‘Face work’ and ‘face saving’ strategies during televised consultancy interventions of family business leadership transitions

Abstract

In this article we undertake an analysis of ‘face work’ in eight television programs produced for the BBC (‘I’ll show them who’s boss’ and ‘The Fixer’ series) in which high profile consultants (Gerry Robinson and Alex Polizzi) reach into the work and lives of family business owners to prescribe strategies for survival, leadership change and the long term sustainability of the businesses. We consider how the filmed consultancy interventions stimulate an interactional realm in which ‘face work’ occurs between family business members as they respond to the consultancy advice. More specifically, through the selection of eight situational dynamics involving different family configurations (father-son, siblings, spousal and cousin consortiums), we evaluate the ‘face attacks’ that are generated by the consultants concerning leadership transition and the corresponding face-saving strategies that occur. This conceptualization, we argue, is distinctive for making visible the rights and obligations that are invoked whilst being a member of both a family and a business.

Introduction:

Over the last thirty years, television programming has seen an increase in the screening of real-life or ‘reality[1]’ programs in which a high profile expert/consultant intervenes in what are presented as ‘problematic’ business situations in order to bring about personal and organizational transformations. Examples of such reality programs are: the BBC Trouble Shooter series including I’ll show them who’s boss and The Fixer, as well as programs focusing on certain business segments such as restaurants (Kitchen Nightmares), retail (Mary Queen of Shops), hotels (The Hotel Inspector) and Blood on the Carpet. Such television formats are distinctive because they provide social representations of intriguing (and often secretive) business situations that show real people interacting with one another as they face human dilemmas whilst simultaneously making important decisions about the future of their businesses. Often these programs centre on small family businesses that are at some sort of crossroads (i.e. son taking over the business; mother retiring; business failing; succession forthcoming).

[1] In popular culture, this genre of TV business programming is often referred to as ‘reality television’ – a format that combines factual and ‘real life’ data. It derives from a tradition of film making known as ‘cinema verite[1]’ (truthful cinema) which is a generic term that embraces a range of documentary-making styles from ‘observational cinema’, ‘direct cinema’, ‘living camera’, ‘mobile camera’, ‘realistic cinema’ or ‘film inquiry’ (Hassard, 2009 referring to Issari and Paul, 1979: 7)

Given that these television programs have not been produced for academic scholarship purposes but have been made for public consumption, an interesting question arises about the 'specific kinds of [scholarly] knowledge that may be generated' from the use of visual formats (Bell and Harrison, 2013, p. 168). On the one hand, as suggested by Goodman (2004), such visual formats could be seen merely as 'eccentric specialisms' designed primarily for providing 'good entertainment' when engaging students in classroom learning. On the other hand, films have long been recognized as a rich resource for critical analysis of organizational issues. Studies have focused on how organizations are dramatically represented in popular culture (Hassard and Holliday, 1998), whilst others have used films in order to illuminate or interrogate organizational issues associated with power, and gender (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004; Champoux, 2004; Goodman, 2004; Tejeda, 2008; Clemmes and Hamaka, 2010; and Czarniawska et al. 2011; Ashford, 2013). An underlying motive in these studies is to address how even seemingly trivial entertainment can function as pervasive amplifications of societal issues (Warren, 2009, p.571 quoting Brewis, 1998).

Whilst we acknowledge this wider literature on the particular meanings, nuances, and benefits of films and other visual modes of inquiry and learning (see Meyer et al. 2013), our main concern in the current article is with the specific kinds of insights that are stimulated through the 'reality' documentary made especially for television. We argue that the programs bring to the fore the contextualised, multi modal, embodied and temporal nature of family businesses dynamics - dynamics that are difficult to capture with traditional research practices. In addition, the use of visual resources for data analysis of family business settings are rare and only two studies can be found[i]: Televisual formats are distinctive, therefore, for six reasons.

