Towards an understanding of the role of sociocultural learning in family firm longevity

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy at the University of Central Lancashire

June 2024

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Abstract

Sociocultural learning occurs when social interaction takes place and is influenced by the prevailing values and beliefs of the particular group. The focus of this research is the family firm which is defined in general terms as a business owned and managed by members of a single family. Family firms form an important part of the Cumbrian economy and those that have survived to a third generation of family ownership, growing to medium or large companies in the process, are of particular significance. This research examines two such firms from the perspective of sociocultural learning, focusing particularly on situated learning and community of practice theory. Communities of practice are an integral part of daily life; in the context of this research, they refer to the workplace. This study examines two aspects: firstly, the nature of learning between the family members and their staff, and that occurring between experienced staff and newcomers to the company. Secondly, it investigates the impact of power relations on learning within the organizations. Using a constructivist interpretivist approach, a case study method was adopted, and interviews were conducted with family directors in two companies and members of management in one of them. The research found that practices in both companies were consistent with situated learning theory. Shared learning was not only key to innovation and adaptability but also contributed to the maintenance of the culture passed down from the previous generations. It was further identified that the potential for learning in the two organizations was facilitated or impeded by the way management power was exercised. The study concludes that people, values, and learning and adaptability are important aspects of family firm success and, depending on the way in which they are managed, may contribute to the firm's longevity.

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Preface

This research project started in January 2015, and a lot has happened since then, both on the world stage and for the researcher personally. It was finished in a time of reflection on the passing of HM Queen Elizabeth and all that she stood for. Much was written about Her Majesty at the time, and the following quote in particular resonates with the ethos of the family firms that form the focus of this thesis:

> "I find that one of the sad things [is] that people don't take on jobs for life, they try different things the whole time."

> HM Queen Elizabeth II, said in late 1980s (Dymond, BBC 2022)

The commitment of the individuals who have carried on, and further developed, the businesses they inherited, providing continuity and employment opportunities for their communities, was one of the major influences in choosing this field of study. It was probably influenced as well by having a father who worked for 66 years at the same hospital, deepening knowledge of a group of diseases and contributing to new treatments.

As so often in life, unforeseen circumstances over the course of the seven years since this research began have required adjustments to the plan as originally envisioned, as well as deliberate modifications made in the light of new knowledge and insights. Covid-19 caused major disruption, not only delaying the attempt to obtain a second phase of data collection, but also making it inappropriate to ask for access to employees in ways which might carry even a small risk of spreading the infection. In addition, three periods of interruption to studies due to personal and family medical reasons meant that on each return to study there was an element of having to pick up the threads and renew acquaintance with the data already collected.

While frustrating in many ways, these circumstances have also brought advantages. Interesting insights, that would have fallen outside the period of study without the interruptions, became available and the extended period of study also provided greater time for reflection on the new knowledge gained.

Acknowledgements

I have been very fortunate in the supervisors who helped me along the way.

To Dr David Vickers, my first Director of Studies, a huge thank you for starting me on this journey and guiding my fumbling attempts to focus the research. You have taught me a lot over many years. Dr Ruth Slater provided much support and a sympathetic listening ear for which I remain very grateful.

Without the guidance, encouragement and unfailing support of my second Director of Studies, Dr Alina Petrescu and supervisor, Professor Richard Sharpley, who refused to give up on me, I would never have finished this thesis. I thank you both sincerely.

It has been a real privilege to be allowed a glimpse into the life of the case study organizations. I have the greatest admiration for the individuals who were kind enough to give me their time and let me hear their wonderful stories.

My family has been more than generous in supporting the achievement of this work in very many ways. I am sorry if there have been times when I was physically present but my mind was elsewhere. I shall try to make up for this.

List of tables and figures

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation for the research

The motivation for this work arises from the conjunction of two areas of personal interest to the researcher, both well supported by bodies of literature but which, in combination, appear to be under researched.

The first is a curiosity about the nature of learning within organizations[1], most specifically the sociocultural aspect of learning and its influence on organization development. The seminal work by Lave and Wenger (1991) on situated learning and Wenger's (1998) subsequent further exploration of communities of practice form the starting point for this research. Such learning at its strongest is deeply embedded within an organization, which both shapes it and is in turn shaped by it. This raises a question about the nature of sociocultural learning and its contribution to growth and innovation in the organization today, whilst, at the same time, honouring the history and traditions of the past. The importance of the role of power in enabling or impeding this learning is also considered.

The second motivation is an interest in family firms that have managed to survive and grow over two generations or more of the same family ownership and executive control. The definition of a family firm is provided in subsection 1.2.4. Cumbria (a part of England in the United Kingdom), the adopted county of the researcher, has some notable examples of such family firms that have developed into significant businesses and now provide an important source of employment and contribution to the economy of the county and wider area.

There are clearly many factors affecting the longevity and growth of a firm, not least the existence of next generation family members able and willing to take on an active management role in the business. This research takes as its starting point the belief that sociocultural learning is occurring within these organizations (alongside formal training and development) and sets out to investigate the nature of this learning, and its possible contribution to their longevity.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the foundations of this piece of research Firstly, it outlines the background to the existing body of knowledge for the three key themes of this

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[1] Since organization is so commonly spelt with a z in the literature, it has been adopted in this thesis; in all other respects English spelling will be used.

work. Secondly, the scope of the research is explained and its aim and objectives are set out. Finally, an overview of the structure of the thesis is provided.

1.2 Background to the research themes

The knowledge base upon which this study is founded derives from three sources, namely, those of organizational learning, power and family firms, which will be introduced in turn. An additional section, included within family firms, provides background on the business environment specific to Cumbria, the location of the research.

1.2.1 Organizational Learning

The first use of the term organizational learning (OL) is attributed to March and Simon (1958), although the concept did not immediately attract serious attention (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 1998). It was not until the 1990s that interest in OL grew exponentially leading to 184 articles in the first half of the decade compared to fifty in the previous ten years and just three in the whole of the 1960s (Crossan and Guatto 1995).

The debates around OL initially focused on two areas: whether organizations can learn and, if they can, what form that learning takes. These debates brought into question the concept of organization itself (Argyris and Schön 1996) and the ontological status of organizations as cognitive entities [Cook and Yanow 1993]. Applying theories of individual cognition to organizations was seen as problematic since "[a]ll learning takes place inside individual human heads" and the only way an organization can learn is through the learning of its members or the knowledge brought in by new members (Simon 1991, p125).

Whilst the debate around an organization's ability to learn continued, other discussions sought to clarify the definition of OL and its contribution to organization theory. In a review of the extant literature, Fiol and Lyles (1985, p.803) proposed an initial definition of OL as "a process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding". Whilst this statement is vague as to the form and nature of the process and actions, there is clear recognition that the purpose of OL is about achieving organizational improvement. Of interest is the reference to both knowledge and understanding. Knowledge, linked with the logical and systematic 'process', speaks of cognitive learning, whilst understanding starts to move towards the concept of learning acquired through application of knowledge in a specific organizational and social context.

Fiol and Lyles (1985) also identified four contextual factors that aid learning, one of these being organizational culture and the shared beliefs and ideologies that underpin it. Culture can play an important role not only in aiding learning but also in obstructing it, as in the case where power relations inhibit the ability of learners to gain legitimacy (Lave and Wenger 1991). While it is not always easy for an external observer to gain a full picture of an organization's culture, it has been suggested that it may more easily be seen when size is small and structure is simple (Cook and Yanow 1993). Family firms, therefore, offer a rich environment to explore the influence of culture on learning and, additionally, provide an opportunity to observe power relations in an organization where the most senior managers are also owners of the business.

