

# Family businesses and business families in cultural context: interdisciplinary updates for family business research

Cross Cultural &  
Strategic  
Management

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article shows that business family and family business research is dominated by reductionist and biased concepts of culture that are in sharp contrast with recent advances in anthropology and the broader social sciences that would allow for more fine-grained analyses.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Through an inbound theorizing approach, state-of-the-art anthropological and sociological concepts of culture are introduced to family business research.

**Findings** – The resulting interdisciplinary update unveils that prevailing concepts of culture in family business research confuse cultures with countries or nations and neglect the processual constitution of culture.

**Originality/value** – The article advocates a research agenda emphasizing the social construction and reproduction of culture as well as the need to systematically draw on findings from anthropology and sociology so as to allow for better cross-cultural comparisons in the field of family business research.

**Keywords** Anthropology, Sociology, Culture, Cross-cultural comparison, Family, Kinship

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

While the analysis of context is receiving more attention in family business research lately (Bornhausen, 2022; Krueger *et al.*, 2021), it typically is considered as cross-country analysis of differences in ownership rights (Lins *et al.*, 2013; Lozano and Durán, 2017), inheritance law (Carney *et al.*, 2014) and institutional settings such as market regulations or the political sector (Block *et al.*, 2019; Ding *et al.*, 2016; Mengoli *et al.*, 2020), but would gain if notions of culture based on discussions in sociology and social anthropology are considered.

In the present article, we challenge the widespread and implicit assumption in family business research that culture is adequately defined or demarcated as almost invariant “national culture” that is uniformly distributed within the borders of nation states and ask: How could we address context adequately in family business research and is the concept of culture helpful for this? With this goal in mind, we aim at introducing to cross-cultural management studies and family business research a new understanding of culture.

To this end, we take the business family as an example for our cross-cultural approach to family businesses because cultural differences in family formation and composition are a particularly fruitful example (Aldrich *et al.*, 2021). In fact, the last decades have seen an increasing differentiation and diversification of family models, gender roles and ethical considerations on sub-national levels almost everywhere. Who would deny that the cultural contexts surrounding an Amish farming family in upstate New York and a DINK (double-income-no-kid) family running a family business in New York City’s financial industry are very different? And yet both are living and conducting their business in the same nation and state, and even the spatial distance between them is rather small. This example clearly indicates that we need a more adequate approach to culture than cross-country studies typically



do provide. A more elaborate approach to culture is hence critical because it pertains directly to a foundational premise of family business research, namely the idea that it is the family-dimension that distinguishes family business from all other forms of business.

Despite recent advances in analysing the family side of family business (Caspary, 2018; Combs *et al.*, 2020; Frank *et al.*, 2010; Goel *et al.*, 2012; Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2017, 2020; Kleve and Koellner, 2023; Kleve *et al.*, 2020; Kleve *et al.*, 2020; Koellner *et al.*, 2020; Leiß, 2014; Schlippe *et al.*, 2021; Stamm, 2013), a better understanding of cultural differences in family formation and composition has been complicated by the fact that the bulk of family business research implies that the nuclear or conjugal family is the main unit of analysis, thus abstracting from the role of broader kinship associations (Osnes, 2011; Kushins and Behounek, 2020). Such a model of the family, however, largely pertains to Western culture and is difficult to apply to minorities or other cultural settings. Here we also have to keep in mind the different meanings of the family in itself as a social institution exist, and that the organization and composition of as well as the interactions within business families are subject to cultural differences on the subnational, national and supranational level.

This makes a strong case that we need to understand the cultural context better because the “cultural specificity of family (...) [is a] prerequisite for the understanding of the corporate reality of family businesses” (Wong, 2021, p. 258). The composition, dynamics, and organization of the business family is rooted in local understandings, values, and definitions of family more generally. The concept of family is embedded in different cultural contexts and thus differently implemented in Anglo-American, Germanic, or Nordic countries (Gupta and Levensburg, 2010), respectively. Yet, as noted above, culture should be equated neither with country nor with ethnicity, class, region, religion, caste, etc. All these categories may be useful proxies as they point to different forms of social differentiation (Roth 2021)—but even as we invoke them in research; we must keep the focus on how differently cultural context is used for defining affiliations with the business family.

Against this backdrop, our article contributes to family business research in three ways. First, the article problematizes prevailing concepts of culture in family business research, continuing previous efforts to analyse family business in relation to the cultural setting (Ng *et al.*, 2022; Shen, 2018; Top *et al.*, 2013). Second, anthropological and sociological concepts of culture will be introduced and explained. In so doing, we follow previous successful attempts of *inbound theorizing* (Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2018) in a bid to enhance prevailing concepts of culture in family business research. Thus, we aim to contribute to an “informed pluralism” as well as to disciplinary exchanges beyond the sphere of management science. Third, we propose an agenda for context-sensitive research on family business and business families based on a new understanding of cultural context. Here we will show how cultural association may shift according to the context. Therefore, we develop a model that emphasizes the processes of differentiation and its relation to culture.

The paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, we address recent approaches to context and culture in family business research and show the deficits of such approaches. For this, we also give two examples why this is problematic. Based on our analysis, we then move on and describe existing approaches in anthropology and the social sciences on the concept of culture in the third section before we describe our own model in the fourth section. The article is closed by a conclusion where we summarize our findings.

## 2. Why should family business research care about a new understanding of culture?

Despite the formidable quantitative and qualitative growth of family business research, context, culture and cultural variations among family firms and business families have been given short shrift, and the context still is under-researched (Krueger *et al.*, 2021). Almost 3 decades ago, Wortman (1995, p. 56) noted that “(p)resently, there are essentially no comparative studies of family business across cultural boundaries, ethnic boundaries, and

country borders". Fifteen years later, this diagnosis was re-confirmed by (Gupta and Levensburg, 2010). Whereas some authors still question the differences between cultural settings as such (Carr, 2005; Stanley *et al.*, 2019), most acknowledge a need for cross-cultural approaches to family businesses (Frank *et al.*, 2017, p. 740).

Against this backdrop, context-related and cross-cultural analyses ought to allow for a better understanding of how, *inter alia*, different institutional arrangements, social norms, religious foundations, societal values, socio-political contexts, and forms/meanings of family cohesion influence business families, family businesses, and the relationships between them. To date, however, truly multidimensional contextual and cross-cultural analyses are complicated by reductionist concepts of culture. For example, the most widespread approach to cultural context in family business research is certainly that of Geert Hofstede (2001; see also Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). In his research, Hofstede is referring to different cultural dimensions such as levels of power distance or individualist/collectivist orientation. Though undoubtedly popular, Hofstede's approach is biased to equally popular cultural stereotypes that do not allow for a truly detailed understanding of business families and family firms. As has been noted, such cultural "dimensions" are too broad to grasp real differences and similarities between cultures and instead have the effect of treating culture as a "mysterious residual variable" (Hann, 2002, p. 8). Set aside replicability issues (Minkov, 2018), the key problem of a Hofstedian understanding of culture as a set of traits shared by all persons within one nation is its inclination to essentialism. This is what Krueger *et al.* (2021) and others called container thinking. Corresponding research (see Bornhausen, 2022 for a recent example) over-emphasizes common characteristics of a national culture, treats them as if they were evenly distributed, and uses statistical average ("central tendencies") instead of individual views (McSweeney, 2002, p. 93). Thus, culture is being essentialized and used to justify notions such as "Chinese capitalism" which imply irreconcilable differences between national contexts (Yanagisako, 2002, p. 7). We are not the first ones to recognize this issue, and all these conceptual problems have been well known for some time now, yet do not seem to diminish the popularity of Hofstede's model in family business and management research.

The truly problematic consequences of Hofstede's cultural dimensions become visible only when they are applied. The Russian Federation, for example, appears to be defined by a collectivist and short-term oriented culture. But if one tries to understand how oligarchs in contemporary Russia have accumulated their enormous individual wealth, the insistence on their being influenced by a collectivist orientation seems inadequate. By contrast, ethnographical research based on a more flexible definition of culture reveals a mixture of individualistic and collectivist orientations towards economic activity in post-Soviet Russia that both evades dichotomous categorization and displays meaningful patterns concerning firms' access to institutional forms of power, social participation and collective moral standing (see Koellner, 2012; Rogers, 2015; Tereshina, 2021). Similarly, the presumption of a general, nation-wide short-term orientation makes little sense in the study of a nation's family businesses, that is, a form of business said to be defined by its long-term orientation (Lumpkin *et al.*, 2010; Masuo *et al.*, 2001; Stafford *et al.*, 2010; Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2015; Chun *et al.*, 2021; Haynes *et al.*, 2021).

Therefore, let us exemplify some shortcomings of classical understandings of culture. A first example is drawn from the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness) program and focuses on governance in family business groups in cross-cultural perspective (Della Pina *et al.*, 2018). The GLOBE program was a global initiative that included 170 scholars from the social sciences and from management studies located in 61 different national settings (House *et al.*, 1999, p. 2). Over the course of several years, GLOBE researchers have collected and compared quantitative and qualitative data. They have been interested in culturally endorsed implicit theories of leadership and emphasized nine attributes for the operationalization of cultures: (1) uncertainty avoidance, (2) power distance, (3) societal emphasis on collectivism, (4) family collectivistic practices, (5) gender

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egalitarianism, (6) assertiveness, (7) future orientation, (8) performance orientation and (9) humane orientation.

