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The Curious Case of HRD in Family-SMEs

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1. Introduction

Activities which help develop an organization's competitive advantage (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Noe, Clarke, & Klein, 2014), that is how an organization's idiosyncratic attributes impact on its competitive position (Barney, 1991) through continuous learning, have attracted considerable attention from scholars, commentators and policy makers alike. Often termed as Human Resource Development (HRD), such activities and practices focus on enhancing the quality of an organization's most important resource, its human capital (Aragón-Sánchez et al., 2003). Currently, dominant theorizing regarding HRD stems from the experiences of atypical (large) enterprises (Iles & Yolles, 2004). HRD however is not solely confined to the efforts of such and is in fact present throughout a wide variety of organizational forms (see Hubner & Baum, 2018; Matlay, 2002; Nolan & Garavan, 2016;). One type of organizational form which is increasingly attracting scholarly attention with regards to HRD, is that of Small-to-Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) (Gray & Short, 2017). Comprising nearly 85% of global enterprises' activity, not only do SMEs provide the lion's share of employment in some countries (Muller et al., 2015), they also comprise significant contexts in which investments in the enhancement of human capital are made on a regular basis (Gray & Short, 2017).

HRD in SMEs should not be assumed to be scaled down versions of HRD activities and practices in larger enterprises (Lai, Saridakis & Johnstone, 2016). In fact, fundamental differences between SMEs and larger enterprises with respect to strategy, structure and resource endowments (Josefy et al., 2015) suggest that HRD in SMEs is often informal in nature (Kotey & Sheridan, 2004), occurs largely through an employee's job (Geldenhuis & Cilliers, 2012; Matlay, 2005) and is largely driven by the ideology and goals of the owner-managers (Coetzer et al., 2019; Koch & de Kok, 1999; Matlay 2002; Saru, 2007). We largely agree with Gray & Short's (2018) recent call to pay greater attention to the issue of HRD in SMEs, and echo their call to recognize and better account for the significant heterogeneity among SMEs. Nevertheless, one observable difference among SMEs themselves, which can influence HRD related decisions, is that of governance structures and approaches to management.

Differences in governance and management types and structures may be particularly observable among family and non-family SMEs. Family involvement in ownership and management is a common feature of many business organizations worldwide (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003), with research showing family firms to be the dominant organizational form throughout many economies and industries (La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, & Vishny, 1999; Shleifer & Vishny, 1986) as well as a significant portion of SMEs globally (IFERA, 2003). Similar to other organizational forms, HRD may serve as a critical vehicle and mechanism through which family-SMEs can achieve their twin objectives of continuity and competitiveness (Handler & Kram, 1988). However, the overlap between the family and the business systems that is common in family-SMEs, can create unique authority structures, incentive systems, accountability norms (Carney, 2005) as well as economic and non-economic goals (Gomez-Mejia, Makri & Kintana, 2010). This can lead to unique peculiarities with respect to their

approaches and priorities towards HRD. Despite the fact that human capital enhancement is central to such firms and often practiced regularly within them, HRD in the family-SME context remains under-studied among HRD and family business scholars alike (Pajo et al., 2010).

Accordingly, in this editorial we seek to draw the scholarly community's attention to the issue of HRD in family-SMEs. Specifically, we hope that by re-emphasizing the importance of HRD to family-SMEs, while simultaneously highlighting its idiosyncrasies in such enterprises, we will encourage further dialogue and submissions related to this important topic.

2. HRD Knowledge Base in Family-SMEs

The enhancement or development of human capital in organizations, or HRD, is often theorized as existing in the intersection between a firm's Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, culture and strategy (Mankin, 2001). Hence, HRD has often been regarded as a complex concept with a concrete definition largely lacking. Werner (2014) defined HRD as 'as a process that stimulates learning and facilitates the emergence of individuals' knowledge' (Werner, 2014; p. 130). This view of HRD recognizes that learning in organizations need not be formal in nature, but can also be unstructured and informal and include a wide range of learning approaches such as experiential and/or non-institutional-learning processes (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). The above definition places considerable emphasis on the notion of learning as lying at the very heart of HRD activities and practices. Broadly, learning can be viewed as the ongoing process by which knowledge is acquired and generated and through which changes in behavior may be become apparent (Harrison & Leitch, 2005). Learning can be regarded as a ubiquitous activity which can occur at a variety of levels and contexts and may occur either cognitively (Mitchell et al., 2007), experientially (Corbett, 2005), behaviorally (Holcomb et al., 2009) or situationally (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Moreover, learning in organizations has been strongly

linked to economic viability and the development of competitive advantages for SMEs (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Noe, Clarke & Klein, 2014).