Closely linked to culture is the role of collective memory in preserving certain behaviours, norms and values (Hedberg 1981). Whilst the concept and nature of organization memory have been debated, there is a strong case for memory being viewed as both an individual and organizational construct, with interpretations of the past embedded in systems and artefacts as well as individuals (Walsh and Ungson 1991). Studies have shown that organizations can preserve knowledge of the past, including cultural aspects, even when key individuals leave (Weick and Gilfillan 1971; Cook and Yanow 1993). This research will consider the question of what role organizational memory may play in preserving, or changing, behaviours norms and values in long-established family firms.

The expression "organizational learning" subsequently lost its appeal and attention turned to the study of "knowledge management" (Gherardi 2009). Research focused on the pivotal role this plays in organization success and led to the proposition that it is "the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage" (Nonaka 1991, p.96). Individual knowledge acquisition had traditionally been concerned with cognitive knowledge, termed an "epistemology of possession" (Cook and Brown 1999). However, this definition of knowledge as an object was problematic when transferred to an organizational context (Gherardi 2009). Drawing on Ryle's (1949) distinction between *knowing what* (cognitive knowledge) and *knowing how* (lived experience), the idea developed that knowledge should instead be viewed as an activity and process which unfolds over time and space. This led to the term *knowing* being adopted (Blackler 1995), subsequently also referred to as *knowing-in-practice* and signifying an "epistemology of practice" (Cook and Brown 1999). As a locus of practice, a family firm offers the opportunity to explore and compare the *knowing what* and *knowing how* demonstrated at both the family member level (senior management) and the employee level.

Knowing, and the learning implicit within it, focuses on interaction between individuals and the social and physical environment they inhabit (Cook and Brown 1999). At the heart of this situated learning is the belief that "learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (Lave and Wenger 1991, p.35). In situated learning, cognitive knowledge, whilst still regarded as important, is viewed as a matter of competence in a particular area. It is one element in a complex interaction with social and cultural factors (Wenger 1998).

The locus of this learning is termed a community of practice (CoP). This involves participation in an activity system where shared understanding and meaning are created for the individual and the community. Newcomers progress to old-timers through involvement in this shared practice on their way to full participation in the sociocultural practices of the community. Because of the nature of social interaction, this progression may be conflictual on occasions (Lave and Wenger 1991). CoPs vary in size, membership and purpose. They may exist entirely within a business unit, across divisional boundaries, across different organizations or simply comprise a group of individuals bound together by a shared interest. The existence and functioning of CoPs offer an opportunity to gain insights into sociocultural learning and are therefore of interest in this research.

1.2.2 Learning in family firms

Much research has been conducted into learning in family firms but largely focused on entrepreneurial learning between family members. Entrepreneurial learning is defined as "the acquisition and development of the propensity, skills and abilities to found, to join or to grow a venture" (Hamilton 2011, p.9). In contrast, searches for sociocultural learning and CoP in family firms relating to learning between family owners of the business and their staff revealed a dearth of literature in this area.

One study of entrepreneurial learning in family businesses through a situated learning and CoP perspective was, however, of interest. It consisted of in-depth interviews with the founders of five second-generation businesses and their children who had joined them in the business. The research concluded that "in family businesses the social dynamic of a community of practice (CoP), its power relations and conditions of legitimacy define the possibilities of learning through participation" (Hamilton 2011, p.21).

This research acknowledges the importance of that work and seeks to build on it through two significant differences. The first difference is the nature and focus of the learning in a family firm. Hamilton (2011) is concerned solely with the entrepreneurial learning in and between the

two-family generations and issues surrounding succession. Whilst learning acquired from the previous generation is inherently relevant to a study of social learning in family firms, and will be touched on, it is not the main concern in this research. Rather, an understanding is sought of how learning occurs across the whole firm and how knowledge is created and shared between owners and staff.

The second difference is that third generation family firms have been selected for this study. Although they are still family owned and managed, they have now grown beyond the close-knit community of a small family unit and are one stage further removed from the influence of the original founder. Of interest is the extent to which a culture can survive across three generations of owners, in a firm that has grown to a medium or large sized organization that employs many staff. A further objective of the research is to assess whether such a firm still operates as a CoP and what links it has to other communities.

1.2.3 Power

As has been noted previously, a vital aspect related to learning in family firms is the concept of power and the way in which it influences practice within them. It has been acknowledged that learning is "a complex notion, implicated in social structures involving relations of power" (Lave and Wenger 1991, p.36). In similar vein, Foucault conceives of power as inextricably linked to knowledge (pouvoir / savoir) and an aspect of concrete practice. However, it is not a power of possession and domination ('power over') but relational and productive ('power to') (Foucault 1984 in Law 1986).

Gaining acceptance into a community of practice requires the conferral of legitimacy (i.e. a form of power) and, even once accepted, progression may be enhanced or impeded by those in authority. As newcomers become more experienced and skilled, they may in turn seek to establish their own identity in the future of the practice, bringing them into conflict with longer serving members.

Whilst accepting that Lave and Wenger (1991) do acknowledge the importance of power relations in learning, critics have highlighted unfulfilled promises by Wenger (1998) to address wider aspects of unequal power relations in institutional practice (Fox 2000; Contu and Willmott 2003). This research sets out to explore the nature of power and its impact in the case study family firms.

1.2.4 Family firms

The third source of knowledge which this research draws upon is the literature and practice of family firms[2] and the business context in Cumbria.

A firm is considered a family enterprise, if:

1. The majority of votes are owned by the person or persons who established the firm, or those who have acquired the share capital of the firm or who are in the possession of their spouses, parents, child or child's direct heirs.
2. The majority of votes may be indirect or direct.
3. At least one representative of the family or kin is involved in the management or administration of the firm.
4. Listed companies meet the definition of a family enterprise if the person who established or acquired the firm (share capital) or their families or descendants possess 25% of the right to vote as mandated by their share capital.

Source: IFB (2023)

For the purpose of this research, only firms with a family member as Managing Director (MD) and at least one other member in an executive director position have been included, although they may also have other non-family directors.

Family firms make a very large contribution to the UK economy. In 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, they numbered 5.2m and employed over 14.2m workers. They contributed £205 billion in tax receipts and £637 billion to UK GDP, amounting to 29.3% of the UK economy (IFB Annual Report 2020/2021).

In Cumbria 90% of businesses are family owned (in-cumbria 2022), compared with 85% in the UK as a whole, thus making this region both close to being representative of the country and a good candidate for research into family firms. In relation to the research aim of examining factors that may contribute to firm longevity, the family firm offers a rich opportunity to study not only survival but also to consider aspects that may contribute to failure.

Table 1.1 highlights the very steep decline in family control of UK businesses after the first generation (and possible demise of those businesses) in 2019. Medium-sized firms accounted

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[2] In order to avoid repetition, the words firm, business, enterprise, organization and company are used interchangeably in this thesis.

for the highest percentage of businesses controlled by the family from the second generation onwards, but by the third generation it was only 9.1%.

There would appear to be a lot of truth in the old saying 'clogs to clogs in three generations'. These figures make research into firm longevity even more valuable, highlighting the high risk of failure and the importance of identifying the role that sociocultural learning may play in increasing longevity.

Table 1.1. Number of generations the business had been in the control of the same family

Size of Company	1st	2nd	3rd	4th or more
All SMEs with employees	76.4	15.6	4.0	4.0
Micro	78.8	13.9	3.5	3.8
Small	65.3	23.8	6.3	4.6
Medium	58.4	26.6	9.1	5.9

Source: IFB State of the Nation (2022)

According to the resources-based view of organization strategy, firms have the potential to create sustained competitive advantage from their own resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Barney 1991). In the case of family firms, each company has its own unique social context and sets of behaviour, skills and values (Konopaski *et al.* 2015). There are no success and longevity rules that can be applied from firm to firm (Leach 2007). The culture created through the vision and values of the original founder(s), and shared and sustained by subsequent generations, may be the unique resource that sets them apart from their competitors. As it is, therefore, not possible to generalise research findings across other businesses, use of a case study approach for this research is chosen as the most appropriate, with specific comparisons drawn where appropriate.