The chosen attributes are a clear legacy of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, which were measured with a 5-point-scale to prevent overly simplistic dichotomies. Based on these differentiations, ten regional clusters were identified as being culturally distinct according to the Culturally Dimension Score: sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Southern Asia, Confucian Asia, Eastern Europe, Germanic Europe, Nordic Europe, the Anglo-Saxon World, Latin America and Latin Europe.

Although we agree that there do exist crucial differences in all these settings, it remains unclear how exactly "culture" is understood. One example from GLOBE program is provided by [Della Piana et al. \(2018\)](#) and the way how cultural differences are analysed. Certainly, there is an importance of specific cultural settings, but we disagree when they describe family orientation as a nationwide characteristic because families and family businesses are too heterogeneous so that such broad assumptions need further analysis. In addition, the study has several further problems. It applies the cultural clusters developed before and ascribes a number of characteristics such as uncertainty avoidance, power distance, etc. to these settings. Without discussing further details such as age of the company, size of the company and industry sector, the differences in governance mechanisms are related to culture. This is problematic because possible changes are not taken into consideration, alternative explanations are not discussed, and culture is very much used in the old-fashioned way as evenly distributed, coherent and static frame of reference. For example, it is suggested that family business groups in the Anglo-Saxon cluster rank high in performance orientation and low in in-group collectivism. However, it remains unclear what are the origins for this. How is it influenced by culture? Is it based on joint beliefs, worldviews, morality or ethnicity? Who are the actors behind this? Where do these patterns come from? How are they produced and reproduced over time? All of this remains unclear but is related to a fuzzy notion of culture, the mysterious residual variable that Hann (2002: 8) mentioned: When all other explanations fail, it must be culture!

Moreover, the cultural clusters methodology reproduces statistical averages and seems to indicate an even distribution of values and norms across larger regional settings. This, however, needs further explanations how these norms and values are shaped and reproduced on such a large scale. Moreover, statistical averages obscure existing differences and may produce artificial facts when they do not pay sufficient attention to extreme cases (see William H. Starbuck's work on this).<sup>[1]</sup> On a more general level, this shows that we need a better concept for grasping how an understanding of culture as rooted but changing; shaping but not determining, can be integrated into family business research. In so doing, however, it needs to be clear that culture as such cannot be assumed to be always synonymous with a country or even larger regional clusters. Here we need more information on how cultural patterns are produced and sustained to allow for the creation of culturally distinct regional settings that persist over longer periods of time.

To summarize this first line of criticism, it is fair to say that cultural differences do exist, but it remains unclear how the cultural context is contributing to them. Here we need a more detailed analysis how the cultural setting is relevant and in which ways it contributes to the development and sustenance of certain patterns over time and across larger regional settings. With the Cultural Dimension Score, however, we are not able to answer such questions adequately.

[Krueger et al. \(2021\)](#) provide a second example for a cross-cultural approach. The research is located outside the GLOBE program. Although we very much agree with the call for taking context more seriously, the way in which this is implemented remains problematic. Why? First, with reference to [Wortman, \(1955\)](#), Krueger et al. define the "Arab world" by being based on "a common language, a common history and mentality, an all but common religion, and common economic interest". All of this remains in a trait-based approach that lacks a focus on the social construction of cultural belonging. This means, that it is not taken into

consideration that change occurred in the last decades and patterns for the social construction of cultural belonging may differ between persons and even shift within one person over time. Whereas a common language may be an important feature at one point in time, it may be completely irrelevant in other cases. Then, for example, local origin, common descent, gender issues or similar beliefs and practices become more important. All of this is deeply related to the context and so the same person may highlight being from Egypt when interacting with a person from Syria, being a Muslim when interacting with a Christian person from Europe, or its local origin when dealing with someone from a neighbouring town. This is what is meant by social construction of cultural belonging.

Second, the declaration of the “Arab world” indicates that the traits mentioned above are equally shared by the members of this cultural setting and distributed evenly across a large region. Of course, this is not the case, as the authors themselves correctly notice: “The Arab context . . . does not form a homogeneous group of countries, but rather a mosaic of identities formed by religion, cultures, languages, traditions, faiths, political systems, geographies, history, and artistic expression” (Krueger *et al.*, 2021 with reference to Basco, 2017). Exactly therefore we suggest focusing on an understanding of culture as a process of social construction. If applied in this way, the focus is put on the production of cultural cohesion and not on the traits as such. Again, the article remains contradictory because Krueger *et al.* (2021) rightly criticize thinking in “containers” although their notion of the “Arab world” is implying exactly such an understanding. For this reason, we take up their call for taking micro-, meso- and macro-context more seriously and put forward a new concept of culture and for cross-cultural comparisons in fourth section.

