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Stepchildren or prodigal employees? Motives and consequences of employee entrepreneurship in family business

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Abstract

How do factors that are specific of family firms (such as the cross-generational logic) influence, and are influenced by, the phenomenon of employee entrepreneurship? Despite a burgeoning stream on nonfamily members in family firms, the relationship between familiness and employee entrepreneurship has been overlooked that far. This study addresses this gap and explores how familiness co-evolves with employee entrepreneurship in an exemplary longitudinal case involving two enterprises: a family firm founded by an ex-employee spanning 20 years and two generations, and its originating enterprise, a family firm (itself stemming from employee entrepreneurship, as well) spanning 150 years and five generations. The in-depth analysis of this case, based on thick source triangulation and mixed top-down and bottom-up coding, allows us to inductively propose a model of the key attributes of familiness that are relevant to the phenomenon of employee entrepreneurship, and their consequences. The proposed model highlights previously hidden aspects and consequences of familiness, including the perceived role of ex-employees as "prodigal stepchildren", the cross-generational mirroring effect between the generating firm and the spawn, and the possible role of the new ventures stemming from employee entrepreneurship as sources of inter-generational spill-in processes.

Keywords Employee entrepreneurship · Entrepreneurial spawning · Entrepreneurial origins · Family business · Familiness · Knowledge spillover · Knowledge spill-in

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Introduction

Entrepreneurs can have several origins. For example, people can enter the entrepreneurship path as students, just-graduated youngsters, unemployed, academics, spin-off project teams, serial entrepreneurs, children of entrepreneurial families. The possible paths from all of these diverse origins to (successful) entrepreneurship are being widely studied by the entrepreneurship literature (Agarwal & Shah, 2014).

However, most ventures do not stem from any of the origins listed above. Most entrepreneurs are ex-employees: people who were previously employed in another organization and resigned to found their own venture, typically in the same sector, and often as direct competitors of their former employer (Elfenbein, Hamilton, & Zenger, 2010).

This phenomenon, labeled as employee entrepreneurship (Campbell, Ganco, Franco, & Agarwal, 2012; Campbell, Kryscynski, & Olson, 2017), has been investigated especially by the strategic management literature, which views employee entrepreneurship as a relevant phenomenon negatively affecting the employer firm's competitive advantage (Agarwal, Gambardella, & Olson, 2016). This research stream is providing interesting knowledge on the factors at the level of the originating company that influence the phenomenon of employee entrepreneurship. For example, there is evidence that strongly embedded organizations, with a thick network of social ties (for example, due to industrial district relationships or open innovation strategies) are more prone to employee entrepreneurship, probably due to the higher range of inputs and opportunities offered to employees (Agarwal, Audretsch, & Sarkar, 2007; Byun, Raffiee, & Ganco, 2019; Mai & Zheng, 2013). There is also evidence of the so-called "small firm effect": in small enterprises, employees are much more likely to develop the motivation and capabilities to found their own business than in middle and large enterprises, probably due to factors such as lower wages, lower career opportunities, and higher knowledge spillover (Gast, Werner, & Kraus, 2017).

Also the research stream on entrepreneurial spawning investigates employee entrepreneurship, studying the factors that encourage spawning and influence the spawn's success (Andersson, Baltzopoulos, & Lööf, 2012).

Despite these valuable findings, the range of possible causes and dynamics of employee entrepreneurship is far from being fully understood (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2018). There are other firm- and individual-level factors that may prove key to employee entrepreneurship, but have been completely overlooked that far. One of these factors is the possible familiness (Frank, Lueger, Nosé, & Suchy, 2010) of the originating firm, that is, the employer firm being a family business with specific characteristics due to the family-firm interaction.

How do factors that are specific of family firms (such as the cross-generational logic) influence the phenomenon of employee entrepreneurship? This question is particularly interesting because family firms are often small and strongly embedded organizations, as well: two characteristics that, as said above, also increase the likelihood of employee entrepreneurship. As a consequence, the familiness factors may provide interesting rival or integrative explanations to the correlations that the literature reports between firm size and firm embeddedness, on the one size, and employee entrepreneurship, on the other side.

To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has addressed the relationship between familiness and employee entrepreneurship, despite a burgeoning stream on nonfamily members in family firms (Chrisman, Memili, & Misra, 2014; Sonfield & Lussier, 2009; Tabor, Chrisman, Madison, & Vardaman, 2018). Family business studies typically focus on the influence of idiosyncratic family-firm systems on firm competitive advantage, firm survival, and family's socioemotional wealth, and have so far overlooked the possible role of family firms as (inadvertent) incubators of nonfamily employees' entrepreneurial initiatives (Xi, Kraus, Filser, & Kellermanns, 2013). Therefore, in order to open up this new and promising research line, it is necessary to go back to the field and investigate whether the aspects of familiness that have already been identified as key by the literature are sufficient to understand the dynamics of employee entrepreneurship in family firms, or new insights and possible models emerge.

This study takes on this challenge and explores how familiness co-evolves with employee entrepreneurship in an exemplary longitudinal case involving two enterprises: a family firm founded by an ex-employee spanning 20 years and two generations, and its originating enterprise, a family firm (itself stemming from employee entrepreneurship, as well) spanning 150 years and five generations. The case is leveraged to inductively address two specific research questions: (a) what are the familiness and familiness-related factors influencing employee entrepreneurship, and (b) how the originating firm's owning family interprets employee entrepreneurship, once it has occurred, and responds to it.

