

**WHEN ORIGINS MATTER: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF
ITALIAN-AUSTRALIAN FAMILY BUSINESS IN AUSTRALIA**

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the link and interaction between the immigration process and the establishment of successful multigenerational family businesses in Australia. In particular we highlight the entrepreneurial role of the first generation (G1) in generating the conditions for the establishment of their business family through their own personal resources. The G1 of Italian-Australian migrants will form the case study used to substantiate a conceptual framework about the antecedent moments of a family business. Using extracts from interviews with members of successful Italian-Australian multigenerational business families, in addition to other secondary data, it will highlight how the founding generation made use of their personal resources and entrepreneurial spirit to create family firms, and shape family dynasties.

Introduction

Many aspects of family business have a historical perspective. An example is leadership succession, a dynamic extended process, perhaps stretching over 20 years (Cabrera-Suarez, De Saa-Perez, Garcia Almedia, 2001; Gersick, Davis, McCollom Hampton, Lansberg, 1997; Handler 1990; Lansberg, 1999); another example is organizational and governance evolutions (Gersick et al., 1997). Also strengthening the historical perception of a family business, Colli argues that history offers an important perspective to the study of family business as “family firms are notoriously and largely ‘cultural artefacts’, that is the product, in their nature and structure, of a certain context” (2010:7). History and tradition are very important not only in terms of understanding the very essence of family businesses but also because they constitute one of the differentiating elements between family and non-family businesses (Ward, 2008:4).

In this paper we focus on the historical perspective of Italian-Australian family businesses that have been founded by Italian migrants to Australia, concentrating particularly on some decisive aspects of their personal life. More precisely, we view the process of their migration journey as a resource with both existential and economic implications which have had deep and long lasting effects on the culture of their business across generations. Here we specifically focus on the Italian migrants who arrived in Australia between the 1920s and 1940s. Since the end of World War II in particular, Australia has experienced the largest sustained migration in its history. Thousands of migrants came to Australia knowing little of their destination, following the path of many others who had migrated earlier, joining an existing network which provided physical and moral support. Many of them were poor, but equipped with unique personal skills, but also courage, and strength. Many were adventurous, enterprising and great risk takers who created and established family firms, some of which continue presently, into their third or fourth generation. Very little information, however, has been collected and reported to date in relation to Italians who have made exceptional and valuable economic contributions to Australia, what

motivated them to ‘take a chance’, identify an opportunity, follow their desire to ‘make it’ in a new land, and **how** they established their family firm, sowing the seeds for a successful family dynasty. We argue that the important historical aspect of **how** the initial business is established by the founding generation is often neglected, falling through the cracks between the literature on entrepreneurship, ethnic entrepreneurship and family business. Hence, the primary aim of this paper is to offer some reflections on the early experiences of the G1 by suggesting that theirs is an entrepreneurial journey that leads to the creation of families and business. However, their journey is not entrepreneurial because they created new enterprises, but it is entrepreneurial because **they created new personal identities and new lives**. The entrepreneurial aspect that we would like to address is the very transformative process that relates to the people themselves. It is through the process of migration, from the moment they make their decision to leave the old country, until their arrival in the new country, that the Schumpeterian “creative destruction” of the old subject and the “entrepreneurial creation” of a new self takes place. This transformation, supported by personal resources which in turn shape the development of new resources, builds the basis on which further entrepreneurial activities become possible. It is drawing from this experience, we would argue, that economic entrepreneurship becomes possible.

The Migration Process

The large number of migrants who have come to Australia since the 1920s has had a huge impact on Australian society, economy and culture. As Collins acknowledges “Immigration has fundamentally shaped the structure and nature of Australian society...it really has been the defining characteristic of Australian society” (1988:3). This means that more than four out of ten Australians today – approximately six million people – are direct products of post-war immigration. The history of the migration of Italians to Australia is well known and has been widely researched (Bertelli, 1980; McDonald, 1956; Price, 1963; Ware, 1981). What has not been widely researched is the entrepreneurial activity of the G1 migrants and the role that they have played in the development and diversification of the Australian economy and the establishment of long-term, multigenerational family businesses. How is it possible that these people who possessed little or no financial resources, and were often poorly educated, were able to develop economic and business strategies which helped them to set the conditions for large family businesses? What type of resources did they possess and why? It is worth noting here that one of the unintended consequences of the immigration policy which aimed to bring in manual labourers was the growth and eventual success of the migrant business. Migrants particularly focused on the small business market in niche sectors, initially providing goods and services to members of their own ethnic group or filling a gap in the mainstream which had become abandoned by the local, native business (eg. food and construction). These entrepreneurs are usually referred to in entrepreneurship and migration literature as ‘ethnic/migrant entrepreneurs’.

