Westhead and Wright, 2015; Thorgen S and Wincent J., 2015).

Most of the studies have used quantitative methods to detect statistical differences between novice, serial and portfolio entrepreneurs, concentrating on the human profile, behaviour and ability to search for information and identify opportunities.

The theoretical approach most widely accepted in literature is that of *human capital* (family background, education, managerial knowledge, experience accumulated), which develops from the assumption that prior experience puts the habitual entrepreneur in a stronger position compared to an individual at his first experience. Relatively few contributions use the social capital perspective and the resource-based view to attempt to identify differences in performance between novice and habitual entrepreneurs (Ucbasaran, Alsos, Westhead, Wright, 2008).

While studies exploring the connection between human capital and performance argue the advantages of experience, more attention should perhaps be paid to the nature of the know-how previously acquired. The experience and skills cumulated may affect the behavior and decisions of the entrepreneur, and therefore his performance, in different ways.

Some authors, giving a wider interpretation define as habitual entrepreneurs not only those who found their own firms but also those who purchase, take over or inherit them (Ucbasaran, Westhead, Wright, 2006). Nevertheless it is important for our study to make the definition more specific by distinguishing between a habitual entrepreneur who founds his own business, therefore taking part in the start-up activity, and another who purchases an established firm, either taking over the management of it or buying shares in it simply as a financial investment. It is on the former one that our analysis is focused. According to a study of the specific category of skills acquired and transmitted from one firm to the next and from one generation to the next, one of the

main objectives of the family-firm entrepreneur in becoming habitual is to “create and manage a succession of businesses and bring about entrepreneurial renewal over the generations” (Rosa, Balunywa, 2008).

For a better understanding of the phenomenon of habitual entrepreneurship in the family business context, it is necessary to take into consideration not only the human capital cumulated in the course

of previous experiences but also those values created and transferred through the generations of the firms' life-cycle, such as the family culture, a sense of belonging and a commitment to the continuity of the firm.

The family business has often been placed at the center of studies performed in a several disciplinary areas such as management, business economics, organization, micro-economics, sociology. Such studies have taken into consideration above all the specific characteristics, behaviors and processes of this type of business. The results of much of the research on critical themes, such as generational succession, relationships between family members involved in management and the strengths and weaknesses existing within the family firm set-up, have been analyzed at length (Corbetta,1995; Schillaci, 1990; Del Giudice, 2017; Del Giudice et al., 2013). Among the particular aspects which have emerged, that of generational succession has proved to be prominent, since this phase in the life of a firm usually represents a change that may have a negative impact on its continuity.

The involvement of family members in an entrepreneurial activity and the circumstances characterizing its generational succession are two aspects which have been studied in connection with the family business world but which also emerged in our analysis of the various multi-business firms (Steier and Miller, 2010; Schillaci et al., 2012). On the one hand, in the family business an underlying commitment exists in the mind of the founders to pass on the firm to the following generation; on the other hand, those who inherit the firm and later on create a further business are moving towards the wider definition of the habitual entrepreneur.

The replication processes of new business creation involving members of the same family may be compared, in terms of characteristics and dynamics, to those animating the habitual entrepreneur. In the first place, the entrepreneurial experience and know-how acquired in the original firm helps to create a background of business knowledge and skills. In the second place, the entrepreneur operating at the center of a network of social family relations has the possibility to intercept and exploit any new market opportunity that presents itself. Finally, the existing firm may constitute a bunch of resources to be exploited in the subsequent initiative (Seaman et al. 2015).

A family business entrepreneur who takes over the running of the firm inherited may later decide to start up a new venture behaving in the same way as a habitual entrepreneur. Indeed, the circuit of the family business confers specific values such as a strong sense of belonging and sharing of objectives.

3. The entrepreneurial process in the family business

While many analyses of the family business are primarily based on the dynamics operating in connection with family relations within a single firm, our research highlights the fact that the family

business does not always concerns a process of a single firm creation but a variety of forms of businesses created by family members acting as habitual entrepreneurs (Randerson et al, 2015).

