Review of *An Alternative Approach to Family Business: A Theory of Socio-Material Weaving* by Mona Ericson*

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I. INTRODUCTION

There was a time, 30 years or so ago, when management scholars began to remind themselves about family businesses. We were reminded that historically family and business were synonymous entities.[1] Publications or discussions of family business started with a recitation of the significant portion of national economies contributed by family businesses. During the same period the professions also started to take notice of family businesses and developed family business specialized services. That was then. Now, family business research is an increasingly legitimized field of academic research appearing in both mainstream management and family business publications. Nor is it uncommon for professional service firms, for example accountancy, law firms, banks, and business consultancy, to have family business focused departments in their practices.

As the topic of family business has become established, a recognition of a need, and opportunity, to fine tune our understanding of family businesses and strengthen the field has emerged. Early family business

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1 HE Aldrich & JE Cliff, "The Pervasive Effects of Family on Entrepreneurship: Toward a Family Embeddedness Perspective" (2005) 18 *Journal of Business Venturing* 5 at 573–596 <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9026(03)00011-9>.

thinking and literature was practitioner oriented, heavily reliant on researchers' lived experience with their family's business. Family business research roots lie in practitioner orientated work that stemmed from the researchers' backgrounds in their family's businesses, a reliance on single case samples, and the use of anecdotal evidence to build many of the assumptions about family business the field still relies on.[2] Consequently, family business literature has tended to not recognize and deal with the heterogeneity, variety, and contradictions across family business we have all witnessed in our lives.[3] Fortunately, family business literature has begun to find space, draw upon additional literature, and tackle the heterogeneity of family. This move in the literature is significant because the purpose of theory is to predict outcomes through increased understanding of a studied phenomenon, physical, social, and symbolic.[4]

Erickson's alternate approach to family business book takes aim at both heterogeneity and the strengthening of family business theory that increases understanding of family business outcomes. The book does this by drawing upon Heidegger's hermeneutic-phenomenological theory[5] and four in-depth case studies, to build a socio-material weaving theory of family business.

II. THE BOOK

The back jacket describes the book as an "innovative and imaginative exploration of an established field of study" and "crucial reading for scholars, researchers, and graduate students of family business." The

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2 Davis, J. A. (2011), *Personal Communication*.

3 C Benavides-Valasco, C Quintana-Garcia, & V. Guzman-Parra, "Trends in Family Business Research" (2011) *Small Business Economics* at 40–57. See also D Neubaum, N Kammerlander, & KH Brigham, "Capturing Family Firm Heterogeneity: How Taxonomies and Typologies Can Help the Field Move Forward" (2019) 32 *Family Business Review* 2 at 106–130, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894486519848512>. See also E Tetzlaff, & AE James, "Heterogeneity", In A. Discua Cruz & C. Howorth, eds, *Encyclopedia of Family Business*, (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023).

4 KE Weick, "What Theory is Not, Theorizing is", 40 *Administrative Science Quarterly* 4 at 385 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393789>.

5 M Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

approach of the author is highly theoretical to the extent that reading the book is helped by the reader having some pre-existing familiarity with the constructs and concepts associated with the theories Ericson draws upon. For example, consider the word 'material'. When first reading the title, it invokes a sense of something physical and tactile, that would be used to make something. Something like a piece of cloth from which a shirt is sewn. However, when continuing to read the book, it soon became apparent that in Ericson's theorising, material included concepts well beyond our initial assumptions. We realized that in her theorizing, material is conceptually far more significant and complex than a bolt of cloth. In order to follow the complexities presented in the book, we found ourselves frequently referring back to the earlier theoretical explanations of concepts. These earlier explanations were particularly helpful when reflecting on Ericson's thesis of social-material weaving theory of family business.

The book begins with an introduction to a village in Sweden, Tällberg, that has been inhabited since at least the 13th Century. Until the arrival of a rail line early in the 20th Century Tällberg had remained a sleepy little agrarian village. Since that time the community has become one of Sweden's most popular vacation destinations. It is a village of 200 permanent residents, eight hotels, and 400 summer houses.[6] In the village, Ericson found a location where a long history of families conducted business in the same industry - agriculture then tourism - with each business following its own unique trajectory. This allowed Ericson to qualitatively develop theory about family business as embedded in the materials around them.

In Chapter 2 Ericson builds the case for why alternate theory of family business is necessary and does so with a brief overview of family business literature. According to Ericson, we typically view family businesses from a systems perspective. The research tends to view family business as a context, a subsystem, within the larger system of an economy. Whether or not you agree that systems theory is predominant in family business research Ericson has a point in her claim that we have thought of family businesses as a specific context. Why else would we have so much research that compares performance of family businesses with other business forms? Such comparisons inherently start from the assumption that family businesses represent a unique context to be studied. This point is supported by Ericson

6 "Welcome to Tällberg", (2022), online: <https://www.visitdalarna.se/en/tallberg>.

reviewing how multiple family business theories have been system focused (even if the theories or theorist do not acknowledge this) because the theories are, mostly, used to explain impacts with the business system.