As immigration grew, the market for the ethnic niche increased, and the opportunities multiplied. Supported by ethnic finance and labour, “emerg[ing] over time as established businesses with a stable niche in the wider business environment” (Waldinger, 1986:593), numerous ethnic entrepreneurs were able to reshape and expand their business. At the same time, they relied heavily on the support of the family: “the family basis of immigrant [Italian] social organisation served as a significant springboard to ethnic [Italian] business formation.” (Lampugnani &

Holton, 1991:73). As a number of Australia's migrant communities and their family businesses now move into the third/fourth generation, we aim to re-evaluate the entrepreneurial experience of the G1 Italian migrants, and demonstrate that this important historical dimension has been fundamental to the creation of successful family dynasties.

The Entrepreneurial Dimension in Family Business

This paper is based primarily on the entrepreneurial origins of family business, describing how the entrepreneurship of the G1 was fundamental to successful multigenerational family business. The origins of family business presuppose a starting point at which family and business do not exist yet, but are created through the initiative of one or more family member(s) who start a small business from nothing, by identifying an opportunity or a market niche, or by creating a completely new type of business. We view the founder(s) as an entrepreneurial agent who acts at two different levels: as a changer of one's self, and as somebody who modifies a business/economic status quo by creating a new enterprise. Often they will achieve this at the same time as they begin a new family, and the two aspects entwine and grow together, interlinked, during the life span of the G1, and perhaps subsequent generations. Following alternating periods of development, consolidation, new expansion, entrepreneurial activity or modification of the business, across multiple generations, the business may eventually become a multigenerational family dynasty. This shows that family business and entrepreneurship are interlinked across the generations.

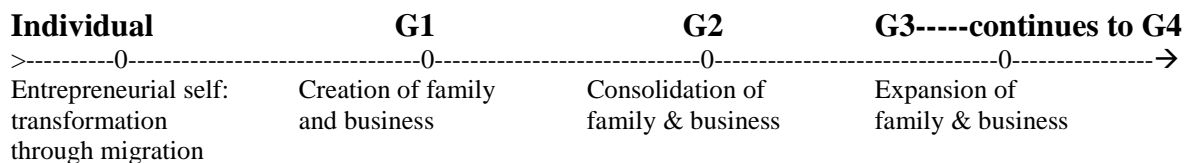
The literature on entrepreneurship is extensive, associating it with innovation or entrepreneurial discovery (Baumol, 1968, 1993; Kirzner, 1997; Leibenstein, 1978; Schloss, 1968; Schumpeter, 1934), ascribing characteristics of creativity, autonomy, independence, locus of control and leadership to entrepreneurs (Brundin, 2002; Hornaday & Aboud, 1971; Low & MacMillan, 1988; Timmons, 1978). Other researchers maintain that risk-bearing is a prevalent characteristic of the entrepreneurial function (Brockhaus, 1980; Cummings, 1980; McClelland, 1961, 1986; Timmons, 1978). Kirzner's view focuses on the alert discovery of profitable opportunities as the key to understanding entrepreneurship. According to Kirzner, entrepreneurs possess psychological qualities such as self-confidence, determination, boldness and creativity which play a key role in supporting them in making discoveries as well as making profit from these discoveries (1999). Sharma & Chrisman (1999) have summarised the definitions that appeared in the literature to that time, and proposed an inclusive definition of entrepreneurship as "acts of organizational creation, renewal or innovation that occur within or outside an existing organization" (Sharma & Chrisman, 1999:17).

More recently, entrepreneurship approaches have concentrated on understanding how social interactions contribute to the entrepreneurial process and in perceiving opportunities (Jones, Latham, Betta, 2008; Gaglio & Katz, 2001; Goss, 2005). This approach understands entrepreneurial activities and characteristics as continually evolving, "dynamic and constantly emerging, being realised, shaped and constructed through social processes" (Fletcher, 2003:127), and language (Mills & Pawson, 2006).