In the view of some scholars, there are reasons why a habitual entrepreneur involves new subjects when deciding to embark on a further business venture (Iacobucci, Rosa, 2004; Scott, Rosa, 1999). These authors distinguish the case of a serial entrepreneur, who sells on or exits from the previous firm before creating a further one, thereby reserving to himself the same managerial team for the new venture, from that of a portfolio entrepreneur, who continues to manage his established firm while organizing a new start-up. In this latter case, the entrepreneur may consider delegating some tasks to new members, sometimes to be found within the family, who will join the managerial team.

Focusing attention on the definition and formation of the new managerial team, they highlight the problem of portfolio entrepreneur 'time allocation' during the process of business group formation that is of the decision whether to devote her/his efforts entirely to the new initiative or to divide them between the existing firm and the new one.

The behavior of a habitual entrepreneur who decides to involve members of his own family when starting on a new venture represents an interesting interpretation of the phenomenon of the habitual entrepreneurship in the family business context, from which we may derive significant theoretical and practical implications regarding the questions *why* and *how* this process takes place.

With reference to the literature on this point up to now, we must bear in mind that little attention has been paid to the implications of a parallel development of the two phenomena. These are frequently characterized by identical subjects and evolve over time, passing on to the

entrepreneurial group not only the skills, competence and resources cumulated so far but also the values, sense of belonging and sharing of the objectives rooted in the family culture.

3.1 *The habitual entrepreneurship in the family business context*

Since the two phenomena are quite reach of contours and contents, it is firstly important trying to map them, in order to draw the possible evolutionary paths of habitual entrepreneurship in the realm of family business. According to this, two different dimensions of habitual entrepreneurship are defined below, which represent the starting point of our analysis.

The context of experience, the first dimension, concerns the environment surrounding the entrepreneur that affects her/his values, attitudes, abilities and behaviors. The experience can be matured within a family context or a business context. This dimension makes two possible situations: the case of an entrepreneur that begins his career within a well-established family business, without having participated in its foundation, or in the second case, an entrepreneur operating individually that starts from scratch and creates a new venture.

The number of firms, the second dimension, concerns the sum of businesses founded and developed by an individual within a family or a business context.

According to this, it is possible to have four different cases, depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Habitual entrepreneurship and family business

| | First firm | Subsequent firm |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Family context | Family Business Entrepreneur (FBE) | Habitual Family Business Entrepreneur (HFBE) |
| Individual context | Entrepreneur (E) | Habitual Entrepreneur (HE) |

The first observation emerging from table 1 is that while the habitual entrepreneur (HE) operates on an individual level the habitual family business entrepreneur (HFBE) must bear in mind the social relations deriving from the family context which may affect the decisional and organizational processes of subsequent firms.

Moreover, in the case of family business entrepreneur (FBE), the firm founded by a single entrepreneur (SE) becomes a family business when he involves his offspring in its ownership and management, with a view to their taking it over in the long run; in this case, the business is based on the presence of two consecutive generations operating in the same firm.

The evolution from the family business entrepreneur (FBE) to the subsequent habitual family business entrepreneur (HFBE), occurring within the family context, may also be of two different types, according to whether the habitual (family) entrepreneur belongs to the second or third generation, beginning his career in an already established family business, or has been involved in the original firm from the start-up.

In the first case, whereas the older generation has experienced the start-up phase, the second one is involved prevalently in managerial or operational activities and it is therefore in this field that exploitable know-how may be accumulated. The second type of experience is acquired in a firm created by more than one member of the same family, (usually of the same generation) all of whom therefore participating in the start-up phase and acquiring specific skills and know-how in this field. We can conclude therefore that a family business entrepreneur (FBE) who intends to start on a successive initiative will certainly have managerial experience behind him but may or may not have experience of the start-up phase.

Regarding the business context, the habitual entrepreneur decides autonomously how and when pursuing his objective of increasing his portfolio of firms. His skills are formed through facing both the initial critical phase and the subsequent ones from the first firm on.

The habitual entrepreneurs considered in our analysis all had some experience in the start-up phase and remained in the role of owner-manager of their firm(s), whereas the findings of our interviews showed that the family business entrepreneur had not always been present at the start-up of the first business.

4. Research methodology

The cases were studied using the qualitative method to collect and analyse data regarding the behavior, attitudes and motivation of a number of entrepreneurs operating in a local environment. The qualitative approach chosen was considered appropriate to observe the phenomenon through a deep exploration activity to understand *why* and *how* the events occurred within the scenario studied.

