

Using Psychodynamics to Uncover Leadership Practice: Family Farm Women in Action

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Abstract

Our intention in this paper is to explore the individual emotional experience of leadership practices in family business through the (inter)actions of family farm women. Applying a systems psychodynamic lens we explore the relationship of the organisation as a system, specifically how power and emotions are experienced in the daily working lives of farm women. Exploring the unconscious nature of work and the role of individual emotions and power relations could be a fruitful line of inquiry to explore how leadership affects the everyday work in family farm businesses and the role of farm women. More importantly, systems psychodynamics provides the potential to explore the lived experience of leadership in family farm businesses.

Family farm businesses offer a particularly interesting subject to gain an understanding of how context and gender affect the practice of leadership within the firm. In many farm business cases the family home is also part of the family business (Gasson and Errington, 1993) and this presents unique contextual factors for the firm's leader, not to mention multi-generational business ownership and a sector which is dominated by masculinity (e.g. Gasson and Errington, 1993).

Psychodynamic theories assume that motivation and actions are inaccessible to the conscious mind even though behaviour and emotions are affected, looking at an individuals or groups inner dynamics (Newman and Hirschhorn, 1999). In seeking to explore unconscious behaviour and dynamics at work (Trehan, 2007; Vince, 2002, Vince and Mazen, 2014) and the connections to the conscious enables us to explore the emotional connotations of family business by allowing the investigation of the positive and negative and social power (Vince, 2002). Systems psychodynamic theory can help leaders to understand ongoing contradictions within their work role, for example they are expected to be both the champions of change and the guardians of the status quo, which is pertinent in family business (Vince and Mazen, 2014). Systems psychodynamics allows for the integration of emotions power and the everyday politics of life (Arnuad, 2012; Fotaki, Long, and Schwartz, 2012; Ket de Vries et al., 2007; Vince and Mazen, 2014).

We define leadership as a practice, carried out in everyday (work and home) settings, involving the attribution of meaning and significance to actions (Alvesson and Spicer 2011, pp. 4–5). The most effective leader is 'attentive to both the task and socio-emotional/relationship dimensions of leadership' (Iles and Preece, 2006, p. 318). Scholars also acknowledge that dysfunctional leadership practices, family strife, paternalism and succession concerns can complicate management to such an extent that the firm can collapse (Kets de Vries et al., 2007).

Drawing on an ethnographic study, we combine interview and participant observations data

to provide three in-depth vignettes detailing illustrations of events in different organisational settings across the farm business. We utilise a psychodynamic framework to explore anxiety, emotions and power relationships between individuals and family groups to surface hidden dynamics.

Our findings indicate that in small family farm enterprises emotions and power relations play a central position. Throughout the working day family members can experience a rainbow of emotions from positive to negative and this can affect and be affected by the ever changing politics and power within the family and business dynamic. The relationship between setting and gender uncover leadership power dynamics and lead us to propose our conceptual notion of 'daily leadership in practice' by this we mean a fluid, ever changing notion of leadership bounded by gender.

In family enterprises there is an eclectic mix of leadership styles which are dependent on the course of action required and the context in which a change of behaviour is needed. The psychodynamics of the family business enlighten our understanding of the complex interplay of emotions and the unconscious in the daily work lives of individuals and the undercurrent of positive and negative emotions. What this analysis indicates is that when we are researching leadership in family firms we need to recognise that power and emotions operates in areas that may be obscured by traditional theories and approaches. Whilst our focus is on one type of family business – the family farm, we believe our approach bridges current gaps between family business and leadership studies, and advances the study of leadership in small firms.

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