First, such programs are 'factual' in the sense that they based on actual companies and real people and where the main purpose is to display the 'organization of human life …. in which there are no actors…..' (Goodman, 2004) and where the main characters play themselves within the framework of a prepared story (Hassard, and Holliday, 1998). Second, these programs have a 'documentary' element in that they try to portray an inside or private view of a business setting that audiences are not normally privy to. Using reality business programs made for television is analytically distinctive and informative, therefore, because they demonstrate how business settings are 'as much a human struggle as other areas of life' (Thirkell, 2010, p.6). Third, they are performative given that the filming process depends to a large extent on the cooperation of real life social actors as the family members have given permission for filming in their homes with spouses and colleagues. Fourth, the programs are ethnographic in the sense that the producers deploy various research techniques to 'provide sociological insights into the 'real world' of institutions and occupations' (Hassard, 2009, p.270). Based on prior research, dialogue is embedded into events or critical incidents to show how individuals make sense of particular situations in their social context. A final distinctive feature is that during the 1990's it became more common for documentaries to use high profile experts or consultants who would 'intervene' and offer advice on how to rectify particular problems. In so doing, they usually

diagnose and prescribe interventions based on their specific frames of reference (Schein, 2011; Schön, 1982) which often glosses over the particular social realities of families in business.

The intervention of the cameras and the consultant into the everyday lives of the families in business means, therefore, that an interactional realm is created in which viewers can observe the co-constitution of meaning and action between family business members as they respond to the consultancy advice. By focusing on this interactional realm, it is possible to identity a range of attacking and defensive postures that are occurring between family business members as they responded to the consultancy advice concerning leadership transition. To evaluate these postures we use the notion of face work. We argue that face work is theoretically distinctive for making visible and consequential the rights and obligations of being a member of a family in business.

Theoretical framing

The substantive issues that are explicitly raised within the programs by the consultants intervention relate to leadership, management change and succession (i.e. lack of willingness to let go; fear of upsetting parents when taking over leadership; lack of clarity of roles; lack of consistent leadership; lack of commitment from younger generation; lack of trust; concern for stewardship and longevity of the business etc.). Interrelated within these issues are organizational adaptations that result from proposals made about outdated business models and frameworks. However, as changes in the business framework also require changes in the family (leadership) system, leadership issues also come under attack. For example, the consultant in The Fixer (Polizzi) asserts the importance of modern, commercially minded and marketing oriented business models that often clash with the localized, operational and 'craft' orientation of business founders. For this reason, she emphasizes the importance of effective family leadership to serve the transition to new business models and structures. In contrast, Robinson (the consultant in I'll Show them Who's Boss) challenges the shared leadership roles that frequently evolve from family situational contexts and the lack of clarity of decision-making, which, in his view, shared leadership, can lead to. In both programs, the need for profitable and sustainable business models is emphasized at the expense of family roles and relationships. This causes tension because often the old-established business models are closely associated to the values, identities and aspirations of the founding family members.

Turning to the literature on leadership in family business settings, it can be noted that the topic of leadership (alongside governance, ownership and management) is one of the most frequently discussed topics in family business settings. For example, studies stress different categories of leadership (i.e. participative, autocratic, laissez-faire, expert and referent (Sorenson, 2000). Other studies emphasise the shifting role of leadership in relation to external factors such as environmental change and its influence on strategy and innovation (Craig & Moores, 2006). A study by Vallejo (2009) identifies the relevance of transformational leadership in family versus non-family firms. Other investigations focus more specifically on leadership in terms of careers and career paths (Salvato et al., 2012). Whereas, other analyses focus on sibling teams

(Farrington, Venter, & Boshoff, 2012), spousal leadership (Poza & Messer, 2001), women's pathways to participation and leadership (Dumas, 1998; Jimenez, 2009), the role of in-laws in leadership, the relationship between stewardship and leadership (Pearson & Marler, 2010), the dependence of family businesses on a single decision-maker (Feltham et al., 2005) and the legacy of leadership in relation to emotional processes (Baker & Wiseman, 1998). In addition, there are also studies on successor selection (Ward, 1987), boards of directors (Corbetta & Salvato, 2004), top management teams (Ensley & Pearson, 2005), the cultural competencies of CEOs (Hall & Nordqvist, 2008) and discussions on whether the CEO should be chair of the board (Braun & Sharma, 2007).