Theories of entrepreneurship developed by business theorists over the last fifty years or so have neglected an important dimension related to 'personal entrepreneurship' resulting from the life of individuals. By personal entrepreneurship we mean the personal resources in a new condition which allows for the creation of a new biography and life. Sarasvathy (2001) introduces the

notion of ‘effectual reasoning’ arguing that entrepreneurs are effectual thinkers who make use of their ‘means’ or personal resources (who they are, what they know, and whom they know) to begin entrepreneurial actions. The notion of personal resources and entrepreneurship as a form of self-innovation has been proposed by Betta, Jones and Latham (2010). These authors, however, remain very abstract throughout their reflection. We, therefore, intend to expand on their concept by reconstructing the entrepreneurial process of migration that leads to personal change, and aligned to this, to the establishment of family business.

Our contention focuses on the personal life (biography) of the migrants and considers it a valuable form of resource. What we are suggesting here is that the history of the individual builds the history of the family business. By so doing, we shed light on a perspective that has been neglected in the literature on entrepreneurship as well as ethnic entrepreneurship. Our intention is to capture in theoretical and practical terms, those aspects that form the basis of a life in transition. By life in transition we mean specifically the migrant experience – someone moving from one context to the other, from a familiar and comfortable context to an unfamiliar and threatening new context. In other words, we describe and analyse this transitory aspect of life as a resource for the G1 Italian migrants. However, life in transition also implies a change from one living condition to the other. Our perspective of entrepreneurship, with regard to the G1 migrants, is that it involves a change in a given order, in this case a personal order that was abandoned, and the installation of a new order in the country of arrival. Both processes take time to develop, often also coinciding with the establishment of a family: this interaction may, at a later stage, lead to a successful family business and, perhaps, after three or four generations, to a business family dynasty. Below we capture in abstract terms the phases of an entrepreneurial process stemming from the G1: this starts with migration and ultimately leads to the subsequent creation of a family business.



The migration literature refers to the migration process as a difficult and painful experience determined by many uncertainties, risks, fears, but also by courage, determination, patience: these were the personal qualities that built the resources of the personal life. These long held personal values and qualities are challenged during the process, but also shaped and formed by migration. Autobiographies, letters and life histories written by migrants are clear evidence of the challenges encountered in establishing new roots in a new distant country, and of their accomplishments. Migration was a process that triggered personal and social change: in this process, the old personal order was abandoned, and a new order installed in the country of arrival, where the essential features of one’s identity and the habitual modes of thought and behaviour are challenged and need to be reconstructed within a new environment and a new culture. We believe that our main contribution to the theory of family business consists in the discovery of this link between personal transformation and creation of a family business. Methodologically, entrepreneurship represents the conceptual bridge that can make such a link possible. This notion of entrepreneurship linked to change relates to Schumpeter’s theory (2004). Schumpeter points to innovation and social resistance to innovation. More often than not, he

argues, people are content with accepting what is comfortable and the easier choice, out of habit or because of routine, even if it is not always the best choice.

“There is very little of conscious rationality... it is society that shapes the particular desires we observe:... wants must be taken with reference to the group which the individual thinks of when deciding his course of action... the field of individual choice is always, though in very different ways and to very different degrees, fenced in by social habits or conventions” (Schumpeter, 1934:91).

But the entrepreneur in Schumpeter’s theory has personal characteristics and skills that are “peculiar and rare by nature” (1934:85) which support him/her to break out of the mould of conventions created by society which shape their lives and perceptions. With his/her skills and experience, the entrepreneur explores and creates innovatory processes within the sphere of the economic domain. Schumpeter’s theory is shared by other economic theorists such as Baumol (1968, 1990), Kent, Sexton & Vesper (1982), Leibenstein (1978) and Schloss (1968).