Within organizations, structures, strategy and culture are often strongly shaped by the owners and management (Saura, 2007). This is especially the case in the context of family firms and family-SMEs. Family-SMEs differ from their non-family counterparts because of the close overlap between the family and the business systems (Chrisman, Fang, Kotlar, & De Massis, 2015), which leads to ownership and control of the enterprises being concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who are strongly associated with kinship ties (Bennedsen, Pérez-González, & Wolfenzon, 2010). Such unique characteristics of family-SMEs suggests that owning families will tend to create a vision of the enterprise which benefits the family across generations (Chrisman, Fang, Kotlar, & De Massis, 2015; Chua, Chrisman, Steier, & Rau, 2012; Schulze et al., 2001). For instance, family involvement in ownership and management has often been associated with having a long-term orientation (Gedajlovic, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2004; Zellweger & Astrachan, 2008), limiting the involvement of outsiders in the enterprise (Chrisman, Memili & Misra, 2014), offering preferential treatment of family members (Jaskiewicz et al., 2013) and favoring the pursuit of non-economic goals. Family involvement in ownership and management can also lead to adoption of unique managerial practices and philosophies, both of which can have significant implications for HRD.

Although the significance of HRD for family-SMEs has been well acknowledged (De Kok, Uhlaner & Thurik 2006; Kotey & Folker 2007; Tabor et al., 2018), there continues to be limited scholarly evidence in the area. For example, in their recent call to action on the issue of HRD in SMEs, Gray and Short (2018) identified 10 articles over 29 years in Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ) that dealt with the issue. Interestingly a similar search by the

authors over the same period, uncovered no specific articles on the topic in HRDQ. It is important to acknowledge at this point that that a dearth of articles concerning HRD among family-SMEs is not peculiar to HRDQ. Similarly, among Nolan and Garavan's (2016) systematic review of 117 articles on HRD in SMEs, the authors only identified three specific studies on the issue of HRD in family-SMEs (Birdthistle, 2006; Kotey & Folker, 2007; Matlay, 2002). Such studies have been focused on differentiating the HRD practices of family and non-family SMEs (Kotey & Folker 2007; Matlay, 2002) and have been largely driven by the research objective of trying to determine whether family-SMEs engage more or less in HRD practices than their non-family counterparts

A similar pattern was observed when examining family business related journals (e.g., *Family Business Review*, *Journal of Family Business Strategy* and *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice*). Although we could not find a specific article on HRD in family-SMEs per se, we did observe that scholars of family-business have tended to broach the issue in a rather disparate manner from various angles. For example, issues such as organizational learning (Birdthistle & Fleming, 2005), entrepreneurial learning (Hamilton, 2011) and knowledge sharing process (Woodfield & Husted, 2017) have been well investigated in the existing literature. In fact, we notice that many of the issues surrounding HRD have been subsumed under broader discussions related to HRM practices in family-firms more generally, and the perennial topic of interest in family business research; succession processes. For instance, early writing about HRD in family-SMEs by Reid and Adams (2001) occurred in discussions concerning HRM practices in family firms. Similarly, much of the recent scholarly growth in the issue of HRM in family-firms (De Kok, Uhlaner, & Thurik 2006; Jennings, Dempsey & James, 2017) has examined variables

associated with training and development (see Pittino et al., 2016) on a range of organizational and personal-level performance indicators, albeit with inconclusive results.