An area that has received some attention, however, as a possible contributor to family firm longevity is that of values. Tapies and Fernandez Moya (2012) conclude from their research in a number of European countries that there are three key dimensions to the relationship between values and family firm longevity: values that contribute to family cohesion; values that contribute to a firm's sustainability; and values that allow the transmission of core values. Values are also cited as a source of strength because they encourage people and give them power to take action (Dumas and Blodgett 1999). Since values play a pivotal role in

determining and sustaining an organization's culture, they will be examined as part of the objective to explore the nature of sociocultural learning in the firms selected for this research.

1.3 The Cumbrian economy

Cumbria is the second largest county in England and constitutes around 48% of landmass in the North West (Cumbria LEP Strategic Economic Plan 2014 – 2024). Its population of half a million (Census 2021) has a higher proportion of people aged over 64 than the North West or England as a whole and a lower number aged 0-64, with consequent problems for companies seeking to recruit staff, particularly apprentices.   Table 1.2 sets out the figures.

Table 1.2 Population by broad age group for Cumbria

Age Group (%)	Cumbria	North West	England
Total under 15	14.9	17.6	17.4
Total 15 - 64	60.8	63.7	64.2
Total over 64	24.3	18.7	18.4

Source: Cumbria Observatory (2022)

Cumbrian businesses, in line with the rest of the England, are heavily weighted towards the micro and small categories but there are significantly fewer large and medium-sized enterprises compared to the national figure. Table 1.3 highlights the difference.

Table 1.3 Businesses by employment size

Size	Cumbria		North West		England	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Large (250+)	55	0.2	1,005	0.4	8,985	0.4
Medium (50-249)	340	1.4	4,315	1.6	36,050	1.6
Small (10-49)	2,105	8.9	24,290	9.1	199,135	8.6
Micro (0-9)	21,090	89.4	238,155	88.9	2,073,890	89.5

Source: ONS (2021a)

The survival and growth of firms into medium and large organizations and the employment they provide, is therefore of great importance to the economy of the county.

Business survival rates for a five-year period highlight the stark reality that only 44% of new Cumbrian start-up firms were still in existence at the end of five years in 2021 (See Table 1.4).

Table 1.4 Business survival rate over 5 Years

	Cumbria Number %		North West Number %		England Number %	
2016 Births	**1,945**		**40,515**		**358,680**	
Year of Survival						
1 year (2017)	1,845	94.9	38,515	95.1	341,745	95.3
2 years (2018)	1,440	74.0	28,700	70.8	253,830	70.8
3 years (2019)	1,150	59.1	20,440	50.5	192,420	53.6
4 years (2020)	990	50.9	16,865	41.6	159,640	44.5
5 years (2021)	855	44.0	14, 265	35.2	136,355	38.0

Source: ONS (2022a)

Whilst Cumbria does have a better survival rate than the North West, and England as a whole, from year 2 onwards, any learning from successful, long-established companies that can be used to improve that rate, would be a benefit both to those new companies at risk and to Cumbria as a whole.

The relevance of researching learning in Cumbrian-based firms is further supported by unemployment statistics which are lower than those for England as a whole. For July 2021 to June 2022, the figure stood at 1.9% (4,700), in sharp contrast to 4.2% for the North West and 3.8% for Great Britain as a whole (ONS 2022b). Although this may be viewed as desirable in many ways, it does present problems for employers in accessing the workers they need, particularly where skills are in short supply nationally, and this places even more importance on the provision of workplace learning.

Cumbria is a largely rural county with rich natural resources and a traditional way of life. A significant number of well-established family firms have grown out of, or are related to, farming, which is itself an important sector for the Cumbrian economy. The two case study companies fall into this category. The agriculture, forestry and fishing industry accounted for 19.8% of enterprises in 2021 (compared to 3.8% for England as a whole) but only 5.6% of the

employment rate, against 1.3% for England (Cumbria Observatory 2022). Apart from the city of Carlisle and a few large towns, the majority of the population live in small, close-knit communities where it is not unusual for families to work in cooperation, for example combining farming and tourism, the latter being another important sector for the Cumbrian economy. The proportion of businesses classified as family businesses, particularly in the micro and small categories, is therefore not surprising.

1.4 Aim and objectives

Firms in third-generation ownership have demonstrated their ability to adapt and survive; the aim of this work is to explore the part played by sociocultural learning in their longevity.

To address this aim, the following objectives have been identified:

1. To explore the nature of sociocultural learning in selected family firms
2. To critically evaluate how, and to what extent, that learning is shared between family members and their non-family employees
3. To critically assess what evidence exists for the concept of community of practice within selected firms and in their relationship in their wider networks
4. To explore the effect of power on sociocultural learning in family firms
5. To critically evaluate factors that support family firm longevity

An interpretive / constructivist perspective was adopted for the empirical research looking at two firms from different industry sectors, which met the criteria of having a third-generation family member as MD and at least one other family member in an executive director position. Interviews were conducted with the MDs of each firm in November 2019 and January 2020 and with other managers in Company A in January 2020. It had been intended to hold focus groups with employees of the firms; however, these did not take place due to circumstances which are outlined in the methodology. Information was also obtained from documentary evidence available in the public domain and personal observations made by the researcher in the course of business transactions with one of the firms.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The structure of the subsequent chapters is set out below.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A review of the literature that forms the body of knowledge upon which this research is based will be presented and critically evaluated.

Chapter 3: Methodology

An explanation and rationale for the methodology chosen, and outline of the methods used to gain an understanding of the sociocultural learning in the case study organizations will be provided, including consideration of the associated ethical issues.

Chapter 4: The Research: Outcomes and Discussion

The empirical data gathered will be outlined and analysed by the themes identified in it. Comparisons and contrasts with the literature will be drawn.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

 A critical review of the outcome and learning from the research, measured against the stated aim and objectives, identified in chapter 1, will be carried out, with an evaluation of the conclusions drawn from the data gathered.

Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

As established in the previous chapter, the aim of this study is to examine the nature of sociocultural learning in family firms and the impact it may have on their longevity. Fundamental to this research is an understanding of the existing body of literature on the key themes of sociocultural learning in an organizational context and power. The first section of this chapter will present and evaluate the literature on sociocultural learning.

2.1 Sociocultural learning

The word 'learning' carries two meanings; it can be used either to signify a product, namely the knowledge that results from the learning, or the process leading to the production of that knowledge (Argyris and Schön 1996) which involves in part drawing upon memory. Viewed from a social constructivist perspective, it is mainly through interactions and communication between people that learning, in both senses of the word, takes place rather than solely in the heads of individuals or organizational systems (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2000). This section will first consider individual knowledge, then draw a distinction between knowledge and knowing, before going on to explore to what extent, and in what ways, both knowledge and knowing can be considered organizational. Finally, the role of memory will be reviewed before a fuller examination of the social and cultural aspects of sociocultural learning theory is presented.