As can be seen from this very brief overview, leadership is also one of the most complex topics to address in that it involves hierarchical differentiations and asymmetric relationships including leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014) where roles are taken, power is surrendered, defined and shaped (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 258) and particular rights, obligations, and duties associated with particular systems in the organizational system are constructed (Yukl, 2013, p.189). Leadership transitions also bring to the fore emotions and occupational states (i.e. feelings of stress, frustration competitiveness, rivalry, belongingness), managerial competencies (or lack of), contrasting styles of communicating and concerns about self/identity, career issues, or existential reasons (age, death of parents, birth of children).

Adding to the complexity is the fact that in family business settings, roles are often shared or dispersed between several family members (in order to secure resources, legitimacy, commitment, growth, sustainability and succession). This can create an impression of 'shared leadership' based on inclusion and equality but often family members try to resist changes in leadership or the business framework to prevent others from changing and to maintain their place in the social hierarchy. This results in tensions and power struggles concerning leadership and business model changes that, on the surface, can be read as a wish to maintain an appearance of equality but under the surface are a concern about the loss of face and status that can occur as (senior) leaders become followers and (young) followers become leaders. These power struggles also bring to light concerns about the rights and obligations that come with being a member of both a family and a business.

As a result, 'there is no clear consensus [and nor could there be] as to as to what levels of influences and processes are most critical to understanding leadership' (Mumford et al. 2009) p.123). For this reason, we see the leadership transition issues identified in the films as highly contextual and situational with each family business having a distinctive pattern of interactions. During the programs, people reveal something of how they see themselves and their relationships with others. 'Behavioral phenomenon [are brought] into sharp focus' (Tejeda, 2008, p.434) and a holistic visual portrayal of the non-linear processes through which social functioning occurs is shown. More specifically, interactions are worked out, dialogue unfolds, emotions are expressed or withheld, and voices (as well as silences) are seen or heard through verbal statements, facial/

bodily expressions and other signifiers. At the same time, a range of attacking and defensive postures can be observed that are used to defend or justify leadership transition decisions.

To make sense of these postures theoretically, we utilize the notion of 'face work' which we applied to a selection of situational dynamics involving different family configurations (father-son, siblings, spousal and cousin consortiums). Face work is the term used to describe what is going on, or what is accomplished, as 'human beings in co-presence or interaction [with one another] realize society and social order' (Samra-Fredericks, 2010, p.2147). Face' is at the centre of all our interactions as we co-constitute meaning and action (Arundale, 2010, p.110; Bargiela-Chiappini, (2010, p.2073)). Furthermore, face is the 'positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' (Samra-Fredericks, 2010, p.2149).

In our view, the notion of face work has significant analytical potential for understanding the processes and constrained interactions that are central to family business leadership transitions. Face work is based on the assumption that 'what the person protects and defends and invests his feelings in, is an idea bout himself and ideas ….' (Goffman, 1967, p.43). When we observe family members defending and protecting certain face or status positions with regard to relinquishing a leadership position or claiming a new one, they are as Manning (2008, p.4) argues, putting out 'a line' to which others can react positively or negatively. In addition, this 'line' or way of expressing their view of the situation vis a vis others, tells us something about how they see their membership in particular categories (i.e. 'family', 'business', 'leadership') – and the rights and obligations that they create. The notion of face work, therefore, provides a rich 'conceptual terrain' to encapsulate the reasoning procedures, inferential practices and the 'cultural knowledge' that we draw upon to sustain social interaction. Furthermore, face work makes 'visible and consequential' (Samra-Fredericks, 2010, p.2147) the rights and obligations that come with being a member of both a 'family' and a 'business'. With this theoretical frame in mind, the following research question is established:

To consider how the face attacks generated by the consultants concerning leadership transition invoke face-saving strategies that bring to light the rights and obligations associated with membership of family and business categories.