To summarize, it is fair to say that the shortcomings of the notion of culture in family business research have long been recognized (Stewart, 2003, 2020; Stewart and Hitt, 2012), but the dominance of Hofstede’s concept of culture is still strong in family business research. Therefore, we conclude that frameworks like Hofstede’s are unable to detect or explain differences that appear in empirical data as they rely too much on pre-conceived understandings of culture which are problematic in at least three ways: First, they equate culture with a set of definable traits such as language, religion or ethnic affiliation. Second, they take these traits to be shared nearly uniformly among all members of a whole country or nation, which is obviously not the case. Third, they assume that individuals act out their nation’s cultural patterns and inherited values and have little choice to reflect on or deviate from them. All of this is problematic because it neglects change and conceptualizes culture rather as an iron cage than a meaningful concept.

Against this backdrop, our research suggests that a systematic integration of insights from the social sciences into family business research and the development of context-specific and truly cross-cultural perspective is required. This endeavour appears the more worthwhile as interest in such forms of research is increasing (Basco *et al.*, 2019; Bornhausen, 2022; Chabowski *et al.*, 2017; James *et al.*, 2020; Krueger *et al.*, 2021; Picone *et al.*, 2021). For several decades already, anthropologists have challenged each of these three assumptions, and cross-cultural comparisons in family businesses and business families would be better based on some of the more recent understandings of culture. To this end, we shall discuss new concepts of culture in the next section based on the wealth of pertinent anthropological and sociological literature, thus challenging many of the reductionist concepts of culture underlying the most problematic comparative schemes in family business research.

### 3. Anthropological and social science approaches to culture

Following a general trend in the social sciences in the last decades, social phenomena – such as nations, gender orientations or understandings of kinship (Carsten, 2000, 2004) and the family (Jurczyk *et al.*, 2014, 2020) – are increasingly thought to be socially constructed. Likewise, anthropological research on culture has challenged trait-based concepts of culture and established culture as a socially constituted phenomenon (Brumann, 1999, 2002; Geertz,

1973; Ortner, 1973; Sahlins, 1999). These shifts are famously emphasized in the *writing culture debate* where traditional concepts of culture were criticized as being static, discrete, homogenous and coherent (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Abu-Lughod, 2008). In the words of Sahlins (1999, p. 414, emphasis added): “the signs of cultural *distinction* represent *modes of organization* rather than the traits in themselves”. Thus, the constitution of cultural meanings and symbols has become at least as important as the cultural traits or characteristics as such, which emphasizes the fact that “culture is flexible in its usage” (Baldwin *et al.*, 2006: x). Accordingly, views of culture as “consistent set of representations (or beliefs) that constitute a people’s perception of reality and that get reproduced relatively intact across generation” (Fox and King, 2020, p. 1) became highly problematic. It has become too evident, empirically, that culture is not automatically produced within a group of people or reproduced across generations. Rather, attention is now given to the fact that the constitution of culture itself needs to be explained, and becomes increasingly heterogeneous, multiple and is no longer distributed evenly across a population and passed on unaltered to the next generation (Agar, 2006; Brumann, 1999; Sökefeld, 1999).

To date, however, culture is still considered meaningful only if it is experienced as “bounded, reified, essentialized, and timeless”, and thus some elements do appear to members as stable and immutable (Brumann, 1999, p. 11). This is exactly why an outdated understanding of culture has persisted until today: “Whether anthropologists like it or not, it appears that people – and not only those with power – *want* culture, and they often want it in precisely the bounded, reified, essentialized, and timeless fashion that most of us [anthropologists] now reject” (Brumann, 1999, p. 11, emphasis in original).

By contrast, we emphasize an understanding of culture as a social construct that is often referred to tacitly, with far-reaching consequences for family business research and management practice. Researchers need to consider that “culture” may well be invoked as an intentional strategy, justification or explanation for specific patterns to exclude others, with clearly political and, at times, xenophobic consequences (Stolcke, 1995).

Following the discussions on culture in anthropology, it may be understood best as “a comparison technique and often a comparative, [which] is the drawing of distinctions between *us* and *them*” (Roth *et al.*, 2020, p. 1, emphasis in original). Here, however, it is important to keep in mind that we are not talking about organizational or business culture, but rather refer to a broader concept of culture that provides a context for organizational or business settings. This may include patterns of shared morality and custom, religious notions, social conventions or many other characteristics. All these routines contribute to the social, symbolic, processual constitution of culture. This includes patterns to foster group cohesion and the demarcation from others, inclusion and exclusion (Brumann, 1999). At the same time, it must be stressed that anything does not go either. Culture is not entirely negotiable or manipulable (Sahlins, 1999, p. 403).