For Ericson, our use of systems theory has neglected a crucial part of General System Theory- feedback loops. General System Theory holds that actions and outcomes of systems are fed back into the system. Back and forth feedback loops exist within all systems (including the family and the family business), parts of the macrosystem, and mesosystem. As Ericson puts it, the research has concentrated on the family business system and parts of the social macrosystem but is yet to incorporate the mesosystem level of space and place. This argument puts in mind the Aldrich and Cliff classic that introduced the concept of family embeddedness to entrepreneurship and family business research.[7] The paper reminds readers of the role of family, its changing needs, and its evolving realities drive many entrepreneurial activities. Aldrich and Cliff's paper could be seen as a feedback paper arguing that what happens in the larger systems feeds back into the family, the family adapts, and through the entrepreneurial activities affect the larger systems. Unlike Aldrich and Cliff, Ericson is most interested the mesosystem of space and place.

If we stop and think about it, space and place have strong influences on identities, norms, and our understanding of our existence. Space and place influences language, culture, and so much more of daily life — often in ways we seldom realize. Think of the oft repeated folk wisdom we hear about Nordic attitudes to weather, the one that claims there is no such thing as bad weather just poor clothing choices. In a region of the world where all four seasons have noticeable effects, space and place have developed understandings, norms, and culture that encourages activity regardless of the weather.[8] In contrast, my local elementary school kept children inside during recess during rain to avoid their getting wet. Ericson goes much further than my simple example to argue for the benefit and need to include space and place in family business research. To bolster the argument that

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7 HE Aldrich & JE Cliff, "The Pervasive Effects of Family on Entrepreneurship: Toward a Family Embeddedness Perspective" (2003) 18 Journal of Business Venturing 5 at 573–596 <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9026(03)00011-9>.

8 L Åkeson McGurk, "There's No Such Thing as Bad Weather: A Scandinavian Mom's Secrets for Raising Healthy, Resilient, and Confident Kids" (New York: Touchstone, 2018).

both space and place affects and structures social interactions[9] Ericson does what many family business researchers before her have done and draws on theory developed in relevant scholarly fields outside of family business research. In this case she turns to Heidegger's hermeneutic-phenomenological theory to help us understand spatiality and distinguish between space and place.

In ten short pages, Ericson introduces and describes the deeply abstract and theoretical elements involved in spatiality and the theorizing that has arose from Heidegger's own theorizing. Although it required effort to keep some of the concepts clear as we read, these ten pages were enough to hold our attention and prepare us to appreciate Ericson's later theory development. In our humble interpretation the ten pages space is not only physical, but it is also existential. Heidegger rejected space as a subject-object relationship and instead saw humans as Being-in-the-world (*dasein*). This means humans "are so intimately involved with the world that it is not perceived as an object that we apprehend but as an extension of us".[10] 'Care' discloses the world to us and through 'mood' we adapted to both the people and the disclosed world we encounter. Essential in this theoretical framing of existence, and Ericson's theory, is the role of materials. Materials are things encountered in space that have been *scaped* (shaped) by people. Scaped land reinforces the notion that space changes. Scaping space not only transforms it physically but also transforms meanings we give it. Place is the combination of space, materials, and human entwinement with the two. There is a feedback loop in place and humans are influenced by space and materials.

The better the reader is able to keep the concepts and theory developed from Heidegger's work the easier it will be for the reader to follow Ericson's qualitative theory building in later chapters. Two key points of Chapter 3

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9 R Iedema., D Long, & K Carrol, "Corridor Communication, Spacial Desing and Patient Safety: Enacting and Managing Complexities" in A van Marrewijk & D Yanow, eds, *Organizational Spaces: Rematerializing the Workaday World* (Edward Elgar, 2010) at 41–57. See also P Kenis, PM Kruyen & JMJ Basjijens, (2010), "Bendable Bars in a Duth Prison: A Creative Place in a Non-Creative Space" In A. van Marrewijk & D. Yanow, eds, *Organizational Spaces: Rematerializing the workaday world* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010) at 58–76.

10 R Chia, Strategy-as-Practice: "Reflections on the Research Agenda" (2004) 1 European Management Rev *1*, at 31 <https://doi.org/10.1057/PALGRAVE.EMR.1500012>.

helped us as we worked through the book. First, acceptance of the physical world's invisible participation in our knowing and being. Second, the focus is not on the natural world, but the human made transformations of the world that matter in our knowing and being.

Ericson then moves on to explaining her methodologies (Chapter 4) and to present the three cases used in her theory building (Chapters 5, 6, & 7). We do not think it necessary to review Ericson's choice of methodology. We believe it is sufficient to say that the reader is presented a well described and justified argument for the use of narratives and qualitative analysis in this project that non-academics might find interesting if only to confirm in their mind that graduate education is a process of knowing more and more about less and less.

The cases are as unique as the space and place they occur in. We say this in part because in Ericson's reporting of the cases we see the location and industry (accommodation) of each business staying more or less fixed while everything else changes. The owning families, blood kin groups, size of accommodations offered, direct and ancillary revenue sources all transform in ways that also remain true to space and place. past and present.