Analytical procedure

For purposes of manageability, we focus on two televised consultancy intervention programs in family business settings. The first was the BBC show 'I'll show them who's boss' (ISTWB) (screened initially by the BBC in 2003). The ISTWB television series was programmed in two series (2003; 2004) involving eight British family business situations. We also selected four similar family configurations from a second BBC series 'The Fixer' (2012-2014), in which consultant expert Alex Polizzi advises stagnant and declining small (family) firms on how to

revitalize their business[ii].

In selecting the eight programs we initially selected on the basis of different family business ownership-management configurations to examine more closely the processes central to leadership transition. In so doing, we followed a trend in family business research for evaluating particular family business configurations. These were: owner managed business involving younger generations in the business; sibling partnerships; spousal businesses; and extended family or cousin consortiums. It should be noted, however, that although we categorize these as the dominant configurations, within each there could be multifarious (inter-generational) relationships involving father-son(s), mother-daughter(s), spouses or cousins. Rather than analyze the complete television programs, we draw attention to one interactional dynamic from each case where a transition process from leader to follower, or follower to leader is underway. In so doing, following Goffman, (1961), we focus on situational or encounter based analysis to evaluate how 'actors enmeshed in interaction set out claims for recognition, status, prestige, notice, a face or a 'line' (Manning, 2008, p. 4). These encounters are outlined in column two of table 1.

Insert table 1 here

The eight selected programs (see column one of table two) were recorded from the television, converted to DVD format and scrutinized multiple times by the researchers as well as being utilized in learning situations with students. Initially, the dialogue and exchanges portrayed in the films were transcribed into a narrative following the flow of issues, exchanges and dialogue that occurred during the film presentation. This resulted in long and detailed texts but which, like transcribed texts produced through qualitative interview, conversation or observation techniques, provide rich material for analysis. Next, we followed several steps in Carvalho's (2000) approach to textual analysis of media frames to identify the:

(i) actors, social agents and characters central to the text (see column 1 of table 1);
(ii) face attacks that are made by the consultants (see column 2);
(iii) face work strategies adopted by the actors in response to the face attack(columns 3 to 7 of table 1). Here we address: what is being endangered or protected during the face work; the face work and associated emotional moves taken to restore face; the dominant face work strategy (i.e. face saving, face regulation, face denial, face compensation); and finally we outline what is accomplished during face work and how these accomplishments relate to membership of the business v family categories.

Summary of analysis

For the owner(s), sibling partners or spouses that founded the business, the main tension is not the need for leadership transition per se, but how they adapt themselves into new follower or

leadership roles when these roles and identities are often incongruous with membership of particular family categories such as parent, son/daughter or sibling. In all cases, the interventions of the consultants constituted an attack of face to one family member or another. For our analysis here, we focus on the key face attack being administered by the consultant. Usually, this face attack was directed at a member of the senior generation who had founded the business (i.e. George Brown & Sons; Aristocrats (Duff-Penningtons); David Holmes Funeral Directors; Kettley's furniture and Oak Garden Centre). Here, the attacks on face made by the consultants related to their lack of leadership skills or to the outdated business frameworks that they were following. In these same companies, which were facing inter-generational transition issues, the face attacks were also directed at younger generation family members who were not able to claim leadership roles or were not competent in their roles due to the unwillingness of the seniors to allow transition. Two exceptions are cases 2 and 6 where there was no inter-generational issue at stake, and the face attacks were directed at the lack of clear leadership and the need to select a leader. Both of these were sibling partnerships involving three brothers.