Methodology

When researching the entrepreneurial individual, a qualitative approach is particularly useful (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Ram, 2001). The qualitative research approach used for this study supports the selection of a relatively small sample of respondents who also form part of a broader study, a doctoral thesis. The approach employed involves a combination of methodologies that provide different sources of data: ethnography and life history narrative through semi-structured interviews. One advantage of using an ethnographic approach is that it encourages the use of other research methods including life history narrative through semi-structured interviews. Due to the unfortunate fact that some of the protagonists of this study are no longer alive, we have had to rely on interviews conducted with members of the second generation, or people who knew them personally. We have also made use of written primary and secondary source material. The life history approach used enabled us to discover, or more precisely, ‘uncover’ the entrepreneurial experiences behind the migration journey and create a set of portraits of particular individuals who were deliberately selected as successful family business entrepreneurs, by focusing on important or memorable events, processes, causes and effects.

As part of our research we studied eight founders of Italian-Australian business families. All have founded family businesses that continue now into their third/fourth generations. Through interviews undertaken where possible with them personally, and with their children and grandchildren, we attempted to capture the experiential elements of the migration process which started with the G1 and is still continuing this day through the family business dynasties. We structured our questions in such a way as to address what we consider were the experiential elements specific to each generation. However, as we thought that we might lose some interesting data by having a structured interview protocol, we decided to opt for open ended in depth interviews. The findings of this qualitative study reveal that the personal strength, values and migratory experiences of these individuals have contributed to form their entrepreneurial visions and attitudes. They also highlight how their personal resources supported the creation of family firms, how the founders influenced the business culture that perpetuates across generations. In the following section we briefly reflect on G1. They first perceptions of Australia

were negative; their insistence on the past was sustained in order to preserve a personal equilibrium during periods of great personal transformation. But even when they talk about the past, their discourse reveals the transformation which has occurred during the process of migration. These people see themselves as peasant and Italian migrants, but they are no longer the same people who left their villages in search of a better future.

The Entrepreneurial First Generation (G1) – The Founders

The interviews with/about the Italian migrant entrepreneurs who founded multigenerational family businesses in Australia reveal the reasons that motivated them to migrate and, more importantly, how they perceived the migration experience. Their decision to relocate was generally due to economic factors (the ‘push-pull’ factors). Their motivations included a dream of independence and in particular land ownership, which was “intrinsic to peasant culture” (Pascoe, 1987:131). They viewed Australia as the land of opportunity (as America had been viewed prior), where they could achieve wealth, success and social upward mobility in exchange for hard work and self-sacrifice.

The G1 in our study were young, all males in their late teens or early 20s, some married with families that they had left behind in Italy, others came with older brothers, cousins or other relatives, or joined them in Australia. They were from rural areas, predominantly farmers, rural workers or tradesmen. Growing up in Italy in the period following World War I, they faced severe economic difficulties due to the unstable economic situation that existed at this time. Many lived in conditions that were just sufficient for themselves and their family.

The stories of the G1 speak of their worries and discontent with their life condition in Italy, confronted by political, economic and social conditions outside of their control such as unemployment, exploitation and bad government. They were frustrated that they did not have the opportunity to achieve more. They were ambitious for a better life, for better opportunities than their life in Italy would ever be able to provide, and they looked for other possible responses, outside the confines of their family or village. They had dreams, a longing for a better future in a new and unexplored country that offered boundless opportunities. Migration would enable them to break out of their old life and redefine their existence. So with determination and a hardy spirit these migrants willingly left their hometown to make their fortune in Australia, often intending not to stay in Australia for very long, and with great courage and high hopes, they embarked on a long migration journey across the ocean, into a new and strange environment.

Speaking about his father’s reasons for migrating to Australia, Don Carrazza (property owner and investor, including Mildura Grand Hotel) says:

“Italy at the time was very depressed. There was no future, things were really tough in the whole of Italy straight after the war. So as a young person, and having a family my father felt that “I want to explore the rest of the world and see if I can better myself”. And that was how his decision was made, and having a contact here, that made it a lot easier for him.” (interview).

Although their individual stories may vary, they all substantiate the enormous impact of the migration act. Upon arrival, they faced confronting situations, with difficult and arduous conditions, mixed with extended times of isolation and loneliness. Their expectations and hopes

were shattered as they faced daily problems such as unfamiliar habits, discrimination, lack of access to basic services, confronting and sometimes threatening situations, often due to their lack of language competence.