Accordingly, anthropologists and fellow social scientists across many decades and theoretical persuasions held that human action in general, and economic action in particular, is grounded in very specific social contexts, which differ considerably over space and time. Similarly widespread is an understanding of culture that acknowledges not only the distinctions between social groups but also the fact that such distinctions may be either perpetuated or changed over time, thereby demanding that researchers also account for processes of change and continuity as a basic property of culture. In anthropology and the social sciences, such positions have been hegemonic and underwrite all understandings of culture (Alesina and Giuliano, 2015; Beckert, 1996; Beugelsdijk and Maseland, 2010; Gudeman, 2008; Hann and Hart, 2009; Koellner, 2012, pp. 10–14; Mauss, 1990 (1925) Polanyi, 2001 (1944) Roth *et al.*, 2020; Thurnwald, 1932; Weber, 1990 (1922) Wong, 2021; Zukin and Di Maggio, 1990).

To summarize our findings, it is safe to say that a new understanding of culture also facilitates a better understanding of specific mechanisms for structuring and organizing the family and the business in relation to context. In short, cultural patterns are crucially important



and influence business and family operations considerably. For this reason, we stress the need to re-think how we can relate to context and conduct cross-cultural studies of business families and family businesses. In this way, we may be able to remedy the above shortcomings of the current trajectories of research on families and businesses as we pay more attention to conceptualizations of culture from neighbouring social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology. If we follow that route, as family business researchers, we can abandon reductionist container thinking and cultivate a processual and context-sensitive understanding of both business and family. In this way, we are better able to conceptualize economic action in family businesses and business families to “entail [...] heterogeneous capitalist practices shaped by diverse meanings, sentiments, and representations [...] all of which *are culturally mediated*.” (Yanagisako, 2002, p. 7, emphasis added).

#### 4. Culture and cross-cultural comparisons

How, then, are we able to develop a better and more nuanced approach to context and cultural specifics? Besides the inbound theorizing from anthropology and sociology, we draw on previous research in management and describe culture as a social phenomenon that organizes external differentiation and internal integration (Schein, 2010). However, these characteristics apply to any process of group formation such as ethnicities, families or organizations. Unlike other scholars – who describe culture as being part of an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Audretsch and Belitski, 2017; Audretsch et al., 2021; Theodoraki and Catanzaro, 2022) yet give little information where the entrepreneurial ecosystem ends and the cultural context starts – we therefore understand culture as a higher-order process of inclusion and exclusion.

Moreover, our approach also challenges traditional multi-level approaches to culture (Krueger et al., 2021; Tsui et al., 2007) in general and particularly those where the levels of individual, group, organizational, national and global culture are distinguished. These approaches are problematic because these different levels cannot be aggregated or reduced to one another. Thus, we describe culture as a wide but flexible concept that may both span across national boundaries and remain bound by them. Some aspects of Catholic religion, for example, may be relevant for large parts of South America and create a culture of spanning almost a whole continent, whereas others might remain specific to small regions. India may serve as an example, too, as we find there a wealth of different cultures within one subcontinent and nation many of which cannot be reduced to mere sub-cultures of an assumed subcontinental Indian national culture.

Finally, we also move beyond the notion of embeddedness that has been popularized by economic and sociological institutionalism (Beckert, 2003; Granovetter, 1985; Zukin and Di Maggio, 1990). In particular, we remain sceptical about Granovetter’s early concept of embeddedness which focuses on the social networks of the actors and ignores the “complex Alchemy of politics, culture, and ideology” that others try to capture with the concept (Krippner, 2001, p. 782). Moreover, the analytical value of such a broad understanding of neo-institutional theory has been criticized because “at the end of the day, all economies are embedded” and new conceptual tools for capturing the context of economic action were demanded (Beckert, 2009, p. 53). Similarly, Alvesson and Spicer (2019) recognized an inflationary and tautological use of the concept of institution in neo-institutionalism. Therefore, we aim at developing a sufficiently inclusive *and* distinctive model that avoids tautologies and inflationary applications.

In so doing, we insist that culture is not static, homogeneous or coherent but socially constructed and tends to create differences without neglecting global tendencies and cross-cultural exchanges. In these processes, however, we also notice shared patterns and specific ways how different things are understood, practiced and evaluated. This means that some patterns are more likely in one setting and less so in another. For example, some cultural context may be closer connected to a patriarchal notion of family life. Again, however, as recent research has shown very convincingly: patriarchal notions are not distributed evenly

across nation states and within the population (Gruber and Szoltysek, 2016). Instead, the two authors developed the patriarchy index and have been able to painstakingly show regional differences, which may be understood as cultural context. Moreover, all of these patterns were subject to change over time so that there was no coherent and constant pattern of culture in what is Germany today.

Therefore, and to further enhance the debates on culture, family business studies might, for a start, seek to incorporate cultural context by using the notion of culture as it is discussed in anthropology and the sociology. Cultural context, then, is a wide frame and allows for emphasizing certain characteristics such as moral notions, religious considerations, ethnic belonging, and their influence on human behaviour in specific situations and settings. Economic operations of family businesses, then, are taking place in “a nexus of social action in which kinship goals, sentiments and commitments are at play” that are bounded to the cultural context (Yanagisako, 2019, p. 6). Applied in that way, such a concept of culture allows for an understanding of context that is not essentialist as it has been in previous approaches (e.g. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions) and may enrich context-sensitive research further (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Aldrich et al., 2021; Basco, 2017; Krueger et al., 2021).