2.1.1 Knowledge

The Cartesian[3] view of knowledge with its emphasis on cognition and reason, tended to place particular value on 'pure' knowledge and thinking (Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001) and, as a result, society came to favour abstract knowledge over knowledge founded in social practice (Brown and Duguid 1991). Knowledge is essentially personal (Polanyi 1962) and is "originated and applied in the minds of knowers" (Davenport and Prusak 1998, p.5), which has led to it being defined as "an epistemology of possession" (Cook and Brown 1999). While still providing "shape, meaning and discipline to our interactions" (ibid, p.392), knowledge has

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[3] Descartes' (1637) assertion of "Cogito, ergo sum" led to a dominant belief in Western philosophical thought that introspection and cognition provided a secure and solid foundation for knowledge.

come to be seen as less about objective "truth and reason and more about the practice of intervening knowledgeably and purposefully in the world" (Spender 1996, p.64).

To act knowledgeably requires the ability to exercise judgment in particular circumstances, based on an understanding of the context (Bell 1999). Exercising judgment consists of the selection and assessment of data relevant to the issue under consideration (Dewey 1910) and of drawing distinctions (Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001; Reyes and Zarama 1998; Vickers 1983). Drawing distinctions involves separating a phenomenon into its component elements and naming them (Wittgenstein 2009); language is, therefore, of crucial importance and the more precise the language used, the finer the distinctions.

In the context of making judgments, the terms data and information are sometimes used interchangeably but Bell (1999) draws a clear distinction between them. Data consists of an ordered sequence of items or events; information is a context-based arrangement of items showing the connections between them. The reference to a context-based arrangement is important as it signals not only that the information is grounded in the beliefs and commitments of those selecting and arranging it (Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001), but also that "[a]cquisition of knowledge is not a simple matter of taking in knowledge; rather, things assumed to be natural categories, such as "bodies of knowledge"….require reconceptualization as cultural, social products" (Lave 1996, p.8).

Viewed from the perspective of social reality, a precursor of social constructivist theory, there are no pure facts in the 'world of daily life', only interpreted ones. All knowledge of the world is therefore arrived at as a construct, interpreted through individual judgments, involving abstractions, generalisations and idealisations (Schutz 1971). Because of this, knowledge is constantly being reinterpreted and transformed in use (Lave 1996), a view that is in direct contrast to the positivistic view of the world where just one reality exists. These transformations are achieved through dialogue within a domain of action (Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001) and through discursive practices across different domains (Foucault 2010). Whether discourses are practices in themselves is, however, disputed; for example, Wenger (1998) argues that they are resources which can be used in the context of various practices. The counter argument is that, as well as producing negotiation over meaning, discursive practice is a way of "accommodating a plurality of discourses and legitimating their existence", and in effect, "working knowledges together while keeping them distinct" (Gherardi and Nicolini 2002, p.422).

Creation of new knowledge in areas where there are a number of interested parties with varied perspectives requires communication with these actors and translation between their different viewpoints. Drawing on the process of 'interessement' (Callon 1986), the concept of boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989) is proposed as one means to overcome the problem where objects of scientific inquiry inhabit multiple social worlds, resulting in findings which incorporate radically different meanings and a lack of coherence between them. Boundary spanning objects are sufficiently flexible to be able to maintain a common identity across all groups while providing strong specific meaning in local situations. Their creation and management are "key process[es] in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds" (Ibid, p. 393).

While knowledge can flow spatially across boundaries between different disciplines and social groupings, it can also flow temporally through individual cognition and collective practice. In the case study of the Verne Q. Powell Flute Company, the craft knowledge required to make "the best flutes" in the world had been passed down over a period of sixty-five years through different generations of workers, maintaining the same standards of excellence (Cook and Yanow 1993). The practices that have enabled this achievement will be examined in subsection 2.1.9.

If knowledge of the world is constructed through individuals' judgments, this raises the question of whose judgments prevail when decisions are taken. This is particularly true in an organizational context, which is the focus of this research. Knowledge is not value free and interpretations favoured above other possible constructs are likely to be influenced by the perspectives of those in positions of power. For instance, in a re-assessment of the prevailing examination systems in western European schools and universities, Kvale (1996) concluded that although development of knowledge in a discipline typically takes place in a number of arenas, it is examination committees (and, by extension, it would be reasonable to include professional bodies and designers of academic curriculum as well) who define what is valid and legitimate knowledge in a particular field against which students will be evaluated. These definitions will have wider implications for organizations when they recruit and develop workers to address the knowledge needs of their businesses.

Knowledge is a hugely complex subject and has been the focus of extensive philosophical debate and literature. The review of it has necessarily been brief in the context of this thesis. In summary, individual knowledge is the "capability to draw distinctions within a collective domain of action, based on an appreciation of context or theory, or both" (Tsoukas and

Vladimirou 2001, p.973). In relation to organizations, it is "a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises" (Wenger 1998, p.4). Knowledge, however, constitutes only one part of the competence which enables purposeful intervention in the world; knowing how to apply it appropriately in action is the other and this links closely to group knowledge. Both aspects will be examined in the following subsection.

2.1.2 Knowing

While knowledge contributes the cognitive element required in action, knowing is the dynamic, concrete and relational part of action, an "epistemology of practice" (Cook and Brown 1999). The two are mutually enabling and interdependent. Knowledge informs knowing while, through the action of knowing, new knowledge is generated. This interplay between the two is termed "a generative dance" (ibid). Knowing is defined by its interactions with things of the social and physical world (ibid) and because it requires this participation, it is not definable in the abstract (Wenger 1998).

Part of knowing is a tacit dimension, which is described as the shaping or integration of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge (Polanyi 1966) and is similar in structure to "knowing how" (Ryle 1949). Tacit knowing is created through situations involving two elements. While attending to an action or experience, new knowledge is created through awareness of that event, but it is knowledge that may not be consciously recognised and that "we may not be able to tell" (Polanyi 1966, p.10). It therefore follows that all knowledge and knowing is either tacit or grounded in tacit knowledge and "the ideal of a strictly explicit knowledge is indeed self-contradictory; deprived of their tacit coefficients, all spoken words, all formulae, all maps and graphs, are strictly meaningless" (Polanyi 1969, p. 195). It is the social and cultural context within which the knowing is embedded that provides language and other denotive representations with their meaning.

The term knowing is used to cover both practical and theoretical knowledge, indicating their essential interdependence (Polanyi 1966). The example of riding a bicycle illustrates not only the distinction between knowledge and knowing but also their interdependence, such that both need to be present to achieve successful execution. The processes involved in riding the bicycle can be described and understood cognitively, but this alone is insufficient to create a competent cyclist. It is only through applying the knowledge in practice, experiencing personally the interaction with the bicycle and the physical environment and learning how to apply the subtle adjustments that are necessary to maintain balance, that mastery can be achieved (Polanyi 1969; Cook and Brown 1999). Engaging with the world involves not only the

application of knowledge but also interaction with materials and artefacts, such as the bicycle, and including tools, probes and pointers. Initially the user is aware of the feeling the tool causes in the hand but as experience of using it increases, attention focuses more on the object with which the tool is interacting. Ultimately it becomes an extension of the user's body leading to 'in-dwelling' of it (Polanyi 1966).