The in-depth analysis of this case, based on thick source triangulation and mixed top-down and bottom-up coding, allows us to inductively propose a model of the key attributes of familiness that are relevant to the phenomenon of employee entrepreneurship, and their consequences. The proposed model highlights previously hidden aspects and consequences of familiness, including the perceived role of ex-employees as "prodigal stepchildren", the cross-generational mirroring effect between the generating firm and the spawn, and the possible role of the new ventures stemming from employee entrepreneurship as sources of inter-generational spill-in processes (Kim & Steensma, 2017; Yang & Steensma, 2014).

The proposed model contributes to a theory of employee entrepreneurship in family firms through a system of operationalizable constructs linked by cause-effect relationships that are consistent with recent theories on knowledge spillover, socioemotional wealth, and the role of familiness in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Cavallo, Ghezzi, & Balocco, 2019; Ferreira, Ratten, & Dana, 2017). The model supports further investigation on the long-term causes and consequences of employee entrepreneurship both in the originating firm and in the new venture.

Background

Familiness

Today, the literature converges (Chrisman, Sharma, & Taggar, 2007) in broadly defining a family business as a firm whose evolution is significantly influenced by the family to which the (main) owner(s) belong (Chua, Chrisman, & Sharma, 1999; Jaskiewicz, Block, Combs, & Miller, 2017; Jaskiewicz & Dyer, 2017). Family business studies developed the familiness construct to synthesize what differentiates family firms from non-family firms, and to conceptualize the family-enterprise interaction in a rigorous and effective way, which helps us understand the specific success factors of family business (Astrachan, 2010; Xi et al., 2013). Familiness has been studied from different theoretical standpoints, thus highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of the construct (Chrisman et al., 2010).

A first interesting theoretical alternative that has been explored by family business scholars consists in conceptualizing familiness simply as the degree of active involvement of family members in the firm's ownership, governance, and management (Chrisman et al., 2018). This view of familiness as a "component of involvement" (Chrisman, Chua, & Sharma, 2005) allows scholars to leverage agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) and to predict that if the owning family's involvement in governance and management is high, then the principal-agent problem is likely to be mitigated because family ties (Gomez-Mejia, Larraza-Kintana, Moyano-Fuentes, & Firfiray, 2018) will enhance spontaneous alignment between owners and key managers, thus lowering agency costs, opportunism, and moral hazard (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006). On the other hand, it is also important that the values, norms, and relational mechanisms of the family firm hinder unworthy (e.g., incompetent) family members from taking the lead (Memili, Eddleston, Kellermanns, Zellweger, & Barnett, 2010).

Dissatisfaction with agency theory led some scholars to focus on another dimension of familiness that is likely to better capture the complex social mechanisms underpinning the family's contribution to the firm. According to this stream, the familiness construct should first of all capture whether and how a strong trans-generational vision drives family involvement in the business (Chrisman et al., 2005). Scholars focusing on this dimension of familiness, often labelled as the "component of essence" of familiness (Zellweger et al., 2010), mainly leverage the behavioural agency theory and the stewardship theory.

The behavioural agency theory (Pepper & Gore, 2015) explains executives' choices and behaviours based on factors such as work motivations and different combinations of aversion to loss, risk, and inequity. In this vein, behavioural agency scholars have identified socio-emotional wealth (SEW) as a key motivation of family members involved in the family business (Berrone, Cruz, & Gómez-Mejía, 2012). According to this approach, SEW-driven family members typically view the family's control on business mainly as a means to ensure a set of advantages across generations. These cross-generational advantages include the possibility to exercise authority, satisfy needs for belonging and identification, perpetuate family values, fulfil family obligations, enhance family prestige and social capital, maintain family unity and harmony, enable family members' entrepreneurial initiatives and/or meet the family's needs for employment and financial stability throughout time (Daspit, Holt, Chrisman, & Long, 2016; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006). In this light, the importance attached to SEW (Debicki, Kellermanns, Chrisman, Pearson, & Spencer, 2016) on the part of active family members can be considered a key dimension of familiness (Gómez-Mejía, Takács Haynes, Núñez-Nickel, & Jacobson, 2007). This view supports the idea that long-term firm survival and people's satisfaction, rather than competitive advantage, are the key expected outcomes of familiness (Vrontis, Bresciani, & Giacosa, 2016). However, the SEW lens also results in paradoxical predictions. On the one side, the pursuit of SEW is likely to push family members engaged in governance and management towards attitudes and behaviours (such as honourability, pride, prudence, commitment, generous investment) that tend to enhance firm reliability, reputation, and long-term survival (Stockmans, Lybaert, & Voordeckers, 2010). On the other side, however, the importance attached to SEW also explains why the controlling family may consider maintaining family control as the top priority, even at the cost of jeopardizing firm survival (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Stewardship theory (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997) enables views of the complex nature of familiness (Chrisman et al., 2010) that are highly compatible with the SEW literature. In the light of the stewardship theory, a trans-generational vision in family business encourages involved family members' collegiality, mutual trust, reciprocal devotion, and spontaneous commitment to the common good (Arzubiaga, Kotlar, De Massis, Maseda, & Iturralde, 2018; Dhaenens, Marler, Vardaman, & Chrisman, 2018; Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007; Garcia et al., 2019; Schulze, Lubatkin, & Dino, 2003).