Learning and development is a dynamic process and one which is heavily embedded within specific contexts (Stein, 1998). One, peculiarity unique to family-SMEs, which may not be found in non-family SMEs, is the issue of succession. For family-SMEs, succession is an opportunity to nurture and develop the skills and capabilities of their most important human resource – next generation leaders and family members (Cabrera-Suárez, De Saa-Perez & García-Almeida, 2001; De Massis, Chua & Chrisman, 2008; Breton-Miller et al., 2004). Hence, central to the succession process is successors' learning and development. However, only a few studies have directly focused on successors' learning and development in the literature (Cabrera-Suárez, De Saá-Pérez & García-Almeida, 2001; Lubatkin et al., 2005). For instance, Konopaski et al. (2015) and Le Breton-Miller and Miller (2015) draw on situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to examine inter-generation learning, while Mustafa, Elliott and Zhou (2019) examine how gender influences the learning styles and approaches of successors. However, despite the issue of succession being strongly related to the development and enhancement of human capital, a majority of the studies in the area have focused on issues such as the choice of successor and the impact of a new successor on family-SMEs' performance success. We believe the process of succession offers scholars ample opportunities to examine HRD in a unique organizational context, and from a long-term perspective.

In sum, we acknowledge that the literature on HRD in family-SMEs remains limited and highly fragmented. In comparison with both larger organizations and non-family SMEs, the existing literature suggests that family-SMEs lag far behind in the implementation of appropriate HRD practices (Astrachan & Kolenko, 1994; Reid & Adams, 2001). However, we feel that this

does not adequately capture the full spectrum of HRD activities in family-SMEs. For instance, research has shown HRD and learning initiatives in family-SMEs to be largely ad-hoc, relational and informal in nature and often occur via on-the-job learning (De Kok, Uhlaner & Thurik, 2006; Kotey & Folker, 2007; Maltay, 2002). Additionally, research also suggests that HRD in family-SMEs may begin very early for some employees, and may very well occur outside of formal organizational boundaries via the process of socialization (Ward & Dolan, 1998). Furthermore, it is not always necessarily true that family-SMEs hold a preference for family members with respect to training and development needs. In fact, recent research has indicated that in some instances a family's involvement in the business may create situations wherein family employees are favored with respect to some HRD efforts, while non-family employees are favored in respect to other HRD interventions (Jennings, Dempsey & James, 2017). This suggests that not only does HRD occur in family-SMEs, but that it may be quite different from theorized expectations and that of non-family SMEs too (Rigg & Trehan, 2002). Hence, due consideration needs to be given to the unique characteristics of family-SMEs if we are to attempt to understand them as unique sites for HRD and learning.

3. The Uniqueness of HRD in Family-SMEs

Having established the dearth of research reporting HRD in family-SMEs, we now consider conflicting findings regarding the phenomenon and its peculiarities which we believe are unique to family-SMEs. The involvement of family in management and ownership can give rise to a difficult trade-off between the continuity arising from creating a shared family and firm history, values and traditions and continuity and the need for growth, development and competitiveness (Chrisman & Patel, 2012). This, we believe, can have significant implications

for how family-SMEs view and prioritise HRD activities and practices. On the one hand, HRD becomes an important decision for many family-SMEs - not after hiring their first employee, but immediately from their inception (Cardon & Stevens, 2004). This is because the need to have family and business continuity requires adequately trained and developed future generations who can successfully build a family-SME's competitive advantage by constructing a future vision that is consistent with the firm's legacy and the needs of future generations (Poza & Messer, 2001).

In contrast, achieving their need for growth, development and competitiveness, family-SMEs face another unique challenge; the finite number of family employees (Mustafa et al., 2018; Tabor et al., 2018). Hence, family-SMEs need to employ significant numbers of non-family employees in order to meet their growth and developmental needs. Not only can non-family employees constitute as much as 80% of a family-SME's labor force (Mass Mutual Financial Group, 2007), they also represent a significant source of competitive advantage because of their own unique knowledge, skills and social capital (Sieger, Bernhard, & Frey, 2011). However, investing in the HRD of such employees may be particularly challenging for family-SMEs as their learning and developmental needs will typically differ from those of family employees. For example, unlike family employees, non-family employees will often lack implicit knowledge concerning the dynamics of family-SME's internal relationships and external networks. Similarly, non-family employees may hold different individual goals and levels of aspiration compared with family members. For instance, Block et al. (2016), found that women and aspiring entrepreneurs were attracted to working in family enterprises because they provide unique learning contexts for individuals with self-employment intentions.