In-depth interviews with open questions were conducted to entrepreneurs on their premises, considering the region of eastern Sicily as the geographic context. The geographic context belongs an underdeveloped area in the Southern Italy.

The activity of habitual entrepreneurs was explored and the factors underlying the realization of the business group. In some cases, the business group had been created by a previous generation, growing in dimensions and number of firms as a result of the initiatives of the following one.

The entrepreneurs interviewed were included in the sample interviewed in accordance with the following criteria: individuals owning at least two firms; individuals who had established one firm some time in the past and were now implementing the second one; individuals who had exited from an established firm and were implementing a new one; entrepreneurs operating within family and non-family businesses.

The entrepreneurs forming the object of the analysis were all those who had held managerial or directional roles within their own businesses, therefore representing the aspects of both ownership and managerial roles. Moreover, they operated in firms founded by themselves or by the previous generation; in the second case, they had begun their career within the family firm, subsequently deciding to embark on further business initiatives.

No importance was attributed to personal characteristics related to the social context of origin, education and academic title.

The firms managed by the interviewed entrepreneurs had been established and operated in various industries.

4.1 The data collected

The data obtained from the interviews are synthetically set out in the following table (Table2), in order to give information regarding the development of the firms studied and the behaviour of habitual entrepreneurs in both family and non-family contexts.

TABLE 2**Cases of family and non-family entrepreneurs involved in multi-firm entrepreneurship**

| | Generation of entrepreneur | First Firm | Case history | Subsequent firm(s) | Number of firms owned | Industry |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------|--|--|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | 2nd generation | Family Business (FB) | The interviewee began his career in the family business together with his brother, joining their father in running the firm and subsequently taking over the family business which they later inherited. The two brothers together gave birth to the second initiative, giving continuity to the family context through a behaviour typical of the habitual entrepreneur. | Habitual Family Business Entrepreneur (HFBE) | 3 | Packaging |
| 2 | 1st generation | Family Business (FB) | In spite of the many firms created so far, it is interesting to note in the case of this interviewee the passage from a family context to an individual one characterizing the beginning of his career. His first business was founded thanks to his personal initiative but with the involvement of family members of the same generation, above all in order to provide sufficient financial resources. After this early experience he felt the need to embark on his subsequent activities alone. | Habitual Entrepreneur (HE) | 6 | Food retail, hotel, logistics, transport |

| | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|----------------------|--|--|---|---------------------------------|
| 3 | 3rd generation | Family Business (FB) | The entrepreneur interviewed took up his position together with his brother in the family firm created by their grandfather. In view of the need to make changes and innovations in the organizational structure to meet new market demands, the existing firms were divided into two main blocks covering the two major areas of activity. The new generation subsequently continued to create new ventures, both together and singly, in various industries, adding a habitual dimension to the family business. | Habitual Family Business Entrepreneur (HFBE) | 3 | Petrolchemical |
| 4 | 2nd generation | Family Business (FB) | The subject of this case is a second generation entrepreneur who inherited the business from his father together with his brother. After some years they embarked on a new business exploiting the synergies made available by the original one, still engaged in the production and application of materials. This was their first personal experience of start-up. | Habitual Family Business Entrepreneur (HFBE) | 2 | Building materials |
| 5 | 1st generation | Family Business (FB) | The entrepreneur interviewed founded his first business, together with his brother, in the field of the distribution of medical products and appliances, after a long period in which both worked as sales representatives within the industry. With time they decided to include some articles produced by firms outside their own but with their own brand name, beginning in this way to diversify their activity. Over the years the commercial activity of the firm in question has constantly been accompanied by a distribution service: this represents a natural evolution of the jointly-run business constituting a complement to the original one. | Family Business (FB) | 2 | Medical products and appliances |

| | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|------------------------|
| 6 | 2nd generation | Single Entrepreneur (SE) | The entrepreneur interviewed founded his business alone but later involved his sons in its management and development. With time, following the initiative of one of the sons, they decided together to exit from the original firm and create a new one, still specializing in the same area, that of the production of semi-finished confectionery products. The two brothers are now on the point of starting a new firm in order to offer a wider variety of products. In this way the original entrepreneur founded his first business alone and the second with the assistance of his sons, thereby passing on to them the start-up skills necessary for the third. | Family Business (FB - two generations together) | 2 | Confectionery products |
|---|----------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|------------------------|

5.