Even when the holder of the tacit knowledge is completely unaware of it and, therefore, unable to articulate it through language, there are other ways it can be communicated, for example through metaphors or symbols (Nonaka 1991) or observation of the resultant activity (Spender 1996). An example of the latter is the Matsushita Electric Company's development of a home bread-making machine, which was encountering apparently insurmountable difficulties in kneading the dough correctly. A breakthrough was achieved when a software developer from the company trained with the head baker of the hotel with the reputation for making the best bread in Osaka. From her observations, it became clear that the chef had a very distinctive way of stretching and twisting the dough, not explicitly documented anywhere and therefore constituting knowledge unavailable to the Matsushita design engineers (Nonaka 1991). This was tacit knowledge possessed by the chef, based on ingrained mental models and so taken for granted that it was unable to be articulated. In some cases, this type of ingrained tacit know-how may be acquired from childhood, as in the case of the midwives in Yucatec (a Mexican indigenous group), who are almost always the daughters of experienced midwives (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Having discussed tacit knowledge and knowing, it is appropriate to turn once more to the generative dance between knowledge and knowing. Knowledge can be mapped into four categories, based on the dual criteria of individual vs. group and explicit vs. tacit, (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Bridging epistemologies: the generative dance
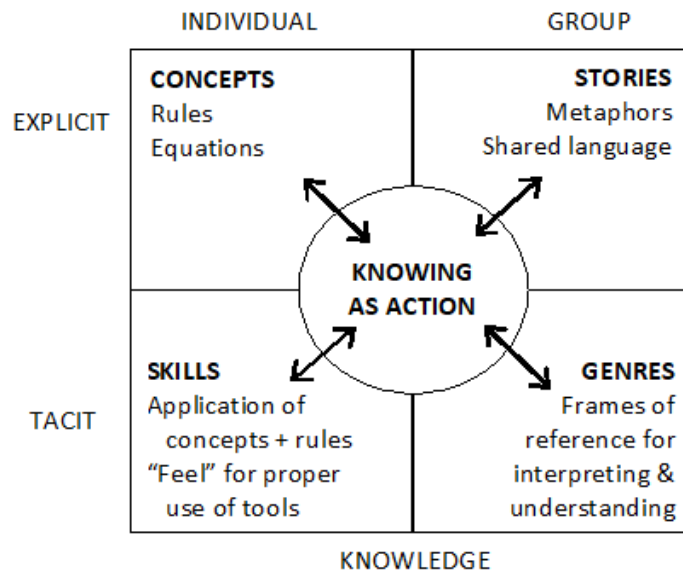
Source: Adapted from Cook and Brown (1999, pp. 391,393)

The most difficult category to define and to understand, particularly for a newcomer into a sociocultural learning environment, is the group/tacit category labelled as 'genres' (Cook and Brown 1999). It relates to the style of communication and behavioural norms of a group, and links closely to organizational culture. Forms of communication that are regarded as normal and acceptable in one organization or situation, such as email or texting, could be seen as inappropriate or offensive in another. Similarly, the common practice of holding gatherings, often named in a way unique to the organization, requires knowledge of expectations of behaviour in order to contribute appropriately (ibid). Placing knowing at the centre of Figure 2.1 highlights not only its importance in giving form to knowledge in social experience but also, through its quality of action, an ability to stimulate new knowledge which in turn generates new knowing: a generative dance.

2.1.3 Organizational memory

The concept of memory has traditionally been associated with the individual and it is defined as "a stock of meanings for future use [from which] judgment selects and adopts the one used" (Dewey 1910, p.107). Memory has proved more elusive to define when applied to an organization, which led to charges of anthropomorphising a socially constructed entity (Walsh and Ungson 1991). It is accepted, however, that Individual and collective memory are inextricably linked since "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 1992, p.38).

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Furthermore, "the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group" and "the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories." (Ibid, p.40). As socially constructed entities, consisting of a group or groups of individuals, organizations may be said to have the capability for a similar collective memory. What that memory consists of, however, and how it is stored, distributed and controlled may be disputable aspects.

The attempt to define organizational memory (OM) has been framed in many ways, depending on the ontological perspective taken of organizations. It is not within the scope of this research to explore all these perspectives, the purpose here is simply to recognise that there is a general acceptance that OM consists of mental and structural artefacts that influence performance (Walsh & Ungson 1991). A working definition of OM in its most basic sense is that it "refers to stored information from an organisation's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions" (Ibid, p.61). That stored information is based on descriptions of actions that always come after the fact as recollected reconstructions (Suchman 1987 drawing on Mead 2015) and shared interpretations.

Individual memories are not always complete or accurate and "[a] man [sic] must often appeal to others' remembrances to evoke his own past" (Halbwachs 1950/1980, p.51, cited by Walsh and Ungson 1991). It is the sharing of individual recollections to create collective understanding and meaning that is of relevance to this research, recognising, however, that memory is a rendition rather than a verbatim reconstruction of past decisions and events (Webster and Mertova 2007). Just as individual memories are not always accurate or complete, interpretations of past actions stored in collective memory are recreations rather than factual recordings for "[L]ife as led is inseparable from a life as told…[L]ife is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (Bruner 1994 in Dyson and Genishi 1994, p.36).

For organizations to learn, they need to embody accurate memory and appropriate distribution of it (Weick 1979), but this poses the significant problem of defining whose 'accuracy' prevails and for what purpose. Organizations create "shadowed places", not open to inspection or question, alongside other areas that are displayed in relatively ample detail and can be minutely scrutinised. Over time revisions are made to practice and "[h]istory emerges in an unintended shape as a result of practices directed to immediate, practical ends. To watch these practices establish selective principles that highlight some kinds of events and

obscure others is to inspect the social order operating on individual minds" (Douglas 1986, p.69-70).

In this context, the organizational memory may be defined by the most powerful group or by senior management (Hambrick and Mason 1984). It is open to potential control and filtering in furtherance of a particular purpose, for example legitimation of a decision, by demonstrating its link to past experience and organizational values (Kantrow 1987). Such legitimacy may enhance commitment to the implementation of the decision. In some cases, it may be the long serving members of the organization who have the greatest understanding of its practices and beliefs and are best placed to facilitate retrieval of information from organizational memory (Pfeffer 1983). Memories can, therefore, grow and be well rooted, well preserved and easy to retrieve. Nevertheless, a disadvantage of this memory development process when embedded in hierarchy, seniority and organizational history is that those with deeply ingrained learning may be less willing or able to change. Substantial change can, therefore, can ultimately only be achieved by bringing in new people, particularly at senior level (Starbuck and Hedberg 1977).

A further characteristic of OM is the way in which it is intrinsically linked to the concept of organizational culture. Organizations can be viewed as interpretive systems (Daft and Weick 1984), that is, as a network of intersubjectively shared meanings that are sustained through the development and use of a common language and everyday social interactions (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Thus, OM can be seen as part of the organization's culture. Shared meaning and interpretations, some of which will be tacit, generate collective knowledge which remains in the organization even when individual members leave (Weick and Gilfillan 1971). An organization's culture therefore consists of an important store of retained collective memory, represented through language, shared frameworks, symbols, the grapevine and stories. These will be explored in Section 2.1.9.

Finally, the development of a narrative or story is a powerful tool for capturing individual memories (Mertova and Webster 2020). Communicating them to others repeatedly over time may lead to them acquiring the status of accepted wisdom or folklore. Stories are not necessarily shared with the whole organization; they may relate to "non-canonical" practices (Brown and Duguid 1991) and their meaning only be understood by a specific group. Non-canonical in this context is defined as practices that are adopted by workers in order to achieve their job objectives, but which are not defined in company procedures. These practices are also referred to as 'work arounds'. An example of this is the case study of the photocopier service technicians dealing with the maintenance and repair of a wide range of

machines, some old and idiosyncratic, where canonical documents such as company procedures and manuals were unable to provide solutions to non-standard problems. Technicians would gather together and exchange anecdotes about their experiences and "war stories" of successful repairs. In the course of doing so they passed on their knowledge to others, generated new insights and created a community memory (Orr 1996). Implicitly, therefore, forgetting, and thereby losing embedded traditions and a dimension of the past, have serious consequences for an organization "[f]or memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man [sic] except through remembrance" (Arendt 2006, p.94).