Within family-SMEs, founder-owners and family managers are well positioned to strongly influence learning and knowledge and subsequently HRD process and priorities.

Specifically, prior research has shown that family involvement in management and ownership can create unique decision-making process, attitudes and behaviors. We believe that both agency theory and stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997; Jensen & Meckling, 1976) may provide complimentary perspectives on the peculiarities of HRD in family-SMEs. We also suggest that these two theoretical bodies of knowledge can be particularly illuminating to HRD scholars in furthering their understanding of HRD process and practices in SMEs more generally.

See Figure 1:

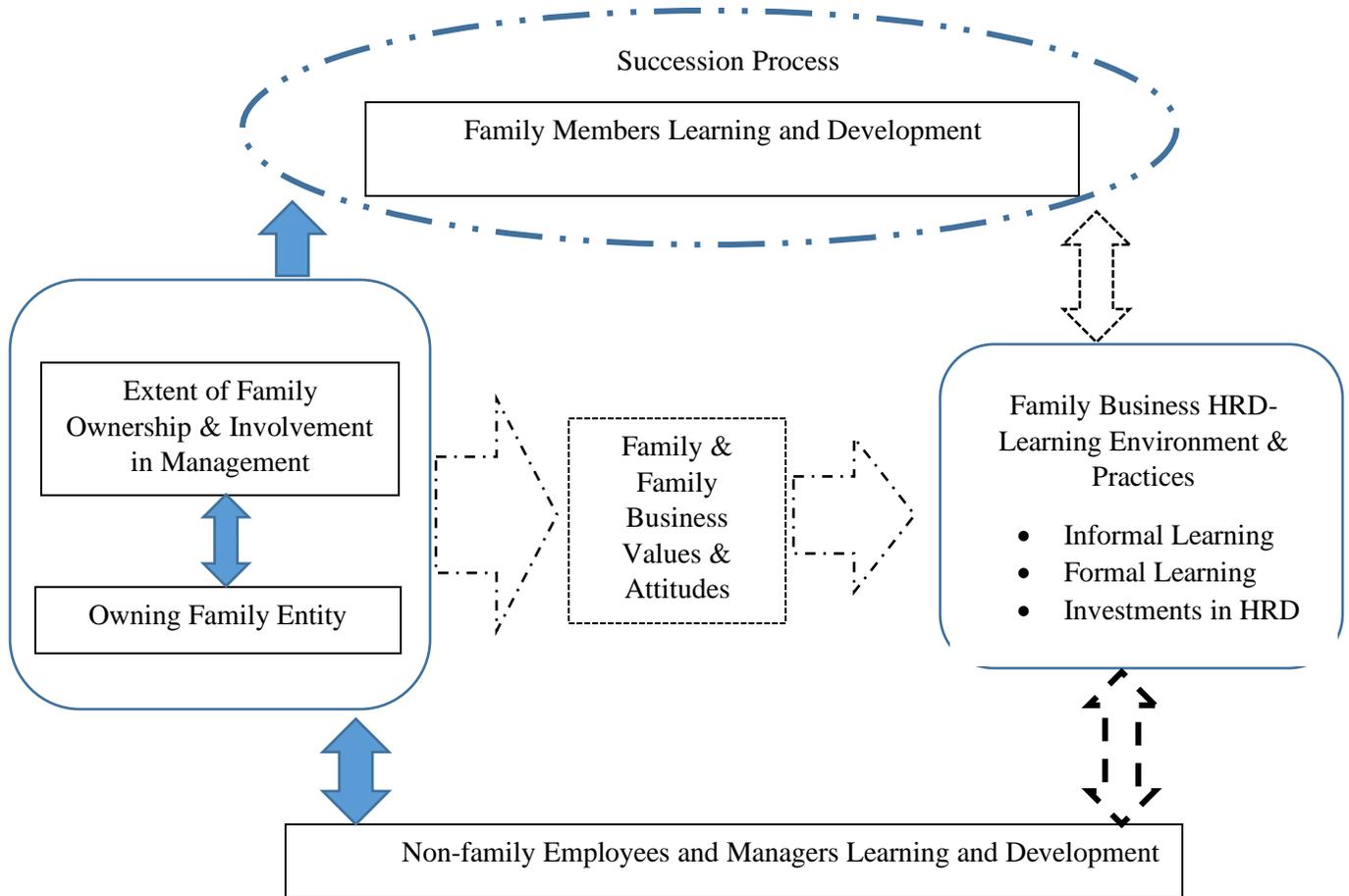


Figure 1: A heuristic model to understand the relationship between HRD and family firms

4. An Agency and Stewardship Perspectives of HRD in Family-SMEs

The past two decades have seen the emergence of two divergent theories in order to explain how family ownership and involvement influences the managerial behaviors of family firms and family-SMEs. First, agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) argues that actors are self-interested and that the risk preferences of owners and employees differ, with employees being more risk averse than owners (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Subsequently, the divergence of interests, along with costly information, makes it difficult for owners to hire motivated employees and makes their supervision necessary. Although family-ownership is said to reduce monitoring costs and employee incentivization, the close involvement of family in management may create incentives to use specific information only available to family members to opportunistically exploit non-family employees and disenfranchise minority owners (Schulze et al., 2001; Young, Peng, Ahlstrom, Bruton, & Jiang, 2008).

Agency theory perspectives postulate that the family owners of family-SMEs are likely to prioritize the training and development of family members and employees over non-family employees. This may be in part because family owners may be primed to view family employees as strategic assets critical to the continued survival of the enterprise in the long-term, while non-family employees may be viewed as a cost. For example, from an agency perspective, family-owners and members may be highly incentivized to provide long-term mentorship to family employees so they can develop firm specific knowledge and values necessary for the survival of the enterprise (Dhaenens et al., 2018; Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2015). Similarly, nepotism and altruism towards family members may mean that non-family employees get little or no opportunities to undertake training both within and outside of the enterprise (De Kok, Uhlaner, & Thurik 2006; Kotey & Folker 2007; Matlay 2002). Such practices may reduce the ability of non-family employees to develop their long-term skills and abilities (King, Solomon, & Fernaid,