For both leaders and followers, the face attacks by the consultant resulted in protective and defensive face saving strategies that, on the surface, manifested themselves as: (i) holding onto leadership (for current leaders); and (ii) not claiming their new leadership role (for current followers). In adopting these postures and 'claims', the incumbents are indicating that a breach of acceptable norms and protocols has occurred as a result of the consultant's face attack. Their response is to put out a claim that they cannot accept the new line that is being proposed to them (i.e. hand over the business and adopt a new business model) and various face saving 'moves' are enacted. These are listed in column four. Mostly, the face saving moves centre on reclaiming the perceived loss of social status that the 'breach' by the consultant has enacted. In most cases, this centred on legitimizing the old working practices and values that were central to the founding of the business (David Holmes Funeral, Kettleys Furniture and Oak Garden Centre). Interestingly, although there is considerable disagreement and resistance to what the consultants are proposing, the ensuing face saving work is directed at other family members. Column 5 outlines the stages of face work portrayed in the programs. These include a mixture of emotional moves from indignation, self reflection, initial conformity, later resistance, seeking allies, putting down of other 'faces' and final acceptance or rejection of the consultants'' advice. In addition, the face work emotional moves were different in each case. This ranged from outrage and indignation in AMT Expresso and Henry Chapman to diffused anger and withdrawal from social relations in Oak Garden Centre and Kettley's furniture, restrained politeness in Aristocracy and the regulation/maintenance of peer or parents' face work in Geo. Brown and Aristocracy.

Finally, in columns six and seven, we outline what is being accomplished through face work. As noted above, face saving occurs to accomplish certain obligations or to secure particular rights that come with being a member of both a business and family. In column six, we show how what is accomplished during face work is legitimized or rationalized in relation to membership

of the business. These explanations range from: obligations about getting the business into profit (Chapman); enabling the business to grow (AMT coffee); maintaining a personalized and caring service to long time customers involving family values (Geo. Brown, David Holmes Funeral, Ketleys Furniture, Alf Onnie Home Furnishings and Oak Garden Centre). Central to this was a perceived need for the owners to be directly operational or 'hands-on' in the business and being personally responsible for customer needs. Other rights or obligations that were invoked in terms of the business category were the need to be autonomous and private (Aristocrats) and the need to differentiate from the big corporate businesses (David Holmes Funeral, Oak Garden Centre). Both the latter businesses invoked an anti-corporate stance when legitimizing their face saving efforts in order to justify adherence to old business models.

From the final column, which outlines what was being accomplished through face work in relation to membership of the family category, it can be noted that two incumbents invoked a connection to their parents to legitimize their face saving (i.e. Henry Chapman and AMT Expresso). In contrast, the leader of Geo. Brown invoked a need for inclusivity and equality of all family members when developing the new business model, whereas the incumbents in AMT, Alf Onnie invoked a need for differentiation, separateness and detachment from family members in order to re-position the business. Their face saving work also involved a challenge to the competence of and 'put down' other family members in order to legitimize and restore face. In the cases of the Aristocrats, Kettleys, David Holmes Funeral, Oak Garden centre, the junior generation were disempowered from developing the business as a result of the perceived duties and obligations of their parents towards the business. In these cases, the face saving strategies of the parents to adhere to past ways of working had the effect of disenfranchising the younger generation with their new ideas. Here, the rights of the business owner and the associated (traditional) business framework were upheld over family inclusivity or involvement. A breach of the family relations was seen as less problematic in these cases, therefore, than a breach of the business framework.

Conclusion

We conclude that the televisual resources were useful for displaying the contextualised, multi modal, embodied and temporal nature of family businesses dynamics - dynamics that are often difficult to capture with traditional research practices. More specifically, we have focused on the situational encounters through which meanings and understanding about leadership transition were being realized as high profile consultants prescribed strategies for survival, leadership change and the long-term sustainability of the businesses. We have argued that the filmed consultancy interventions stimulate interactional realms in which we were able to analyse the face work that was occurring between family business members as they responded to the consultancy advice. In addition, we have used the films to highlight how the face attacks' that are generated by the consultants concerning leadership transition resulted in a range of corresponding face-saving strategies that make visible the rights and obligations that are invoked whilst being a member of both a family and a business.