This is very important because culture is not only constructed and relational but also partial and plural (Agar, 2006). Consequently, persons do not have a culture but belong to different cultural contexts because they may use different patterns for differentiation, e.g. by stating “I have a religion, an ethnicity, and a language. So, I may craft myself by referring to these different characteristics, all of which refer to my cultural context”. Cultural reality, however, is likely to be more complex as one may draw many other distinctions to distinguish and define oneself, and thus to socially construct of cultural differences and the cultural characteristics. What is more, culture itself is a culture-specific concept that has been “invented” in 18th-century Europe to serve an emerging interest in comparisons (Luhmann, 2008). “The interest in culture is therefore rooted in an interest in comparisons” (id., p. 43). Culture therefore is a concept that may truly be referred to as “comparison technique”, and thus as one whose basic form is the drawing of distinctions between *us* and *them* (Roth et al., 2020, p. 1). The standard case of doing culture are comparisons between one’s own and other nations or between earlier and current stages of one’s own or other nations, respectively. In recent decades, this comparison technique has also routinely been applied to distinguish sub-cultures within one’s own culture and to suppose that some of these subcultures have more culture than others.

As a comparison technique, however, culture is not entirely self-made but also the result of other cultures’ observation of one’s own culture. As one observes other cultures, one realises that other cultures observe one’s own observations of their culture; and in observing other cultures’ observations, one realizes that other cultures draw their own and often different distinctions. Culture, therefore, appears as the form by which social systems broadly conceived to include families, businesses, nations and many other systems observe both themselves and one another. Consequently, “doing culture” is a matter of social differentiation.

A comprehensive overview of the basic forms of social differentiation may start with the perhaps most basic social distinction, which is that between similar and dissimilar social systems (Luhmann, 2013, p. 12f). This distinction can then be combined with that between equal and unequal systems (Luhmann, 1977). The result is a cross-tabulation of two foundational social distinctions (Roth, 2015, 2017, 2021) that resonates with early sociological works on social differentiation (Durkheim, 1933; Marx, 1867; Spencer, 1895; Tönnies, 1963) as the seminal distinctions between homogeneity and heterogeneity, mechanic and organic solidarity, association and organization, or community and society are all drawn along the first dividing line of dis-/similarity, while the second distinction between equality and inequality has been discussed more controversially as inequality was considered an avoidable side-effect of division of labour by some classics (e.g. Durkheim) and an unavoidable effect by others (e.g. Marx; see Cattacin, 2001). In any case, the resulting cross-tabling of the two foundational



sociological distinctions generates a matrix that displays the four basic forms of social differentiation (see [Table 1](#)).

Developed by [Roth \(2021\)](#), [Table 1](#) suggests that the social construction of cultural differences and characteristics is based on four basic forms of social differentiation: segmentation, centralization, stratification and functional differentiation. Segmentation refers to the grouping of similar elements into analytically equal categories. Thus, we can distinguish families and clans, languages and language families, tribes or nations, settlements, the list goes on. Certainly, however, we may also observe that although there is no quasi-natural superiority of, e.g. the Russian over the Armenian language, the former is more central (even though the latter is older). This observation, then, refers to the second form of social differentiation, namely centralization or centre-periphery differentiation. Though often enablers of one another, centralization and stratification must not be translated into or confused with each other. In early modern Europe, French was both the most central language and the language of the upper strata of society (and thus also considered by many the most sublime modern language). Consider, in contrast, however, the case of the Norman conquest of England, where the Norman ruling class ultimately adopted the language and lifestyle of those they ruled. The distinction between two or more classes, estates, castes or other strata in ranked orders must therefore be distinguished from the distinction between centres and peripheries. Since the dawn of modernity, we have finally seen a trend towards increasingly sharper distinctions between what social-systems theorists refer to as “function systems” such as politics, economy, science, art, religion, law, education and so on.

In this sense, [Table 1](#) shows a compact, detailed, and most probably comprehensive map of those social distinctions that one may draw on to define and distinguish cultures. Of course, no self-definitions of individual persons or social systems must or ever will draw on all the above aspects or dimensions to define their culture; in fact, culture is best understood as a concept of distinctions that is most often latent but can be made relevant in a specific setting when necessary (see also [Figure 1](#)).

[Figure 1](#) shows the profiles of two families each characterized by the different importance they place on the different function systems of society, namely politics, economy, science, art, religion, law, sport, health, education and the mass media. In these spider diagrams, increasing importance is represented as increasing distance from the centre. Thus, both families appear as business families as indicated by their strong orientation towards the economy, yet each family is likely to pursue its business mission very differently because of the different value the remaining function systems have for these families due to their individual history and/or socio-cultural context.