2001) by learning and developing on the job. Additionally, such a perspective may also explain why family-SME owners may not be willing to offer non-family employees' educational benefits such as subsidizing the cost of acquiring knowledge, as it may increase the potential value of the non-family employee to other employers.

In contrast, the stewardship theory perspective proposes that family owners are likely to act as stewards via trustworthy, collectivistic, and pro-organizational ways and are intrinsically motivated to care about the welfare of the enterprise and its stakeholders (Davis et al., 1997). Such an attribute stems largely from family owners and members' strong personal identification and deep embeddedness within their enterprises, and the socio-economic contexts, and as such motivates them to take actions which assure their enterprises long-run survival (Corbetta & Salvato, 2004; Gómez-Mejía, Cruz, Berrone, & De Castro, 2011; Zellweger, Nason, Nordqvist, & Brush, 2013). Corbetta & Salvato (2004) and others have suggested that a stewardship orientation among family owners may motivate families to care about their employees, and stimulate high levels of commitment, trust and loyalty among employees (Davis et al., 1997). Hence in this view, both family and non-family employees are viewed as strategic resources, which need to be nurtured and developed in order to ensure the long-term survival and competitiveness of the enterprise (Eddleston, Kellermanns, & Zellweger, 2012).

The stewardship perspective suggests that family-SMEs' owners will be willing to develop learning cultures in their enterprises by making strategic investments in the training and development of their employees, both family and non-family alike. For example, Mustafa et al. (2018) recently suggested that owners of family-SMEs may be willing to provide close one-on-one mentorship to long-term employees in order to build up their management skills and capabilities. Similarly, from a stewardship perspective, family-SME owners may not only be

willing to invest in off-site training, but they may also be likely to give non-family employees significant on-the-job training opportunities through either promoting them or rotating them into various positions (Miller et al., 2008). Broadly, such willingness to make formal and/or informal investments in training and development not only empower employees but also signal the family's commitment towards their labor force (Beehr, Drexler, & Faulkner, 1997).