From the institutional theory standpoint, familiness provides the family firm with social embeddedness. For example, if the family firm pursues long-term consistency between the firm's value proposition and the family's values, reputation, and social role, then the organization is provided with an inimitable identity (Basco, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2012; Vallejo, 2008; Zellweger et al., 2012; Zellweger et al., 2010). The family may also provide the firm with long-term, cross-generational links with political or government counterparts and/or social movements that are legitimated and relevant to the ongoing evolution of the organizational field (Basco, 2015; de Bakker et al., 2013; Reay and Jaskiewicz, 2015).

Family business, entrepreneurship, and non-family employees

The links between entrepreneurship and the family business phenomenon have been quite under-investigated for a long time (Hall, Melin, & Nordqvist, 2001; Nordqvist & Melin, 2010). On the one side, entrepreneurship scholars have long overlooked the role of entrepreneurial families (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003); on the other side, family business scholars have traditionally focused on different issues from entrepreneurship, such as succession, governance, or performance (Habbershon, Williams, & MacMillan, 2003). The last two decades, however, have witnessed a growing interest in the nexus between entrepreneurship and family business (Casillas, Moreno, & Barbero, 2011). In particular, entrepreneurship has been considered a relevant factor for family businesses to attain their vitality, growth and profitability, along with their sustainability and renewal, and it impacts on the global and local development (Arzubiaga et al., 2018; Casillas, Moreno, & Barbero, 2010; Le Breton-Miller, Miller, & Bares, 2015; Memili et al., 2010; Webb, Ketchen, & Ireland, 2010; Xi et al., 2013).

Researchers focused on different phenomena which characterize the link between family firms and entrepreneurship (Randerson, Bettinelli, Fayolle, & Anderson, 2015): the first one is represented by the entrepreneurial family, as the family values could both direct and restrict entrepreneurial activities and processes; the second one is the entrepreneurial family business, as the family businesses could favour or constrain innovation and initiative (Casillas et al., 2011; Garcés-Galdeano, Larraza-Kintana, García-Olaverri, & Makri, 2016; Hayton, Chandler, & DeTienne, 2011; Hernández-Perlines, Moreno-García, & Yáñez-Araque, 2019; Jaskiewicz, Combs, & Rau, 2015; Weismeier-Sammer, 2011).

The family business is typically linked to the role of the founder generation and the family in terms of its identity, structure and cohesion along with its cultural vision (Craig, Dibrell, Garrett, & Moores, 2014). Within this context, the founder generation is generally more involved in exploration activities for finding new opportunities, while later family members generation tend to exploit for satisfying the family members needs and maintaining the grow of the firm (Miller, Le Breton-Miller, & Lester, 2011).

In a family business context, the culture and value of the owning family impact on all the key aspects of organizational behaviour (Vallejo, 2008). The organizational commitment represents a psychological link between an employee and its company that decreases the probability of leaving the company (Neckebrouck, Schulze, & Zellweger, 2018). The degree of employee loyalty also depends on the level of entrepreneurship, which may generate new opportunities also for employees, sustaining employment relationships and mutual responsibilities. On the contrary, when a company adopts a conservative approach and become resistant to change, opportunities for (non-family) employees may decrease. In addition, some founders remain into the role for long time, paying little attention to enhancing the employees' attitudes in the management of the company. This Is one of the reasons why the literature is dedicating increasing attention to non-family employees and managers in family firms (Tabor et al., 2018). Sometimes, founders favor family members and they don't integrate and retain competent non-family employees. In addition, the very sense of strong psychological ownership (Pieper, 2010) that family members are likely to co-develop toward the firm may paradoxically reduce family members' capabilities to accept innovation and change processes coming from outside the family circle, even if these innovations may have a very positive potential impact.

Method

A qualitative research approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011) is well-suited to this research, since it explores issues that have been overlooked that far and aims to inductively develop a new model (Pettigrew, 1990).

This study addresses the research questions by investigating a case of employee entrepreneurship in a family firm that is today at its fifth generation. We will call the originating firm with the fictitious name "ORIG", whilst the firm resulting from the employee entrepreneurship initiative will be given the fictitious name "SPAWN".

SPAWN can be viewed as a hostile employee entrepreneurship initiative, since this new company was founded in the very same territory, hired away several key employees from ORIG, and proposed the same products (traditional sweets) to the same customers, at a lower price. SPAWN was also a family firm (that failed at its second generation) and ORIG had also stemmed from an employee entrepreneurship initiative. Both ORIG and SPAWN are rooted in a territory, the Italian Langhe region in Piedmont, with a strong tradition of prestigious families leading firms in its thriving food and wine sector. Therefore, the case under analysis can be considered to be highly representative (Yin, 2013) of a wide range of the most significant dynamics that affect family firms facing employee entrepreneurship.

The data collection on this case took place from 2014 to 2017. During this period, intense secondary data collection was conducted by leveraging the archives of local newspapers (Gazzetta d'Alba) and archive documents, especially by local industrial associations and initiatives (Archivio Storico del Comune di Alba) in order to gain in-depth longitudinal understanding of the social role and prestige of the Langhe family businesses in the confectionary industry and, more generally, in the food and wine sectors. The analysis of this material confirms that the ORIG-SPAWN case is particularly interesting to explore the dynamics of employee entrepreneurship in family businesses.