6. Data analysis and implications

The interviewees all confirmed that among the factors considered most valuable during their careers, their experience in the field and the knowledge of the context in which their original firm operated were crucial elements in the decision to proceed with the creation of a new venture. All the entrepreneurs who had embarked on a subsequent initiative had clearly drawn profit from their previous experience in terms of various forms of theoretical and practical learning in the entrepreneurial field. This proved to be true both for single habitual entrepreneurs and for family entrepreneurs who had begun their career in the established family firm.

Compared to an entrepreneur developing his first venture, the habitual entrepreneur may certainly count on the backing of personal experience which helps him to tackle the critical moments connected with the creation of a new business with greater effectiveness. But the interviews also revealed that the family entrepreneur matures with the awareness that he will one day be directly involved in the family business and responsible for its continuity.

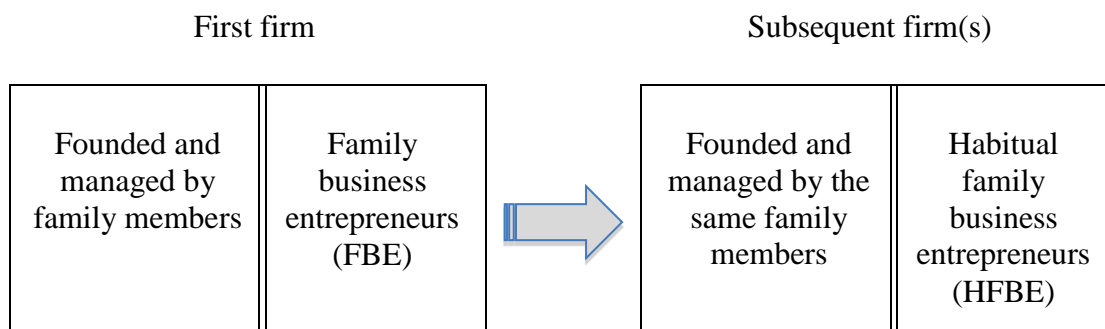
The research carried out brought to light a variety of manifestations of the phenomenon of habitual entrepreneurship within the family business, albeit originating in different ways. It also underlined the fact that the various forms of multi-firm family may evolve with time, developing a new physiognomy according to whether new family members are involved. Such changes occur exclusively as a result of the behaviour of entrepreneurs starting a new initiative and their decision to continue alone or to involve other operators, which may frequently be selected from within the family.

According to the succession of events, three different processes may be identified.

The first case considered (Fig. 1) occurs in the presence of an established family business when the family members already working in the first company decide to create another firm, constituting themselves the founders of the initiative. This process can be represented graphically as follows:

FIGURE 1

Development Process from Family Business to Habitual Family Business

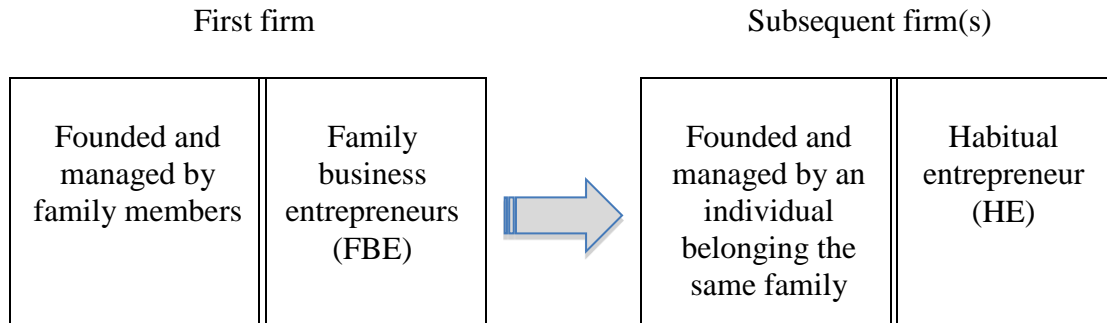


Before the existence of the multi-firm reality, the family business is already consolidated; from this business further initiatives may subsequently develop, in which members of the same family, who have already acquired some experience in the original firm, may be involved.

The second case, also starting from the well-established family firm, occurs when a single member decides to start up a subsequent business operating autonomously.