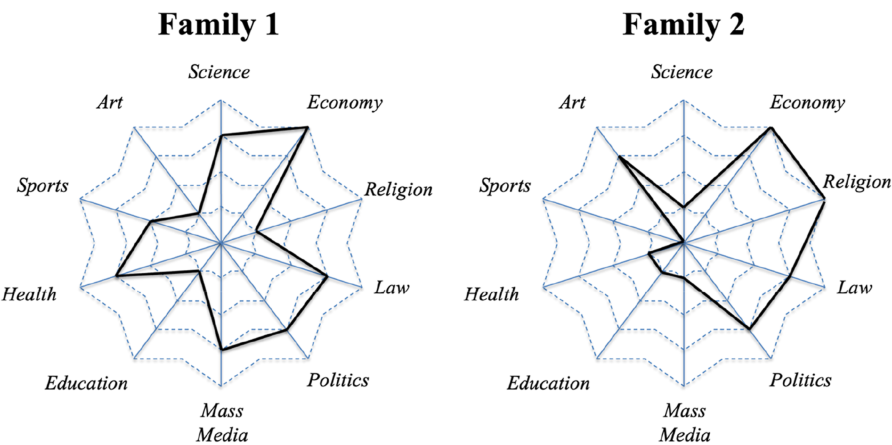
Being the most recently emerged form of social differentiation, functional differentiation is yet to be more systematically included in cultural studies. This systematic inclusion, however, is critical if one aims to take all aspects of culture into account, which implies the consideration of all above forms of social differentiation.

If we perform such a systematic analysis, then the importance of all these forms and its subforms may be ranked according to their relevance to a specific system’s cultural context (see, e.g. [Roth et al., 2020](#)). In so doing, we can develop profiles that distinguish and compare these different contexts without essentializing the notion of culture (see [Table 2](#)).

**Table 1.** Social differentiation

	Equal	Unequal
Similar	Segmentation (families, tribes, nations, etc.)	Centralization (civilizations, empires, etc.)
Dissimilar	Functional differentiation (economy, science, art, etc.)	Stratification (castes, estates, classes, etc.)

**Source(s):** [Roth, 2021](#), p. 719



Source(s): Authors’ own work

Figure 1. Families in the context of functional differentiation

Table 2. A model for comparing cultures

Culture A	Culture B
English language	English language
Economy	Family origin (nobility, gentry, commoners)
Religion	Gender
Politics	Politics
Ethnicity	Economy
Former periphery of an Empire	Centre of an Empire
Source(s): Authors’ own work	

Table 2 shows that even though belonging to the same language segment, two cultures can be very different if it comes the importance they place on the afore-mentioned forms of social differentiation turned cultural variables. Note that the profiles are already highly specific (and most likely sufficient to make an educated guess as to the cultures being distinguished) even though we have abstained from defining in higher resolution their political regime or their dominant religious orientation. This observation is coherent with Amann *et al.*'s (2020, p. 28) idea “that the Islam-Christianity divide might be less significant than the difference between cultures that place a high or low value on religion; and the picture becomes even more diverse and colourful as we draw similar conclusions for other function systems”. Intra-category differences between cultures are indeed not unlikely to be less important than differences of the importance cultures place on the different categories.

In so mapping and comparing culture(s), we do not deny certain dis-/continuities over time and in larger areas because this is how it becomes useful for cross-cultural analysis over time. What is specific to one cultural setting and which patterns are the most relevant there? Where are they located in the ranking and are we able to recognize a specific pattern in a cultural setting? It may be best understood by comparing culture to a building. Although the building can be changed, basic characteristics remain, and it still is relevant if it is made of wood or stone. For example, although we can change the location of windows, doors and rooms, a wooden building remains a wooden building and a stone building a stone building with the inherent basic characteristics. Similarly, cultural settings can be conceptualized as flexible on

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the one hand and stable on the other. Even though changes occur, some basic characteristics persist and allow for emphasizing continuity.

This would enable us to apply the relevance of the cultural setting to family business research, as it is important to analyse the processes how culture is filled with meaning and realized in everyday life. For example, it may help us to gain more detailed insights when we focus on the family (Aldrich *et al.*, 2021; Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2018) and conceptualize variances among families by developing systematic tools for capturing the cultural context of these variances (Landau, 2007). To be sure, there is no uniform understanding of the family across different cultures (Kushins and Behounek, 2020; Wong, 2021). Families rest on specific forms of organization, and even the very idea that families are organizable seems contestable (Kleve *et al.*, 2020). Expressions and ideas about the role of the family in individual and communal life therefore do change, and both forms and ideas of and for the family are subject to creative processes of production and reproduction (Alber *et al.*, 2013; Carsten, 2000; Jurczyk *et al.*, 2014; Sahlins, 2013; Stewart, 2010).

