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Fieldnotes from Scandinavia

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What is a family business?

The Scandinavian field site of the REALEURASIA project is a middle-sized city. This region of northern Europe has few big cities , and the one in which I have spent the past six months does not have such a feel, though in fact it is one of the country's largest in terms of both population and geography.

In this blog post, I will give a brief introduction to the early stages of fieldwork and some reflections on what a family firm is, based on six months of fieldwork in mainly one family firm.

Before I say more about my field site, I will reflect a bit upon what it means to do fieldwork in Scandinavia in 2016. We live in a globalised world where news spreads at an extreme speed over the internet and through a great variety of social media. For us anthropologists it is always a high priority to protect our informants and their privacy. We commonly do this by giving pseudonyms instead of real names, and in some cases not revealing the exact location of the field. In thread with these ethics, I have therefore chosen to anonymise both my informants and the exact location of my field site. I will now give an impression of that site.

Walking the streets of the city, you find small independent shops, cafés and restaurants, and large shopping malls, chain restaurants and shops. The REALEURASIA-project is concerned with small businesses, preferably family businesses. Unlike some of the other locations in this project, where families own and run almost all businesses, such businesses can be hard to find in Scandinavia. Not because they do not exist, but because only a few view themselves as family businesses and therefore do not speak of themselves as one. When I first arrived in my city, I had difficulties finding these family firms, and in encounters with local people, nobody seemed to know of any family businesses. 'There are no family businesses in this country anymore', was a common respond to my question from people I met in the field. Further, they would mention farms and especially large estates called Gods – large, old land properties often inherited by noble families through generations – as places where I could find what they perceived to be family businesses. In the city, they could think of none. When I explained that a

family business need not be a business that had been inherited through generations, but it could simply be a business owned or run by people who were related to each other, the locals I met, still could not think of any: especially not if I wanted natives, they explicated. In this case, they would commonly mention immigrant families as a group who typically ran businesses with help from family members. Such shops could be butcheries, small grocery shops, and hairdressers. Further, nobody seemed to know of any they could introduce me to. To me, none of this made sense. From my own experience as an employee in various small businesses over the years as a student, I had the impression that family was always somehow involved in these firms, if only informally. It could not be so hard to find a small business with some kind of family relation involved, could it?

I contacted the local government, the central government, looked at official statistics, and scanned Google. No one had a register or a clear idea of what a family business was, or how to find them. The local government told me that they could give me a list of local firms, but this would take time, and they could not indicate whether family members were involved or not. I continued my search for family businesses and gathered information about local firms by walking the streets, taking photos of different businesses I walked past. Then, I went home and googled them to see if any of them appeared to be family businesses, or if I could find information about who the owners were. Some of these businesses did indeed trademark themselves as family businesses, and I ran back to them to ask if they would be so kind to let me include them in my sample. I bought new shoes, I carefully chose outfits that I believed would make me look serious but not threatening, put on a big smile, and presented myself to the manager or owner.

To my great disappointment, my strategy did not bring positive results. Some of the businesses I went to, typically the larger ones, quickly turned me down with the reply that they did not have time. I insistently tried to explain that I could help in the shop, and that I would not steal their time, but this did not help. Other places the owner told me that they had already been studied or that someone else had written their history already. When I tried to explain that I was interested in the everyday life of the business, and that my focus was not a study of their history, they still declined. At one place, they told me that I was welcome to sit in the cafeteria if I wanted to. As this was a very expensive, luxury, niche café, I did not see how I would manage with buying their products enough to occupy one of very few tables every day, although this was the closest I had gotten to success. Most businesses, however, were far too busy to actually listen to my presentation, and as is common in the initial phase of fieldwork, I felt rather hopeless.

However, I continued my search and because religion was one of the topics I was interested in, I attended church every Sunday to get a grasp of the function of the state church. As I moved

around in the city, I went to different churches, listened to different priests' preaches, tasted different communions, and talked to different churchgoers.