The case was further investigated based on 19 semi-structured interviews (approximately 60 min each). The interviewees were: the ORIG CEO (fifth generation) (five interviews), ORIG President (fourth generation) (four interviews), ORIG brand manager (three interviews), a local Slow Food activist (two interviews), two ORIG/SPAWN ex-employees (two interviews each), and one ORIG non-family employee (one interview).

Since the employee entrepreneurship initiative was launched in the 1970s, some key informants are now dead or not available for interviewing; however, the set of interviewees can represent the entire range of key standpoints.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Through group work and discussion, we selected the most interesting and relevant contents from secondary data collection (web pages and newspaper articles) and transcribed these contents with a word processor to build a homogeneous archive for the analysis. The resulting archive of the contents that were deemed to be relevant to this study includes approximately 250 pages.

These selected contents were analyzed using the Atlas.ti software and seven codes that stem from the research questions and the relevant literature: (a) familiness - involvement logics; (b) familiness - cross-generational logics; (c) familiness - stewarship logics; (d) familiness - embeddedness logics; (e) familiness - other aspects; (f) factors influencing employee entrepreneurship; (g) views on employee entrepreneurship; (h) consequences of employee entrepreneurship. Finally, we coded for (i) key decisions and/or events, and all of the coded parts were further coded for the relevant year or period to facilitate the longitudinal analysis of this case. Based on this structure of first-level coding, we allowed further codes emerge from the analysis, especially for second-level coding.

The empirical data were then leveraged to address the research questions and to inductively build a model of the key attributes of familiness that are relevant to the phenomenon of employee entrepreneurship, and their consequences. The results (and particularly Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) were discussed with the ORIG interviewees to make sure that the researchers' interpretations are not based on misunderstandings of the empirical case.

Findings

Case presentation

ORIG is a typical family firm. The company's history has been closely tied to the Orig family, who have been owners for five generations. The company produces nougat and chocolate in the Piedmont Langhe's region of Italy. The founder started the company in the 1885, after learning how to produce nougat as a worker at an artisanal producer's

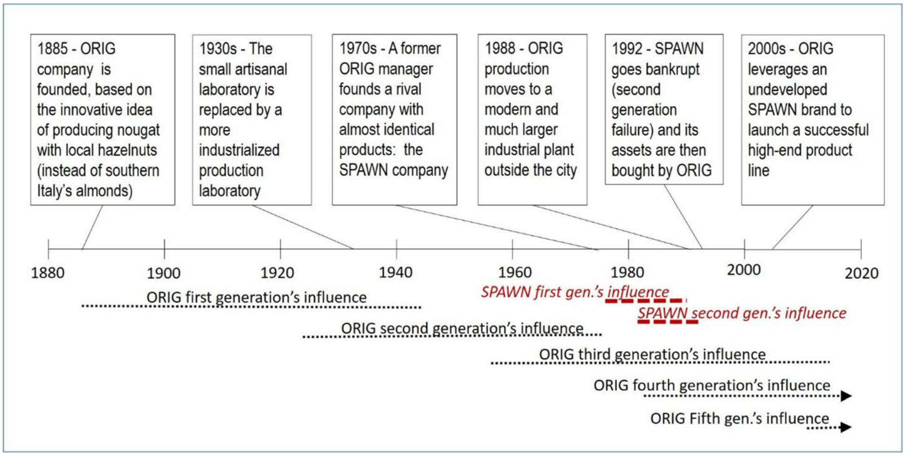

Fig. 1 The ORIG-SPAWN case: timeline

laboratory. The second generation replaced the small artisanal laboratory with a more industrial facility, which permitted an increase in production in the 1930s. The third generation took over in the 1950s. The following decades brought success and prosperity to the firm. In the 1970s, a close collaborator left the company and founded a rival family firm, SPAWN, with almost identical products but lower prices. Some ORIG employees with key know-how followed him (including the senior mechanic who designed the production lines). In 1988, ORIG decided to move to a modern and much larger industrial plant outside the city.

In the meantime, the SPAWN company's founder died. His two sons tried to take on the business, but the company ended up in bankruptcy. The Orig family acquired the company from the Court. Part of SPAWN staff accepted to work for ORIG, including one of the sons of the late SPAWN founder.

In the 2000s, ORIG fourth generation decided to develop a neglected SPAWN brand for a new high-end product line.

The Orig family continues to run the daily operations of the company, involving the young fifth generation, which includes a son and a daughter. The son, who joined the

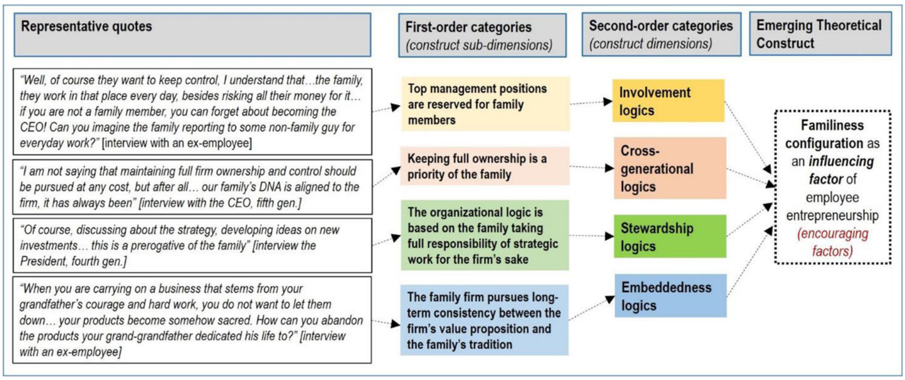

Fig. 2 Familiness dimensions emerging as factors that encourage employee entrepreneurship