Ericson presents a narrative for each case that illuminates the intermingling of aspects of an intimate involvement of people and families with place, with other people, and materials. In all three cases we learn of businesses that are all controlled by families, primarily accommodation businesses, but are also distinct from each other. Primed as the reader is by Ericson's earlier chapters, the plausibility, a necessary condition in the exploration of new theory[11], of space, place, and materials having roles in both developing the similarities across and differences between cases and family businesses is present.

The first case tells of Siljanstrand, Siljansgården, and Green Hotel. This is the tale of the sustaining efforts of the members of at least three unrelated families and history. Striking are the interesting examples of the families incorporating and preserving Tällberg and the province into what they do. Wood from older buildings is incorporated in renovations, expansion is accomplished by moving and incorporating old structures from around the village and province, and dirt under foot is preserved to reflect the history

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[11] K Kreiner & J Mouritsen, "The Analytical Interview" in S Tengblad, R Solli, & B Czarniawska, eds, *The Art of Science* (Copenhagen: Business School Press, 2005) at 153-176.

of its use. We see space and material imprinting on past, present, and imagined futures.

The second case, Klockargården, is described as a village within a village. We have in mind the image of a medieval village with everything clustered around a castle. Instead of a castle, in Klockargården it is various individual small ventures developed by family members and generations surrounding the hotel. In this case, we observe a family's history of being-in-the-world that by "threading their ways in entwinement with business activities in, through, between, and around houses, cottages," and shelters.[12]

Åkerblads Tällbergsgården are the two businesses represented in the final case. Here we have a narrative with about 22 generations of the Åkerblad family and their association with Tällberg, the family's land, buildings, along with their activities in that space. In many ways the Åkerblad family is the type of family we are most familiar with in the family business cases we use in our classes and training because they have experienced the events we so often teach about. The similarity ends once a social material weaving lens is applied, allowing us to see much, much more. The Åkerblad's have gone through successions, professionalization, and innovations. By looking at the case through a social material lens Ericson can see beyond surface business and family activities. We see a family that has stayed involved with their buildings and land to honour their past while engaging in the future for over 600 years.

It is at this point (Ch. 8), Ericson builds upon the foundation laid out in the book so far to lay out her alternate theory of family business. Because, like a good movie, where half the fun is seeing how the story arrives at its conclusion, we will leave the details of this chapter to the readers. However, if you like skipping ahead in a movie to the end, then we would say that Ericson's theory of social material weaving theory's contribution to existing family business theory articulates that it is to not focus on a particular business, its development, and its activities. What matters are the interactions and relations of people in a place with what has been shaped by people (i.e., materials). The author's cases show materials becoming tools, what Heidegger called 'toolness' or 'equipentality', that the families used to shape their activities in the past, present, and future intentions.

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[12] Mona Ericson, *An Alternative Approach to Family Business: A Theory of Socio-Material Weaving* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021) at 97.

If you accept that theory should push the boundaries of our knowledge by providing compelling and logical explanations of the what's, why's, and how's of social phenomena[13] then Ericson has developed a theory. Building from the age-old parable of blind men trying to understand an elephant Ericson adds to our ability to see more of the elephant we call family business. Based on D.A. Whetten's principles[14], Ericson's book has three elements of theory. The book identifies the factors necessary for explaining family business, how the factors are interrelated, and the why of the dynamics of the necessary elements.

Drawing further from the elephant and blind men parable, knowing the elephant requires the incorporation of many hands. We take this to mean no single theory is sufficient to understand social phenomena universally and completely, every theory is missing something. Missing from Ericson's theory is space and place that are not 'scaped' by humans, a shortcoming acknowledged by Ericson. Given the intellectual roots of Heidegger, Ericson, and most management scholars, the limitation of placing humans at the centre of exploring the elephant is unsurprising. Applying intellectual roots that do not place humans at the centre but also understand the what's, why's, and how's of the world as with all the aspects of nature would be one way to extend Ericson's theory to cover more of the elephant.

III. CONCLUSION

This is a book that clearly seeks to speak to an academic, not a practitioner audience. Packaged as it is, we suspect that many practitioners – those who own, work in, advise, and consult family businesses and business owning families – will find the book lacks ready to hand tools and equipment they can apply in their family business situations. What the book does well is give readers enough of a primer on Heidegger, and those who followed, highly abstract theorizing to be able to put into a useable framework an expanded view of family business topics. As academics, we finished the book thinking about the farms in our area that have remained

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13 DA Whetten, "What Constitutes a Theoretical Contribution ?" (1989) 14 Academy of Management J 4, at 490–495.

14 *Ibid.*

with some version of the same family almost as long as Europeans have lived in the region. What they did when they came was certainly influenced by what they found here, the ruminants of being-in-the-world as it was in Europe, and the intertwining of it all with materials they brought and found. What insights on family business would research utilizing a social-material theory of family business discover? What publications could be written? The hope is that the research would lead to knowledge that could also be translated into tools and equipment that help family businesses and their owning families flourish and function.