2.1.4 Learning

The broad definition of learning as the continuous generation of ideas that are turned into objects and action, which in their turn create new ideas (Czarniawska and Joerges 1995), is adopted as a starting point for this review of social learning. The concept that learning is in essence a fundamentally social phenomenon is not intended to replace earlier theories of learning which have different assumptions and foci (Wenger 1998). It is outside the scope of this research to comment on these earlier theories. Nevertheless, since sociocultural learning is examined within the context of organizational learning (OL) in this thesis, it is worth considering briefly the relationship between learning and organization activity, before focusing on sociocultural learning itself.

Working and learning, along with the resultant innovation they generate, are closely related, but have conventionally been viewed as in conflict (Brown and Duguid 1991). Furthermore, there is an argument that organizing and learning are antithetical processes, since learning brings disorganization and increases variety and complexity, while organizing seeks to create order, reduce variety, forget (Weick and Westley 1996) or even selectively unlearn (Hedberg 1981).

The most productive learning occurs at the intersection between order and disorder, where there is no extreme alternation from one to the other but "intimate and continuing connection between the two" (Weick and Westley 1996, p.445). At these intersections, where definitions are unstable, learning can transgress boundaries. One important aspect of learning is the attempt to challenge the deep- rooted assumptions in an organization and explore new perspectives and opportunities (Clegg *et al.* 2005). Newcomers to an organization may play a part in maintaining this tension during the process of becoming enculturated to organizational norms and assumptions. This occurs in the early stages of socialisation before they reach the

status of fully accepted members of the community, able to confidently act within the established norms where the practices and standards become 'taken-for-granted' (Spender 1996). In asking questions of experienced members, newcomers may focus insiders' attention on forgotten or outdated assumptions and aspects of practice founded on them (Weick and Roberts 1993). In some cases, this may result in a re-evaluation of their validity. Equally, they may introduce ideas from their previous experience and seek to gain acceptance of them. If successful, this will add a new element of competence to the community (Wenger 2010).

In an earlier review of perspectives of OL, Fiol and Lyles (1985) also identify a theme running through the literature linking learning with change and adaptation as part of an organization's adjustment to its environment. This theme is reflected and expanded in the definition of OL as "the acquiring, sustaining, or changing of intersubjective meanings through the artifactual vehicles of their expression and the collective actions of the group" (Cook and Yanow 1993, p.384). It extends the scope of OL beyond acquiring and changing practices, to sustaining those that already exist and maintaining the status quo, where it is appropriate to do so (Czarniawska and Joerges 1995). Of significance in Cook and Yanow's (1993) definition is the use of the terms 'meanings' and their 'artefactual expressions' which they clarify as "necessary components of culture" in their view (ibid, p.388) but which are also of importance in a social perspective. Although there are overlaps between the social and cultural perspectives, they will be considered separately with connections made where appropriate.

2.1.5 A social perspective of organizational learning

Within this perspective, learning is viewed as a socially constructed understanding that emerges from practical collaboration (Brown and Duguid 1991). Four key interlinking themes emerge: community, practice, meaning and identity, as shown in Figure 2.2 (Wenger 1998). These themes cover the situated and relational nature of learning within a community of practice; the changing and negotiated character of meaning, which is what learning should ultimately produce (Wenger 1998, p.4) and the creation of identity within the contested nature of learning and knowing). These will be considered in turn, whilst acknowledging that there are many overlaps between them due to the integrated nature of social learning. Because a community and its practice are inextricably linked, the two will be considered together as communities of practice.

Figure 2.2 Components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory

Source: Wenger 1998, p. 5

2.1.6 Communities of practice

Communities of practice are the loci for situated activity and this includes learning. The term 'situated action' was created to reflect the reality that "every course of action depends in essential ways upon its material and social circumstances" (Suchman 1987, p.50). Based on a study contrasting the navigational techniques of the Trukese and Europeans (Gladwin 1964), Suchman (1987) makes a distinction between, on the one hand, cognitive phenomena, such as plans that are representations of situated actions and, on the other hand, the artefacts and actions they represent which only acquire significance from their essential relationship to the particular, concrete circumstances. Nevertheless, whether relying on careful planning and preparation and strict adherence to implementation of the plan (making adjustments to it where necessary) or setting sail with just an end destination in mind and responding to conditions on route, both courses always involve situated actions requiring accomplishment of alignments within a network of relations (ibid). Such alignment involves "heedful action" (Ryle 1949) by individuals, interrelating their actions within a social system to create "collective mind" (Weick and Roberts 1993).

In a detailed analysis of the complex and lengthy process involved in learning to navigate, Hutchins (1996) highlights the robustness of a system of distributed knowledge with built in redundancy, where team members have access to each other's activities. While it is difficult for an individual to manage more than one complex task at a time, a socially distributed

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cognitive system can handle a greater number and, where individual errors occur, they are more likely to be picked up by other team members and either rectified or the effects mitigated. Having set out to research the influence of culture on the cognition of individual actors where their activities, while socially situated, were considered primarily as individual cognitive accomplishments, Hutchins (1996) concluded that to a large extent "cognitive accomplishments can be joint accomplishments not attributable to any individual" (ibid, p.35). Both the cases studied by Weick and Roberts (1993) and Hutchins (1996) involve organizations requiring almost error-free operations with potentially catastrophic consequences for failure. For many businesses the operating conditions are less stringent and the result of failing to meet them less severe. Nevertheless, the concept of heedful interrelating still has relevance for them as well as potential benefit.

Just as actions are situated, so is learning, though not as one activity but, rather, as an aspect of all activity and "an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (Lave and Wenger 1991, p.35). Learning from this perspective involves not just cognitive knowledge but knowing through participation and engagement with others in communities of practice, where "agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other" (ibid, p.33), which draws on the work of Vygotsky (1978). For an apprentice or other new member of an organization, there are two complexities to master: the skills required to operate as a competent practitioner and the social situation within which those skills are performed. Both elements are essential as Becker's (1972) example of barber colleges demonstrates. The technical skill of learning to cut hair is clearly essential but of equal importance is the management of clients, particularly when the end result fails to meet their expectations. As a way of providing practical training for their students, it is common practice for colleges to offer haircuts to members of the public at a very reduced rate. Such clients are not in a position to complain when they find the end result less than satisfactory and, consequently, trainees fail to gain experience in handling dissatisfied customers. It is social practice that provides the key to understanding the complexity of human thought as it is enacted in everyday life (Lave 1988).

Practice is formed over time, in and by communities of individuals, and reflects the shared historical and social perspectives and frameworks defined by the community as criteria for membership. However, practice is not static; existing practice evolves, and new practice emerges because "nature and society and the space between them are continually made, un-made, and remade" (Pickering 1992, p. 21, quoted in Gherardi and Nicolini 2002). Individuals typically belong to a number of communities, some of them at the same time, some overlapping, some with lifelong membership and others joined only for a limited period

(Wenger 2010). Each community has its own historical and social resources and perspectives, and newcomers need to learn these from established members ('old timers') and internalise them to the point where they can demonstrate correct behaviour and use of appropriate language.

The route for individuals to acquire understanding and proficiency in a particular practice, and to gain acceptance by established members of that practice, is through a process of "legitimate peripheral practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991). The stated intention of the authors is that each of the three words in this definition should be seen as indispensable in defining the concept and not considered in isolation. However, whilst recognising the integrity of the combination, it is also important to consider the meaning each element contributes. 'Participation' acknowledges that learners become a part of the community, although they are not accepted as full members of it until they have assumed its identity and become knowledgeable old timers. The choice of the word 'peripheral' is designed to indicate the "multiple, varied, more- or less-engaged and -inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by a community" (Lave and Wenger 1991, p.36).