Statistics show that almost 80% of the country's population are registered members of the Lutheran state church, and that most people baptise their children and confirm their baptism at age 14. In church on Sunday, however, this great majority was barely represented. Some churches were almost completely empty, except in the case of baptisms. Other churches – often the smaller ones in the outskirts of the city – were more populous at the Sunday service, and the sense of community was greater. At the church coffee after the service, people talked with each other and many knew each other from before. However, the attendance at church services varied greatly, and it was never representative of the number of registered members of the state church. The attendants were further overrepresented by the older generation of the population although some younger people attended too. Only a few attended church every Sunday.

On Sunday to mark the service the national flag is hoisted in front of the church.

On Saturday the church opens to the public with a flee-market in its large cellars.

Going for Sunday church service is thus something for a particular group and if you go, you sing along at the psalms and take communion. The whole service takes about an hour, whereas the priest's sermon takes about 15–20 minutes. Here, he or she takes a story from the Bible and contextualises it with the topic or situation of the given day. The topics I listened to varied from trust, worries, disease, moral, interpretation, forgiveness, and so forth. The priests were careful to stress the relevance of these topics today and all priests seemed to agree that we should not take the texts in the Bible literally. Rather, we should interpret them to fit 'today's culture and society'.

Attending church every Sunday followed by church coffee did provide me with new acquaintances. One of the people I met in church was a business owner, and when I explained why I was in the city, he invited me to visit his business, which he owned and ran together with his wife. The business worked with design, and had seven employees.

The next business I got involved with was not at all associated with the church, but was brought to my awareness by the mother of a colleague at the university. The business had survived through generations and proved to be a 'real family business' according to the emic perceptions I had met so far in the field. The business had been passed down from father to son through generations and was now run by the husband of the former owner's daughter. The husband had been involved in the business since he was a young boy and knew it in and out. Other members of the extended family were also involved in the business either as employees, seasonal workers, or as someone who gave a hand whenever it was necessary. The most defining part of the family in the business was the family name, which was also the name of the business. Their name and their belonging defined everyone in the family to the company. Even those less involved in it were associated with the business through their name, and were all known as a member of the firm's family. Common for all who shared the family name is the pride that comes along with it. They all seemed to be proud both of the firm, their family, and their family history. I do not know if this is unique to families with businesses, but it sure was visible in this family.

Besides reflecting on names, what can I say about family businesses in this particular Scandinavian city based on six months of fieldwork mainly in one central family business, supplied by some insight into a few other businesses which might or might not be defined as

family businesses, depending on who does the defining?

In my case, the family business is a business that takes pride in being inherited through the generations. A far away ancestor created something that he passed down to his son. His son developed the business, and passed it down to his son. Unlike Sylvia Yanagisako's (2002) Italian family firms, the grandson did not destroy the business, but he kept developing it, and passed it down to his son again. This went on for generations and the business grew, expanded, gained reputation, and built trust in the population. The inhabitants of the city, like the owners of the firm, inherited from their parents the habit of buying produce from the business. They learned about the business from their parents, and they acquired their own experience with the firm in their own time. They built trust through generations of owners and customers. All inhabitants of the city know the business and have some idea of what it represents and what to expect from it. The business is frequently in the local news and it is a safe place to go to get what you expect to get.

In these times when larger multinational companies are taking over more and more of the market, people still choose to shop in this particular shop because they know what to expect and they trust that the business will give them the same quality products that they gave them when they grew up.

However, the business is experiencing severe competition from large, multinational companies that can offer cheaper, larger quantities, and more accessible similar products to what this business has to offer. Still, they have survived through rough times both because of their persistence and because of their long invested trust in the population. New inventions must be made in each generation, and the pressure is even greater today than in the last generation as society and the market both moves at a greater speed than it did just 30 years ago. The people of the generation before the current managers are still involved in the business, and are omnipresent in the background, constantly monitoring the actions of the present one. There is a fine balance between maintaining the old and safe, and continuous renewal and new inventions to fit the market of today.

This is just a small introduction to the early stage of fieldwork and a glimpse of what I have so far found a family business can be in Scandinavia today. According to the emic perceptions, a family business is inherited through generations and is run and owned by people who are related to each other. The other firm run by a couple shared many of the values and attitudes that I found in the family business, but the pride they took in their work was not associated with family or their family name, and, maybe because of this, they did not identify their business as a family business.

Reference

Yanagisako, Sylvia Junko. 2002. *Producing Culture and Capital: Family Firms in Italy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.