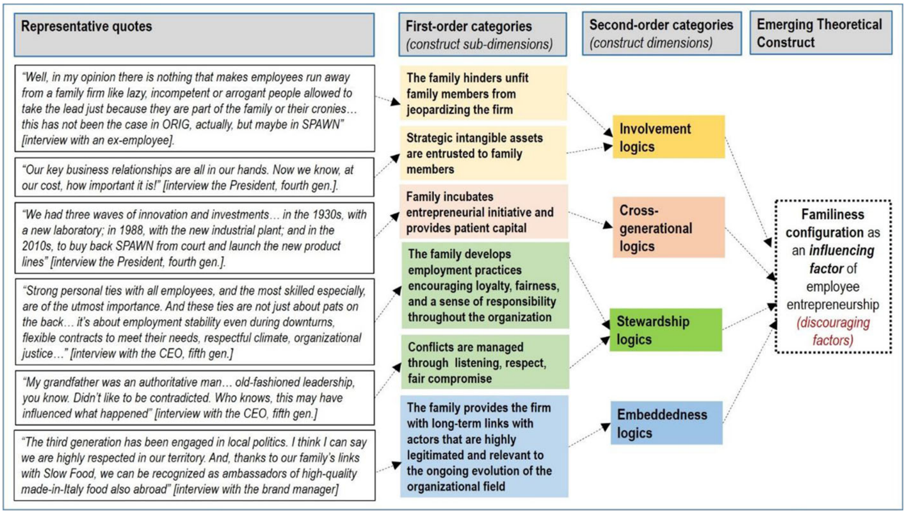

Fig. 3 Familiness dimensions emerging as factors that discourage employee entrepreneurship

company in 2014, is the current CEO of the company and responsible for the product quality. His sister and mother are members of the board of directors.

Figure 1 synthesizes the history of the ORIG-SPAWN case over the generations.

Today, the company can be considered as a successful and healthy family firm, whose products are well-known and appreciated by customers all around the world. Today, the workforce comprises 46 employees, plus a dozen seasonal workers to cover the busier periods. The product distribution for the €15 million turnover is approximately half for the nougat and half for chocolate and sweet truffles, whose market is expanding, especially internationally.

Familiness factors influencing employee entrepreneurship

The sources involved in this empirical study support the idea that several factors that the literature identifies as dimensions of familiness do influence employee entrepreneurship.

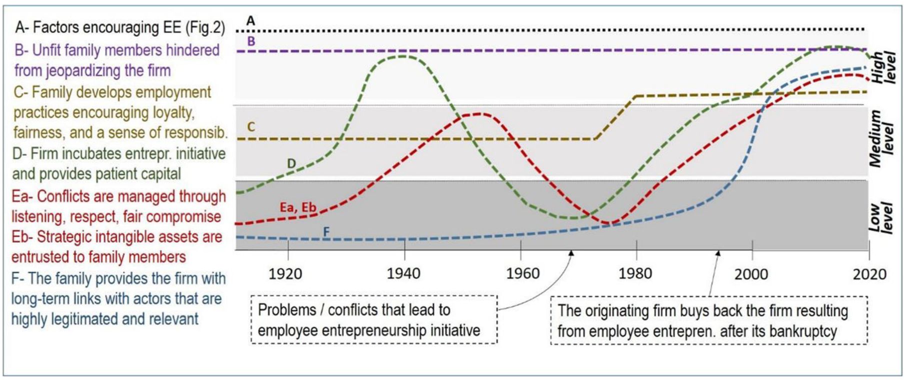

Fig. 4 Longitudinal evolution of the originating firm's familiness factors influencing employee entrepreneurship (EE) (qualitative estimates, approved by the interviewees)

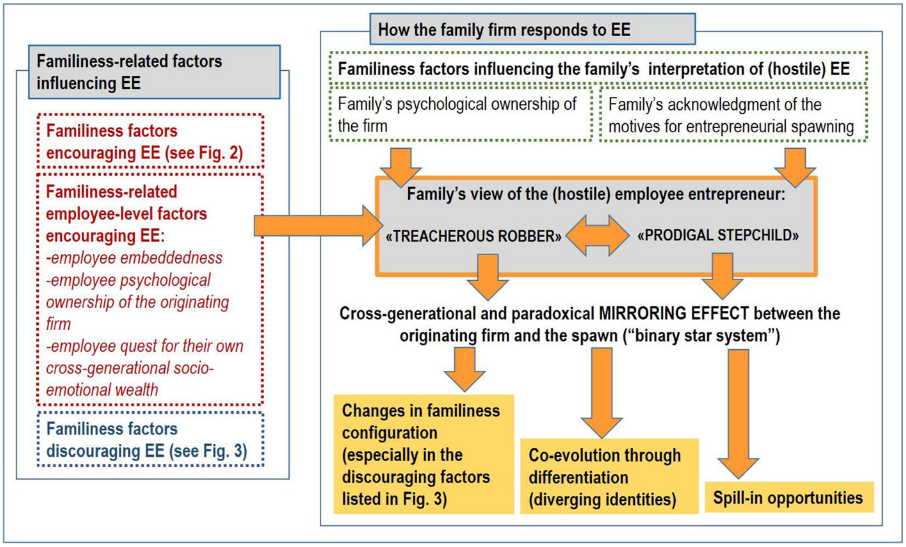

Fig. 5 The emerging model of employee entrepreneurship (EE) in family firms

The coding process led us to classify these factors based on two criteria: firm-level / individual level factors, and factors encouraging / discouraging employee entrepreneurship.