Luigi Grollo (founder of Grollo Group) left his hometown in the province of Treviso, north of Venice, and arrived in Melbourne on the 24 July 1928, after WW1, hoping that the new land would bring plenty of opportunities to make his fortune. He was young, strong and enthusiastic, 19 years old. However his early years in Australia were tough and lonely, working as an itinerant labourer in forests, cutting timber, excavating underground tunnels, breaking stones in quarries, building sewerage systems, managing to survive through the years of the economic depression.

“From 1928 to 1940 I lived in a tent: twelve years under canvas; 12 years spent in all sorts of places, always looking for work which, when the Depression arrived, became even more rare. In fact I always managed to find work. I always had the strength and determination.” (Pascoe, 1988:6).

Life was difficult and arduous and those early years in Australia were marked by extended times of isolation and loneliness that left a deep scar.

“I had no friends, I had no brothers, no mother, no father. I was alone! I worked two or three months in a place, and then I would change...It was sad and hard. Australia has been hard for me, very hard... I worked like a slave, disinherited, without love, without any family, nothing.” (Pascoe, 1988:8).

Carlo Valmorbida (founder of Conga Foods, Valcorp Fine Foods) felt deeply the effects of the migration process. His words reflect the cultural and psychological shock of arriving in a new country where language, customs, and even food, were vastly different. He was ill prepared to face this shock, and the effects were ever-lasting. Reflecting on the act of migration, Carlo Valmorbida says:

“The greatest form of humiliation is the act of migration itself. You are born in one place and have all the traditions and culture, but you are forced to leave for political or economic reasons and you have to move on. But the minute you move on you are a second-class citizen regardless of who you are or why.”(Ostrow, 1987:69).

Their new world, different from the familiar one they had left behind, was not the ‘promised land’: it was harsh and often alienating. Excerpts from their stories speak of a deep sense of disappointment, anger, and a feeling of hopelessness.

“You are humiliated at every second thing. You have to buy into the culture of that country, and to assimilate. You have to renounce your culture, your dress sense, or the environment stays hostile. You feel hopeless. You have to give up part of yourself, and you have to substitute it with what the new country is giving you.” (Carlo Valmorbida, in Ostrow, 1987:69).

These reflections on the early experiences of the G1 make us reflect on the dynamics of migration and the challenges associated with this process. However, these young migrants were adventurous and enterprising, and their stories also tell us about their strength, courage, perseverance, their dreams and ambitions, their strong willingness and capacity to adapt to their new country. They were battlers with a strong sense of resilience and an inner strength of

character, with a touch of pride and humility which is at the heart of the Italian peasant culture. These were the personal qualities that built the resources of their personal life. Throughout their journey from the old to the new country, the migrants came equipped with personal qualities and resources as well as skills, which formed part of their identity and their entrepreneurial spirit.

Upon arrival, these people, who had unknowingly become entrepreneurial during their migration process, continued their personal change by entering into a new phase, equipped with a new mental and physical disposition. They arrived as unskilled labourers and were employed as manual labours often in remote country areas, worked in isolated parts of the Australian countryside, working in forests, mines, breaking stones and making roads. These hard times, however, gave them the opportunity to experience the various aspects of the Australian country and learn about its diversified climate and conditions.

Like Luigi Grollo, they had a strong capacity to overcome difficulties and obstacles, and adjust to new conditions through their sense of resilience and an inner strength of character.

“Australia for me has been a hard struggle, but I have stayed happy because I was healthy and looked after myself: I was full of energy. I have always been unafraid. ... I was young...I have made friends... I have worked with courage.” (Pascoe, 1988:8).

Over the years, as they settled in the new country, the G1 established a family and a business: from simple labourers, they became small business owners, setting the foundations of successful businesses with the support of their wife and children, their extended family and ‘paesani’¹ network (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986). They developed a financially successful family business, which they then passed on to the next generation(s). With the business, over a lengthy succession period, they transmitted their skills, knowledge, as well as their attitudes, their idiosyncratic organisational culture, valuable family and business traditions and values (Light & Gold, 2000; Kellermans & Eddleston, 2004; Lambrecht, 2005; Tàpies & Ward, 2008), acting as powerful and long lasting role models for subsequent generations.

“Family values seep into the management of the business. Values are often attributed to the founder of the business (Cappuyns, 2002). These values can then place a permanent stamp on its continued existence.” (Lambrecht & Donckles, 2006:393).