This very broad definition of 'peripheral' links to the difficulty in defining 'legitimacy'. Social structures involve unequal relations of power (Blackler 1995), and the extent to which newcomers are afforded access to the nexus of power and control of resources impacts the level of participation and learning they are able to achieve. Peripheral participation can be empowering where learning insights are facilitated and disempowering where access is denied, quite legitimately at times in line with wider society norms. Legitimacy may also be influenced by practical aspects. In periods of economic depression, experienced workers may see newcomers as a threat to their jobs and keep them engaged on unskilled work longer than is required for their learning. On the other hand, in periods of staff shortage those same experienced workers may have little time to devote to newcomers and the newcomers are forced to learn faster and take on greater responsibility earlier than would normally be the case (Becker 1972). Depending on the individual and the circumstances, this may be seen as an opportunity or exploitation and, therefore, either legitimate or unacceptable. The issue of unequal power will be explored more fully in Section 2.2.

The shared historical and social perspectives and the frameworks of a community of practice are founded on meaning that has been continuously negotiated and modified over time. This important component of social learning which has already been touched on will now be examined in more depth.

2.1.7 Meaning

Meaning does not exist in an individual or in the world but is created "in the dynamic relation of living in the world" (Wenger 1998, p.54), where context and individual action overlap (Snook 2001 in Weick *et al.* 2005) and "[e]veryday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p.33). Mutual understanding is specific to a given interaction in a particular context and is not "discharged once and for all by a stable body of shared meanings" (Suchman 1987, p.51). However, where action is taken in a context of joint enterprise, shared meanings may be created, and sustained or modified, over time through a process of negotiation, involving participation and reification (Wenger 1998). Reification, as defined by Wenger, is a central element of practice, whereby communities produce both artifacts and abstractions, which embody essential elements of their practice, and which can take the form of both process and product (ibid). Language, as a symbolic artifact, plays an important role in creating coherence and shared meaning; through back-and-forth dialogue, new knowledge is created which generates new meaning (Cook and Brown 1999). Reification is a significant element of culture and will be explored further within the review of a cultural perspective of OL.

The dynamic nature of meaning involves action which precedes cognition so that "we act our way into belated understanding" (Weick *et al.*, p.419) and meaning emerges retrospectively in an "*act* of apprehending, of making sense, of putting together, from what [we] have, the significance of where [we] are" (Vickers 1976 in Cook and Brown 1999). Reflection can aid the construction, or reconstruction, of meaning through a process of inquiry that makes explicit what has been observed or experienced in the course of action (Raelin 1997). This reflection may take the form of 'knowing-in-practice' which takes place after the event is finished or 'reflection-in-action' which, although still retrospective, takes place during the time in which action can still make a difference to the situation (Schön 1991).

An act of making sense, or sense-reading (Polanyi 1969) starts with the inarticulate meaning of an experience and through effort strives to reach an understanding of that experience, finally creating 'sense-giving' if words can be found to express what has been experienced. Here again, the crucial importance of the use and comprehension of language for learning is demonstrated. The example of the medical student learning how to interpret x-rays of pulmonary diseases illustrates the journey involved in moving from incomprehension, through partial understanding of the pictures and words used to describe them by an expert, to full competence in diagnosing and naming the diseases and achieving the status of an expert. This act of comprehension is achieved through the joint understanding of the objects referred to

and the words referring to them so that "the meaning of the things and of the terms designating them is discovered at the same time" (ibid, p.189).

The act of 'sensemaking', which is about "continued redrafting of an emerging story" (Weick *et al*. 2005), requires sense-giving to make it complete. Sensemaking is both an individual and a social activity, and involves elements of interpretation and discovery, although it goes beyond these to encompass authoring and creation (Weick 1995). Interpretation, when defined as "acceptable and approximating translation" (Mailloux 1990, p.121), raises two important points. An interpretation is an attempt to capture the presumed intended meaning of another or others and therefore, by its very nature, can only offer an approximation of the original. Furthermore, it is created by an individual or group with a focus on a particular audience. To be acceptable it is likely to have some stature "within the power relations of a historical community" and involve political interests and coercion or persuasion (ibid, P.127). Emily Dickinson's (1862) poem 'Much madness is divinest sense' encapsulates the conflict that can arise when individual and social interpretations of what constitutes sense diverge, and the power of the majority triumphs.

> Much Madness is divinest Sense -
> To a discerning Eye -
> Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
> 'Tis the Majority
> In this, as all, prevail -
> Assent - and you are sane -
> Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
> And handled with a Chain –

Shared understanding and consensus are commonly used terms in relation to meaning within organizations but the issue of whether shared beliefs are a necessary condition for organized action raises a deeper question (Lant 2002, p.355). As will be seen later in the discussion of the cultural perspective of learning, shared beliefs are sometimes taken as an implied condition. An alternative perspective sees social sensemaking as not necessarily requiring shared common values. It may instead involve individuals aligning to form joint action for a variety of reasons, maybe out of necessity or to achieve separate outcomes which are enabled by such action or because it is the only sensible course of action to take (Blumer 1969). Here, a system of consensually constructed social action creates workable relations. In an organizational context, shared meaning may also be difficult to achieve as individuals have different prior experiences through which they filter their understanding of collective actions (Weick 1995). Rather than shared meaning, it may be the shared experience of collective action that is important (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992).

Closely linked to meaning is identity and in an organizational context this consists of the identity of the individual, the identity of the organization, and the interconnected identities of the two. These will now be considered.

2.1.8 Identity

"Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society" (Berger and Luckmann 1966 p.195) and is akin to Follett's (1924) circular response. Individual identity (or self) is "essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience" (Mead 2015, p.140). Each individual is made up of "a parliament of selves" (ibid), which may be expressed more personally as "We are many" (Neruda 1968 quoted by Weick 1995), each self being formed through engagement with others in particular social processes and contexts. The individual reaction to these social interactions is always "a reaction to a relating, I never react to you but to you-plus-me, or to be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you-plus-me" (Follett 1924, p. 62). In the process of meeting, each party is modified. It could therefore be said that individual identity is both linked to specific social contexts and constantly in flux as these contexts change.

A different definition of identity is offered as "the way a person understands and views himself, and is viewed by others, a perception of self which is fairly constant" (Cain n.d. quoted by Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 81) and appears to conflict with the previous sources. This apparent dichotomy between constancy of an identity and a kaleidoscope of different identities created in different social environments may be explained by the context in which Cain's definition was made, namely that of a study into the process of becoming a nondrinking alcoholic through Alcoholics Anonymous. In this situation, success is measured on the ability to leave behind the identity of an alcoholic and take on that of a non-drinking alcoholic. It is only through an enduring transformation of self-perception, supported by group members, that sobriety can be achieved.

For organizations, the notion of continuity and longevity also has relevance, where identity is defined as "that which is core, distinctive and enduring about the character of the organization" (Albert and Whetton, 1985, p.416) and might also be referred to as the source of its culture. These characteristics may be overtly manifest or tacitly understood by actors within the organization; in both cases, however, they influence individuals' perception of their identity in the context of the organization which, in turn, affects the image they project to outsiders. Positive or negative response from outsiders may lead to an adjustment of this image and a consequent re-assessment of identity (Weick *et al.* 2005).

Preservation of organizational identity can also be an issue during times of change due to innovation or restructuring (Cook and Yanow 1993). Organization leaders need to be cognisant of the complex interrelation between people and context; issues that arise require examination from the joint perspective of the people involved and the context in which they are operating, together with the reciprocal effects that the two have on each other (Follett 1924). A similar understanding is needed of the integral link between individual learning, along with its implicit construction of identity (Lave and Wenger 1991), and the social practice of the community in which the learning is situated.