To understand these processes, we need more systematic cross-cultural comparisons because the results of previous research on the impact of kin-based ties on entrepreneurial success are highly ambivalent (Schweitzer, 2000; Stewart, 2003). Though associated with free support and care, kinship relations also face culture-specific expectations of mutual support and sharing (Sahlins, 2013; Benteler, 2015), a factor that might both enhance and curb business. Consequently, notions of belonging might be framed inclusively or exclusively, thus regulating access to resources and moral obligations for mutual assistance (Schweitzer, 2000). More specifically, kinship ties could offer several culture-specific patterns that may be beneficial such as sharing of information (Lomnitz and Pérez-Lizaur, 1987), access to networks and markets (Goody, 1996, p. 120ff.) or the pooling of resources necessary for the establishment of the business (Hart, 1975; Tocheva, 2015, p. 137ff.). Yet, kin relations also tend to limit entrepreneurial success when they exert normative pressure for financial support (Barth, 1963; Hart, 1975) or when short-term needs must be fulfilled at the expense of the family business (Lomnitz and Pérez-Lizaur, 1987). Precisely this is at stake when Janet Carsten (2000, p. 4) emphasizes the “particularities of being related in a specific cultural context”, are shaped by the “ordinary, everyday activities of family life” (Carsten, 2004, p. 6).

A cross-culturally comparative approach as presented above, therefore, constitutes a promising agenda for future research on family business and business families not least because it does not exist in ready-to-apply form yet. This is true, first, because our above elaborations have outlined the coexistence of contradicting and sometimes highly problematic concepts of culture in family business and management research. Second, even within anthropology and sociology themselves, and even though the topics of kinship and economy are central, there are only relatively few social science experts in family business research so far (Koellner, 2022, 2023). This emerging field at the interface of social science and business research is, therefore, still characterized by solid, yet weakly tied individual research endeavours (Ghezzi, 2016; Jones, 2006; Rutherford, 2010; Tereshina, 2021; Wong and Chau, 2019).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to incorporate insights from anthropology and other social sciences because they have a comparative and cross-cultural self-understanding at its roots (Goody, 1976; Murdoch, 1957, 1967). Therefore, it is worthwhile to integrate such insights and to develop a cross-cultural perspective on business families and family businesses with connections to anthropology and sociology. First attempts at this integration have been made (Stewart, 1992, 2003, 2014; Koellner, 2023), yet, there remains a wealth of anthropological and sociological concepts of kinship, culture and family, the exploration of which would prove highly beneficial for future cross-culturally comparative research on business families and family businesses.

An adequate starting point for cross-cultural comparisons is Sylvia Yanagisako's (2019, p. 6) notion of the kinship enterprise as “projects of collectivities of people who construe themselves to be connected by enduring family bonds and whose relations are structured by beliefs, sentiments and commitments”. Based on such a perspective, we might be able to

analyse patterns such as beliefs, sentiments and commitments in their contribution to the business family and to build bridges between anthropological research on families and classical family business research. Thus, we may also succeed “to understand how decisions about the investment and reinvestment of capital, expansion and diversification, and management structure are made without setting up an opposition between economic and kinship goals” (ibid.). In so doing, we could develop a truly global and comparative perspective on families and family businesses in their broader political, economic and further social contexts.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we pointed at the prevalence in family business research of concepts that identify culture as a largely consistent set of practices and meanings shared by inhabitants of different countries. Whereas this dominant concept of culture does allow for certain insights in political or legal issues (taxes, laws, etc.) and some institutional factors (labour markets, capital markets, etc.), such country-level and traditional concepts of culture are clearly inadequate for fine-grained insights into many other social domains. One most obvious case in point are business families, which are the most important context factors of family businesses. For this reason, we drew attention to anthropological and sociological concepts of culture also highlighting that cultural processes are not only subject to considerable change but also that cultural features are unevenly distributed *within* the population of individual countries. Against this backdrop, we emphasized an understanding of culture as process and discussed concepts of culture from neighbouring social sciences, which allow for truly cross-cultural comparisons that stress the rootedness of the business family and the family business in more fine-grained and diverse sets of cultural settings.

To develop an even more sophisticated understanding of culture that would allow for cross-cultural comparisons not only across or within the segments of national cultures but also across or within the entire range of sub-systems of modern world society (Roth, 2021), further interaction with adjacent social sciences is required. Yet, it is fair to say that, given its long-standing tradition and wealth of expertise in cross-cultural research on family and economic issues, “imports” from anthropology and sociology hold a great potential of substantially improving the theoretical diversity and cross-cultural competence of research on business families and family businesses.

## Notes

1. See [https://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/extreweb/Extreweb\\_files/v3\\_document.htm](https://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/extreweb/Extreweb_files/v3_document.htm)

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### Further reading

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