The culture and values of the founders remain a strong presence that shapes the family business across generations, and leave their imprint beyond their lifetime (Gersick et al., 1999; Ward, 2008).

Interviews with second and third generational members of family businesses reveal that as they grow up usually involved, either directly or indirectly, in the business affairs, they accept the business as a family priority, and take pride in the family business name. The history of the family is often reported on the firm’s website, dedicated to the origins and the founders of the business. This reflects how the achievements of the founder perpetuate across generations, and how closely the family business identifies with the culture and the values of the founder and the founding family.

“The original Costa fruit shop was established in Geelong, Victoria in 1888. Francesco Costa, a determined Italian immigrant and great-grandfather of our present Managing

¹ Paesani – Italian term used to refer to people from the same village or small town.

Director, operated the small 'Covent Garden' retail outlet that provided the base from which our current business grew and prospered throughout Australasia. [...]The Costa Group proudly remains a fully owned and operated family business.” (Costa Group website)

“Pizzini Wines has been built by Alfred and Katrina based on the passions and commitment to family and the family’s Italian heritage, hard work and determination shown to them by Rosa and Roberto. Today these same virtues have been bestowed on Alfred and Katrina’s children who all work within the business in some capacity.” (Pizzini Wines website)

These websites, and the following excerpts reveal a close attachment to the business, the family, and their heritage, forging an intimate and emotional relationship with what their multigenerational family business represents.

Lorenz Grollo (G3) discloses his great admiration for the achievements of his grandfather Luigi who founded the Grollo Group (building construction, property investment and development):

“My grandfather came out here with nothing, he came off the boat and he lost his bag, and what he’s achieved is amazing... His achievements, in terms of what he created he was legend, both in the Italian community and everywhere. I mean, I guess the ‘Grollo’ name is known throughout Australia and elsewhere in the world because of what he started, and he started with nothing.” (interview).

Simona Valmorbida Sbardella (G3) also recognizes her grandfather Carlo’s exceptional personal mark on the Valcorp Fine Foods business:

“If you look at my grandfather’s life, he’s such an incredible person. To be able to build something, to then have something still going to pass on to your daughter, and then to pass on to your granddaughter, is quite incredible” (interview).

Both the G2 and G3 maintain a close and warm connection to their Italian heritage which is sustained through close intergenerational relationships and frequent visits to Italy for work and personal reasons, and some have already documented their family history.

Although Frank Costa (Costa Group) strongly perceives himself as ‘an Australian’, he is extremely proud of his family roots and ensures that his numerous family members, his children and grandchildren “understand their roots and gain a sense of their wider family heritage” (Tobin, 2007:126).

“I go to Italy every year. I go to the island [*Sicily*] every year.... I took my eight daughters first, the following year I took the eldest daughter, her husband and children, then the second, third, fourth, fifth daughters, once a year... I take them so that the grandchildren can understand their origins and their heritage, to see where I came from, or where my ancestors came from.[...] I want the grandchildren to understand that we owe a lot to the person that came out here with no money, no language in a lot of cases, and no job, just came here, got off a boat, and ‘What the hell do we do?’... and they started working really hard and created the base, the foundation for us to follow in... I want my grandchildren to understand that.” (interview).

In recognition of the exceptional achievements of the G1, Frank Costa's biography (Tobin, 2007) is dedicated "to the memory of those families who migrated to Australia from the Aeolian Islands. They arrived with no English, little money and few possessions. Through their indomitable spirit and desire for stability, they and their descendants have made an immeasurable contribution to the Australian way of life".

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the experience of a selected group of Italian migrants to Australia. We have interpreted their transitory aspect of life as a resource that instigated an entrepreneurial process, which helped them to change personally and professionally. This process then supported the development of their self-employment, eventually leading to the establishment of a family, a family business and a family business dynasty. We have argued that these two aspects together, entrepreneurial attitudes and personal resources, set the conditions for the emergence of families and family businesses, and the basis for business family dynasties. We believe that our proposition represents a valuable contribution to the theories of entrepreneurship and family business. By adopting a historical perspective, the findings suggest that the identity, personal resources and heritage of the business family founder is an important aspect that is too often neglected in the literature, and needs to be reevaluated and reconsidered by placing the history of the founders in the centre of the entrepreneurial and family business context. If we return to the title of this paper, we have argued that family business origins *do* matter.

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