The firm-level factors include those aspects that can be easily associated to familiness dimensions. We classified these factors, consistently with the literature, into four dimensions of familiness: involvement logics, cross-generational logics, stewardship logics, and embeddedness logics.

The firm-level factors that emerge from our analysis as encouraging employee entrepreneurship are synthesized in Fig. 2. According to our sources, two of these factors are of particular importance to encouraging employee entrepreneurship: the degree to which top management positions (such as the CEO) are exclusively reserved to family members, and the extent to which the family considers maintaining full ownership as an absolute must. These two conditions, in fact, may create a glass ceiling that the most ambitious non-family employees may consider hard to accept.

However, other firm-level factors emerge from our analysis as discouraging employee entrepreneurship. These factors are synthesized in Fig. 3. According to our sources, these factors that the literature identifies as further aspects of familiness may create the conditions for employees renouncing (or not even developing) the idea of founding their own business. The influence of these factors can be explained as follows: family-driven organizational justice, barriers to entry and innovation make remaining in the firm more appreciated, and engaging in employee entrepreneurship less feasible.

The familiness dimensions identified as relevant to employee entrepreneurship in Figs. 2 and 3 have developed in a very interesting way throughout time in the case under analysis. Whilst the factors encouraging employee entrepreneurship have remained substantially unchanged in the last century (see Black dotted line "A" in Fig. 4), the discouraging factors have significantly changed: they were quite low before the employee entrepreneurship initiative, and have significantly increased since then, in the years in which ORIG successfully addressed the crisis resulting from the hostile founding of SPAWN (see Fig. 4, lines B, C, D, E and F).

These changes consistently emerge from source triangulation and have been confirmed by the interviewees, with which we discussed our results. For example, ORIG's CEO said: "Especially from the 4th generation, every suggestion from the employees has been taken into consideration. We constantly urge a participative attitude of employees, as the product quality is of the utmost importance to us!, both nougats and sweet truffles are characterized by handcrafted processes". In another interview, he said: "Our company (like Ferrero and the important wineries of our territory) contributes to the diffusion of Langhe's high-quality made-in-Italy food around the world, thanks to its export. Once upon a time the Langhe was only known for its Barolo and traditional truffle, but now consumers know about our hazelnuts and chocolate production as well. Our family's long-standing collaboration with Eataly and Slow Food is so relevant to differentiate us from so many competitors... We believe in the great potential of our lands, the Langhe, whose ideal climate and richness of the lands permit a high-quality food production".

The sense of organizational justice, responsibility and mutual understanding is nurtured through processes that involve family and non-family members alike: "Family members have been educated and trained with craftsmen since we were children… in living business life and in sharing company's values, improving and protecting the goal of long-term vision … I grew up in the company, I know each employee and their families personally… expert employees see that young family members spend years in the laboratory, rubbing shoulders with artisans, questioning, observing, learning during all their childhood" [interview with the President].

Then, the firm provides family members with jobs, but only to those children who have worked in the firm since their teenage years, starting by paying their dues and showing they are fit. "Since secondary school, I have worked in the firm as a labourer with the other labourers every summer" (Fourth generation member, 1999 interview in a local newspaper). Not only does family members' engagement in the firm start precociously, it also goes on far beyond retirement age. "My great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, and grandfather remained involved in the company until their death: it means that their influence has continued as long as they lived and permits the following generations to understand their role and to learn how to dress it up" (interview with the CEO). Being a family member is not a sufficient condition to become a top manager in ORIG, because even non-family members today admit that family members deserve these positions for their merits and engagement. For example, equal possibilities are given to male and female family members.

The family firm's engagement with non-profit associations started during the third generation and has continued since then. Also, the firm's engagement with territorial institutions has been important for generations: the third generation's firm owner was the president of Banca d'Alba (the main territorial bank), the fourth generation's firm owner was engaged with the main national industrial association, and one of the fifth generation children is engaged with the regional association of young entrepreneurs, as a member of the board of directors. "This role was a sign of engagement in the public life outside the company" (Fifth generation member). In other words, "there has been a relevant switch between the third and the fourth generation. The fourth generation has been the first to engage in non-profit associations in order to bring benefits for the company: meetings with other entrepreneurs, training courses…" (Fifth generation member).

As for the emotional, relational, ethical, and cognitive environment that the family firm is capable of providing, very high levels have been present in the case under study since the second generation, when the entrepreneurial firm became a real family firm. “Company, as a workplace, constitutes a family, as well” (interview with an ex-employee). For example, the firm allows some employees free time (typically on Fridays) to carry on with their own nougat crops: “We like to have employees with their farm: they are experts of vintage trends, hazelnut quality, price trends, ways of cultivation, and they know how to evaluate the nuts quality we buy just with a look” (Fifth generation member). A strong relationship between the employees and the family emerged: “I grew up in the company, I know each employee and their families personally” (Fifth generation member). “We are also friends with each other, and this means a good working atmosphere, which also impacts on one’s involvement in the company” (non-family employee). The sources converge in highlighting that the owning family is highly respected in the territory and in the sector, and this has a significantly positive impact on the firm’s legitimation. Indeed, the family pursues prestige and respect from its business activities and enjoys the family’s good reputation and recognized identity in its context.