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Table 1: What are the face work strategies going on during leadership transitions

Company & family configur-ations	**Face attack to whom/what**	**What is endangered; what is being protected**	**Face work & emotional moves to restore or avoid face loss**	**What is accomplished through face work**		
				Dominant face work strategy	**How does this relate to business membership category**	**How does this relate to family membership category**
1. Henry Chapman (Father-son)	Consultant's criticism of leader's (son's) competence	Loss of face (with father and workforce) Social worth. Leadership competence.	Indignation Some self reflection. Conformity. Resistance. Ally with father/prof manager. Put down of consultant. Reject advice.	Face saving Reclaim social status	Obligation to the business to get the business right/make a profit.	Invokes connection to father's style (aggressive; no nonsense). Need for connection to family.
2. AMT Expresso (Siblings, 3 brothers)	Gerry to Alistair (youngest brother)	Status and social worth of youngest brother. Wish for recognition as the best person to lead the business.	Indignation Arrogance Resistance Direct face attack on brothers. Competitiveness. Put down of older brothers. Put down of consultant. Advice rejected	Face saving Autonomy invoked. Differentiation of self.	Need for entrepreneurial skills to grow the business.	Competitiveness invoked. Detachment from brothers. Disassociation from family invoked. Likens himself to resembling father.
3. G. Brown & sons fruit wholesale. Cousin consortium (2 brothers and several cousins)	Consultant's criticism of the shared leadership (older brother)	Equality and inclusivity of all family members. Distributed leadership.	Initial harmony. Indignation Resistance. Put down of consultant. Alliances. Acceptance.	Face saving. Face regulation (of peers).	Need for personal contact with customers. Operational mind set.	Need for association, acceptance & Inclusiveness of family. Everybody mucks in. No hierarchy.
4. Aristocrats – Duff Pennington. (mother-father, daughter-husband).	Consultant's criticism of mother (wont let go)	Family heritage.	Mother (denial of reality; genteel politeness; silences). Put down of daughter.	Denial of other's face? Face saving (only she can do it). Face maintenance.	Change is bad for the long-term heritage of company. Being commercial & making money means less	Responsibility to family heritage invoked. Privacy of family. Daughter and husband disempowered.

					privacy (open to public eyes).	
5. David Holmes Funeral (father & 2 sons)	Consultant's criticism of father & leader via challenge of the business.	His need for operational involvement and belief in personal, 'caring' values.	Arguments Withdrawal	Face saving Need for legitimacy.	Change in the business is a critique of him. Need to counter the 'corporate' funeral image	Need for family image. Sons are disengaged and betraying their own wishes for personal development.
6. Alf Onnie Home Furnishings (3 brothers)	Consultant's criticism of youngest brother via 'dirty and chaotic' business.	His need for creativity and differentiation. Wants to 'spread his wings'. Perfectionism.	Aligns with consultant. Differentiation from brothers. Resistance. Acceptance.	Face saving Autonomy Express creativity	Need for creativity and higher quality in the business.	Friendly detachment from brothers. Need for separateness.
7. Kettley's Furniture (father, daughter &sons)	Consultant's criticism of senior generation /father and owner.	His belief that his way is best. Desire to keep control. Hands-on operational involvement.	Inertia. Lack of action. Resistance. Put down of consultant?	Facing saving Autonomy. Personal identity.	Change in the business is a critique of him. Superior knowledge of customers & market. Personal family service.	Separateness from junior generation.
8. Oak Garden Centre (husband-wife and their son and daughter in law)	Consultant to husband and wife	Plants are their life. Need to redeem their 'face' in the local community after bankruptcy. Need to prove their way is right.	Detachment. Denial of reality. Put down of son. Final acceptance.	Reclaim status. Face saving directed towards the local community. Face maintenance to son as he leaves the business.	Plants not profit. Differentiating from the big garden centres.	Son disempowered. Spousal union works against the son. Son is isolated

[i] i) An audio-visual analysis of work-family discourses in the British sitcom Only Fools and Horses (1981-2003) (Infante, 2011); (ii) Smith (2014) uses visual ethnography to 'help us uncover new nuances of the meanings that family businesses use in their everyday practices' (p. 1).

[ii] (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01qwflg/clips).