FIGURE 2

Development Process from Family Business to Habitual Entrepreneur

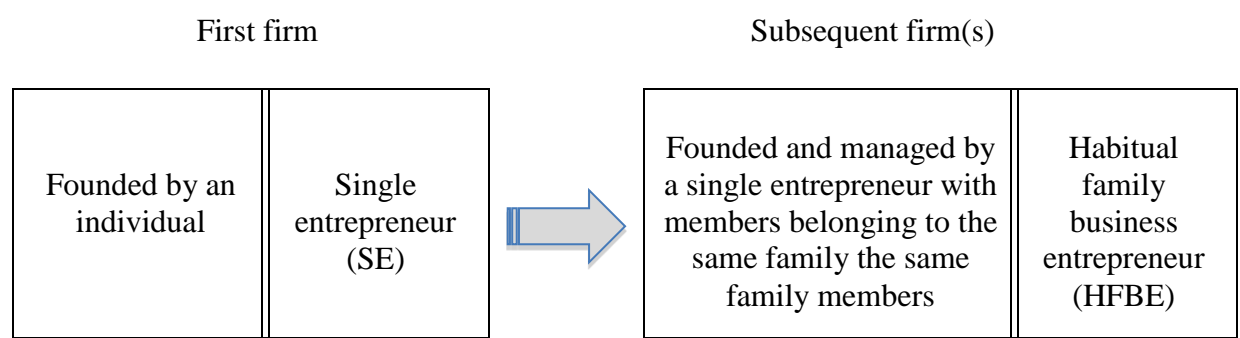


The entrepreneur in this case began his career founding or inheriting a firm with other family members; after this early experience he feels the need to experiment by embarking on a subsequent activity, either exiting from or maintaining his position in the previous firm. In this process the single family member becomes a habitual entrepreneur, although he is still partially operating within a family context.

The third case is based on different assumptions. The company was founded and is run by a person working with others selected outside his family environment. However, when he decides to develop a new business idea, he involves one or more elements of the family. He thus becomes a habitual entrepreneur, but also starts to operate, with the second company, in the field of family business.

FIGURE 3

Development Process from Single Entrepreneur to Family Business



In the last case defined, the original firm is characterized by an individualistic behavior, the entrepreneur later moving towards a habitual behavior when he decides to found the subsequent firm involving members of his family not operating in the first initiative. This process occurs when a mother/father, operating as a single entrepreneur, is ready to create a new venture together with his offspring, thus creating a family business including both habitual and first-time entrepreneurs.

7. Conclusions

Research on the family business has up to now been focused largely on an analysis of the interactions and relationships among family members and their behavior, while those who study the habitual entrepreneur concentrate on a single operator, his relationship with the surrounding environment, his motivation and ability to create a group of firms.

The findings of this research have shown that a family business may give birth to processes of reiteration through the initiative of its family members. As a result, the features at the root of the behavior of a family member creating a new venture are similar to those characterizing the single habitual entrepreneur.

Our research led to the identification of three processes: that of a family business which reiterates through the initiative of at least two family members to found a subsequent business; a family business which gives birth to a subsequent initiative through a single family member assuming the behavior of a habitual entrepreneur; a single entrepreneur who, having established his first business, involves members of his family in his further ventures.

These results give rise to some important implications, and we argue that the field needs more qualitative and quantitative research to better understand the phenomena investigated. In the first place, it is seen that the evolution of a family business takes place through the initiative of one or more members operating according to the model of the habitual entrepreneur. This is true both of those initiatives born within a family business (FB) and moving towards a habitual family business (HFB) and in the opposite case, that of a single entrepreneur (SE) developing into a family business (FB). In both cases, what triggers the processes of overlapping between the two phenomena is a habitual mindset and behavior.

The second implication regards the motivation leading an entrepreneur to recruit human resources from within his family rather than outside it, which could be a simple need to delegate some activities or to obtain financial support. The second- and third- generation entrepreneurs interviewed in our survey, however, all expressed to a strong desire to repeat with their own offspring the behavior of their mothers/fathers in involving them in the family business and creating continuity. Although this aim appears to be closely linked to the concept of family business, it is interesting to note a similar tendency also in the single habitual entrepreneur who, in this context, is often not indifferent to the prospects of future development of his own initiatives involving the next generation.

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