Besides firm-level familiness factors influencing employee entrepreneurship, we also identified individual-level familiness-related factors that also encourage employee entrepreneurship.

The first individual-level factor is employee embeddedness, which provides the employee with the intangible resources (knowledge, capabilities, and relationships) that enable the spawning process. As the CEO said in an interview, “[the founder of SPAWN] was one of my grandfather’s closest collaborators, he was considered as one of the family and then learned everything about our business. We were really hurt by his decision”.

The second individual-level factor emerging as relevant to employee entrepreneurship is the employee’s psychological ownership of the originating firm. If a non-family member feels key to the company but knows that ownership and top management positions are reserved for family members, this may be a powerful trigger of the employee’s entrepreneurial intention. “[The founder of SPAWN] used to play a pivotal role in our company due to his competences in operations. He had great command and sometimes he posed as an owner. Also employees recognized his role, in fact someone followed him” (MRS).

The third individual-level factor emerging as relevant to employee entrepreneurship is the employee quest for their own cross-generational socio-emotional wealth. A brilliant, self confident employee may develop the desire to provide his or her children with the same opportunities of the owning family’s children. *“I can understand him [the founder of SPAWN]. He had two sons, he believed in them. Probably, ORIG could not offer these boys the same opportunities that their father thought could provide them with by founding their own company”* (interview with an ex-employee).

How the family firm interprets and responds to employee entrepreneurship

The employee entrepreneurship initiative resulted in a heated emotional impact on the Orig family. Two familiness-driven and somehow contradictory interpretations of the role of the SPAWN founder emerge from the empirical analysis.

On the one side, the event was considered as frankly outrageous. The Orig family was one of the most respected industrial families of the Langhe region, and the decision of the ex-employee was perceived as a personal insult to all family members and to the family as a local institution. *"My grandfather was incredibly angry, and remained angry for all his life. He used to call him [the SPAWN founder] a robber, a traitor, a treacherous opportunist"* (interview with the CEO). This interpretation is strongly fueled by the family's psychological ownership of the firm.

On the other side, another view of the event also emerged, and became stronger since the fourth generation took the lead. *"A good employee who goes away and founds his own company... it is very frequent, you know. The right arm of the owner, he knew how to produce nougat and, when he left, he took our know-how away. We were not happy with this, of course… but on the other side, we did the same a century before! Our founder, five generations ago, worked in an artisanal laboratory where he learned the craft, and then went away and founded his own business when he was in his early twenties"* (interview with the CEO).

One of the ex-employees we interviewed mentioned the parable of the prodigal son, from the gospel, to explain this somehow surprising understanding on the part of the Orig family. *"Yes, there is wounded pride. Yes, there is thirst for revenge. Yes, there is the let-us-show-everybody-that-turning-on us-is-not-a-good-idea. But on the other hand, that man was almost a member of the family… a stepchild, let us say. And when a child slams the door, the family usually knows why. And somewhere in their hearts, they hope that the prodigal children come back one day. And in the end, they [the Orig family] did right like in the parable: they took back almost all of the people who had left them, including one of the spawn founder's sons".*

In other words, after the foundation of SPAWN, a sort of invisible thread remained, linking the originating and the new family firm. First of all, the trauma resulted in radical changes in the originating firm's familiness configuration as Fig. 4 clearly shows. Second, the two firms started building their respective business models and organizational identities by keeping the other firm into account and making choices in order to differentiate from one another. *"We continuously observed their [SPAWN's] strategy and tried to avoid their mistakes in terms of low prices and quality. Lose the customers for the price, and they will come back. Lose them for low quality, and they will never come back"* (interview with the President). As a consequence, even if the spawn originally was a sort of carbon copy of the originating firm, the two companies started diverging. A third important consequence of the invisible entanglement between the originating firm and the spawn is the emergence of opportunities for resource spill-in. Not only did the family firm prove capable of resisting the strong price competition launched by the newborn competitor; in the end, the family firm was even capable of re-absorbing the competing company's best assets and high-potential ideas and innovation. In fact, after the acquisition of the competitor, the family leveraged a neglected brand to develop a high-end product line that was much more suited to the emerging market trends than the traditional family firm brand.

Discussion and conclusions

The ORIG-SPAWN case analyzed above yields a rich set of interesting and consistent results that confirm the high intensity of the case and its suitability as a basis for inductive generalization (Woodside, 2010). Overall, the results suggest that familiness plays a significant role in employee entrepreneurship, and vice versa. We investigated the interplay between familiness and employee entrepreneurship with two main goals: (a) understanding the familiness and familiness-related factors influencing employee entrepreneurship, and (b) understanding how the originating firm's owning family interprets employee entrepreneurship, once it has occurred, and responds to it (Fig. 5).

Our analysis suggests that many factors the literature has identified as components of familiness do influence employee entrepreneurship. Two sets of relevant familiness components can be identified: factors encouraging employee entrepreneurship (listed in Fig. 2) and factors discouraging employee entrepreneurship (listed in Fig. 3).

The familiness factors influencing employee entrepreneurship listed in Figs. 2 and 3 are measured at the level of the family-firm system, consistently with the literature on familiness. However, our results suggest that other familiness-related factors exist, at the employee level, that also encourage the phenomenon of that employee founding their own firm (if combined with firm-level factors): employee embeddedness, employee psychological ownership of the originating firm, and employee quest for their own cross-generational socio-emotional wealth (Fig. 5, left).