Our discussion suggests that HRD in family-SMEs may have a number of peculiarities and may also be met with a number of contradictions. In particular, we have shown that both the agency and stewardship theory perspectives may be used to understand and explain the differences in family-SMEs' approaches to HRD from other firms, including non-family SMEs. We also believe that the two theories can be particularly illuminating to HRD scholars in furthering their understanding of HRD process and practices in SMEs more generally. Finally, we propose that theories relevant to HRD scholars may also be beneficial to understanding the peculiarities of HRD in family-SMEs. For instance, Mustafa, Elliott and Zhou (2019) draw on social identity and situated learning theories to show the gendering of successor learning in Chinese family-SMEs.

5. Suggestions for Future Research

Our brief analysis of the existing literature suggests that HRD practices do indeed occur in family-SMEs. However, we also acknowledge that while they are largely informal in nature, such activities may be quite distinct from HRD practices in not only larger organizations but also from other SMEs. Yet, despite the uniqueness of HRD in family-SMEs, there continues to be a dearth of empirical evidence concerning the HRD practices of family-SMEs and the issues

unique to such practices. Accordingly, we believe that there are several areas of fruitful future research which deserve scholarly attention.

De Kok, Uhlaner, and Thurik (2006) have suggested that HRD practices in SMEs are highly relational in nature (Mustafa et al., 2018). This suggests that familial, relational and emotional dynamics among family members, and between family members and employees, may influence the HRD decisions and practices of family-SMEs. Consequently, we suggest that future research take into account factors such as age, gender and even birth order, to examine whether these factors influence HRD in family-SMEs. For example, future research could study the decisions surrounding the training and development of female successors and family members compared to male leaders (Stead & Elliott, 2009). Particularly worthwhile may be explorations into the types of learning strategies (Stead & Elliott, 2013) female family employees utilize in family-SMEs, the types of knowledge they are given access to, and from whom and where does their learning develop. Addressing such questions may be critical in developing an interpretive view of HRD in family-SMEs and understanding the nuances of such practices. Furthermore, future research also needs to better account of, and understand, the holistic nature of HRD in family-SMEs. Recently, Mustafa et al. (2018) highlight the dualism (e.g. formal and informal) with respect to HR practices and employee development and learning that exists in family-SMEs. Accordingly, future research may wish to explore the relationship(s) between formal and informal learning and developmental process in family-SMEs.

Specifically, future research may look to examine when and why family-SMEs may choose to implement either formal or informal HRD practices. Equally important may be the exploration of the nature of the conditions that stimulate family-SMEs' move from informal to more formalized HRD practices and why. This may necessitate in-depth investigations into the

unique features of family-SMEs and how family involvement in management and ownership influences decisions regarding human capital development and management. Addressing such questions may provide a more holistic view of HRD in family-SMEs, and how and why their practices differ from SMEs and larger organizations. Finally, and in line with Gray and Short (2018), we also encourage HRD scholars to adopt different perspectives and methodologies in the study of HRD in family-SMEs. We particularly encourage future researchers to move beyond quantitative approaches to fully embrace more qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography, participant observation and family memoirs archives/photographs/diaries, when studying HRD in family-SMEs. For example, ethnographic approaches may be better suited to examining the informal learning that takes place during, before and after the succession process, as they offer an opportunity to understand the complex nature of the process and the inter-relationships associated with it. In closing, we believe that there are a significant number of fruitful research opportunities for HRD scholars in the field of family business and vice-versa. Additionally, we suggest that theories specific to family business such as stewardship theory and agency theory, may also illuminate HRD scholars' understanding of HRD in SMEs more generally. Accordingly, we hope that HRDQ might become a key publication outlet for scholarship examining HRD in family-SMEs and its associated issues.

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