Therefore, we suggest that familiness and familiness-related factors may usefully complement the set of antecedents of employee entrepreneurship that have already been identified by the literature, such as the small firm effect (Gast et al., 2017).

Besides, our analysis suggests that familiness and familiness-related factors also influence the way in which the originating firm's owning family interprets employee entrepreneurship, once it has occurred, and responds to it (Fig. 5, right). The ORIG-SPAWN is a case of hostile employee entrepreneurship, that is, a case in which the ex-employee founds a firm that is a direct competitor of the originating firm and hires people away from it. Thus, this case shows how a family firm can successfully respond to the most challenging and extreme type of employee entrepreneurship. The "high intensity" of the phenomenon allows us to recognize that the owning family of the originating firm attaches a vivid emotional meaning to the spawning process, and the elaboration of such emotions is a cross-generational process that significantly affects business decisions in the short, middle and long term.

When an employee leaves a family firm and founds their own (hostile) firm, the family responds by, first of all, elaborating a relational interpretation of what happened. We suggest that such interpretation is based on a new mental image of the ex-employee, spanning from "treacherous robber" to "prodigal employee". These two interpretations, although logically contradictory with each other, can even coexist or oscillate, like in the case under analysis. Therefore, building upon the literature on organizational paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011), we suggest that employee entrepreneurship may trigger a paradoxical tension between these two interpretations: on the one side, the ex-employee is perceived as a traitor and the relation with the spawn is shaped by feelings of indignation and revenge; on the other side, the ex-employee is viewed as a sort of prodigal stepchild, who has been ungrateful and should pay for that, but maybe will repent and, one day, may be given a second chance.

Based on the analysis, we suggest that the familiness-related employee-level factors listed above (i.e., employee embeddedness, employee psychological ownership of the originating firm, and employee quest for their own cross-generational socio-emotional wealth: see Fig. 5, left), besides influencing the phenomenon of employee entrepreneurship, also influence the family's interpretation of the role of the ex-employees founding the new firm. In particular, if the ex-employee had been put in the condition to be deeply embedded in the family firm's knowledge and relational capital, just or almost like a family member, the "stepchild effect" is likely amplified, as well as the paradoxical tensions between opposing emotional interpretations of the spawning.

In addition, our emerging model suggest that further familiness factors influence the family's perception of employee entrepreneurship, even if they do not directly encourage or discourage it: the family's psychological ownership of the firm, and the family's acknowledgment of the motives for entrepreneurial spawning. The former variable (psychological ownership) has already been widely investigated by the literature, but its role in shaping the interpretation of employee entrepreneurship towards the "treacherous robber" pole is an original contribution of this study. The latter variable (acknowledgement of the motives for spawning) provides an original dimension of familiness: those family firms that originated from employee entrepreneurship and/or are active in contexts (such as traditional industrial districts) where spawning is very common are shaped by logics that may enable the "prodigal stepchild" interpretation.

Following a hostile employee entrepreneurship initiative, a sort of binary star system is created, in which the two firms (the originating firm and the spawn) somehow orbit around one another. The family-driven strong emotions shaping the relation between the two firms result in the two firms continuously and often spasmodically watching one another. A sort of "mirroring effect" allows each firm of the binary star system to observe a quasi-copy of itself. This mirroring effect influences the decisions in both firms. In particular, the emerging model highlights three possible effects of employee entrepreneurship and the subsequent mirroring effect in the originating firm.

First, when the reasons that have triggered employee entrepreneurship are acknowledged by the originating firm, the configuration of its familiness may change: although decreasing the factors encouraging employee entrepreneurship is often out of question, increasing the factors discouraging it may significantly and positively change the logics shaping the family-firm system. As Fig. 4 shows, the case under analysis is an interesting exemplar of this longitudinal evolution of familiness. Second, the mirroring effect resulting from the intense business and emotional interdependence between the originating firm and the spawn may result in coevolution-by-differentiation mechanisms: each firms needs to make different choices from the other in order to protect its identity and business space, therefore the binary star system made up of the originating firm and the spawn creates the conditions for diverging identities. Third, the intense mirroring activity between the two firms creates the conditions for resource spill-in, even across generations. This resource spill-in occurred in an almost theatrical way in the case under analysis, through the acquisition of the bankrupt spawn and the exploitation of its innovative ideas about chocolate-based products.

In conclusion, the emerging model suggest that familiness configurations (including both well-known and novel components) may significantly influence employee entrepreneurship; on top of this, familiness dynamics may fuel and shape the coevolution of the originating firm and the spawn, viewed as a binary star system fueled by a strong mirroring effect.

Of course, this study has limitations. The inductive model proposed here is based on a single case study, although particularly intense and revealing. All the constructs included in the emerging model depicted in Fig. 5 are operationalizable, therefore it is possible to conduct quantitative studies to test the relationships between the variables. Configurational studies, considering also non-familiness variables, such as firm size or the industrial sector, would be particularly interesting.

This study has interesting implications for practice, since it provides conceptual tools for family firms that need to manage the risks of family entrepreneurship or the aftermath of a family entrepreneurship initiative.

Finally, this study has implications for regional development studies and policy-makers, since it highlights the so-far overlooked role of family firms in the dynamics of entrepreneurial spawning and subsequent strategic differentiation and spillover effects, which are of great interest for territorial resilience.

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