Identity is "a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities" (Wenger 1998, p.5). The stories related by the Xerox technicians served not only to impart information and develop others' ability to handle problems, but also to establish their own identities within the group (Orr 1996). Through learning, identities evolve over time, developing in the present while incorporating the past and future. In common with meaning, they do not exist as objects but must be negotiated through individuals' subjective experience of developing relations with others and influencing the everyday world they inhabit. This "interlocking of identities" entails both mutual dependencies and conflict and, where it involves different generations, there is the added complication of identities founded in different times (Wenger 1998, p.157).

Both newcomers and old-timers have vested interests in a practice and its development. For newcomers to a community the focus is on understanding the existing practice and establishing their identity within it. At this stage they may not feel sufficiently competent or confident to challenge the existing practice but, nevertheless, have a legitimate interest in its future development. As they develop within the practice, gain mastery and are socialised into the culture, their identity transitions into that of an old-timer. Old-timers' identity is heavily invested in the history of the practice which may result in one of two consequences; either they seek continuity of the practices which they have been instrumental in creating or they welcome the potential opportunities offered by newcomers to develop and refresh practices. Depending on the level of consensus or conflict between the two generations and the way in which conflict is handled if it arises, interaction between newcomers and old-timers can be constructive or conflictual (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Issues of power have been a recurring theme in the aspects of learning discussed so far and section 2.2 will address them more fully.

Having considered the social element of sociocultural learning, the following section will examine the cultural aspects of it.

2.1.9 A cultural perspective on organizational learning

When early debates around OL failed to provide a satisfactory social science of organization or learning (Weick and Westley 1996), a different theory of OL was required, one "that satisfactorily accounts for phenomena such as culture and institutionalization" (Cohen and Sproull 1991, p.i). Organizations cannot be perceived (Sandelands and Srivatsan 1993) and by implication nor can a process of collective learning within them. However, focusing on feeling, emotion and lived experience and viewing organizations through the construct of a cultural perspective overcomes some of the difficulties experienced in attempts to grasp the nature of OL (Yanow 2000).

Culture is a complex and debated concept (Weick and Westley 1996), involving "values, beliefs and feelings, together with the artifacts of their expression and transmission" (Cook and Yanow, p.379). For a culture to exist, it has to be embedded in a group which has been established long enough to share significant problems, had the opportunity to work on those problems, if not actually solve them, and pass on the resultant knowledge and know-how to new members (Schein 1984). Consequently, "every culture has not only its own set *body* of knowledge, but its own *ways* of [knowing]" (Vickers 1976 in Cook and Brown 1999) and is therefore unique. By acting as a living repository for the group's learning, knowing and memory which existing and new members draw on and mutually continue to create, culture has the advantage that it attains the "ontological status of the collectivity" and affords the possibility of viewing the group or organization as an entity (Yanow 2000, p. 250).

A second advantage of the cultural perspective stems from being able to view the individual group or organization as a society, or clan (Ouchi 1980) based on Durkheim's (2013) definition of a politico-familial form of organization resembling kinship, which implies collective responsibility but not necessarily blood relations. Within this structure, collective action is coordinated towards a common purpose, thereby escaping the criticism of anthropomorphism of an inanimate object (Yanow 2000).

A review of the research conducted around the intersection of culture theory and organization theory, concludes that the common element is the idea that "culture focuses attention on the expressive nonrational qualities of the experience of organization. It legitimates attention to the subjective, interpretive aspects of organizational life" (Smircich

1983, p.355). Two themes identified within the research are of particular relevance to this study of sociocultural learning. The first is the theme of Corporate Culture, in which organizations are seen as culture-producing phenomena and the emphasis is on the socio-cultural qualities that develop within a specific organization, although this will inevitably be influenced by the wider cultural context in which the organization is situated. From this perspective, culture is viewed as one internal element of the organization's system, supporting shared values and beliefs, providing a sense of identity and enhancing commitment to the organization. This understanding of culture as something possessed by the organization is rejected, however, by those who view it as a constitutive element of the organization (Cook and Yanow 1993, note 16), or, to phrase it differently, "[t]hey leave behind the view that a culture is something an organization *has*, in favor of the view that a culture is something an organization *is*" (Smircich 1981, quoted in Smircich 1983, p. 347).

The interpretation of culture as a root metaphor also has close connections with the second of the themes, described as the Symbolic Perspective (Smircich 1983). "Symbols are objects, acts, relationships, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions and impel men [sic] to action" (Cohen 1974, p. 23). The term 'symbol', when applied to culture, offers the perspective of a system of shared symbols and meanings operating for a given group at a given time (Geertz 1973; Pettigrew 1979). In order to analyse the nature of these meanings, culture needs to be broken down into its six component concepts. Symbol is the most inclusive of them, encompassing language, ritual and myth; ideology and belief make up the other two (Pettigrew 1979). This interpretation is challenged, however, on the grounds that people bring different prior experience to a situation and, as a result, shared meaning is difficult to attain. In cases where there is shared experience, this "may be made sensible in retrospect by equivalent meanings but seldom by similar meanings" (Weick 1995).

Artifacts, which include aspects such as office design, technology, style of dress, visible and audible behaviour and documents, play a hugely significant role in embodying the meaning of a culture (Schein 1984; Weick and Westley 1996; Gagliardi 1996; Cook and Yanow 1993; Lave and Wenger 1991). Contrasting interpretations of artifacts view them, on the one hand, as secondary manifestations of deeper cultural phenomena and demonstrations of how a group constructs it environment (Schein 1984) and, on the other hand, as primary cultural phenomena which influence corporate life (Gagliardi 1996). In this latter interpretation, the influence takes two forms. Not only do artefacts, through their materiality make possible and shape organizational action, but they also influence perceptions of reality, thereby "subtly

shaping beliefs, norms and cultural values" (ibid, p.568). Core beliefs and values are hard to observe and what is seen on first observation may simply be overt behaviour and an espoused culture. It is only through a deeper knowledge of the organization and the non-debatable assumptions of its members which underlie their behaviour and become taken-for-granted over time, that an understanding of the organizational culture can be achieved (Schein 1984). Where individuals have difficulty articulating or discussing the intangible aspects of organizational life, because they are 'in-dwelling' (Polanyi 1966), artifacts can provide clues to them (Van Maanen 1979) and help to access '*the sense beyond the action*' (Monaci 1991, in Gagliardi 1996, p. 568).

The conclusion to this review of sociocultural learning theory offers a brief exploration of aspects of the case study of the Powell flute company, introduced in subsection 2.1.1.

The case study of three flute manufacturing companies in America, which focuses on Verne Q. Powell Flutes, Inc., founded in 1927 (Cook and Yanow 1993), offers insights into organizational culture and power relationships. Whilst considerably smaller than the case study organizations used for this research, and operating in a different market, there are nevertheless two aspects of the Powell company that are relevant to this present research.

The first relates to the situation facing the company when a new scale, developed by an independent English flute maker, Albert Cooper, and favoured by several prominent flutists, came to their attention. The dilemma for Powell was whether to stay with the traditional scale developed by their founder, which was very highly regarded and viewed by the company as the best in the world or move to the Cooper scale. The debate surrounding it was lengthy and went to the heart of the organization's identity. "Powell's primary concern was as much preservative as it was innovative: learning how to do and make something different without becoming a new and different company" (ibid, p.383). The situation faced by Powell is not an unfamiliar one for family firms seeking to stay grounded in their heritage and traditional identity, but also needing to grow and develop in response to changing circumstances. After considerable discussion, involving the whole company, a prototype Powell flute with a Cooper scale was produced. Once the company was completely satisfied that this new version retained the style and feel of the original Powell flute, a unanimous decision was taken to produce both versions. It was an accommodation of a changing environment, while retaining the company's existing values and identity, and it proved successful. Within a few months of the Powell flute with the Cooper scale being offered for sale, 90% of the orders were for this model.

The second aspect concerns the relationship between the workers who make the flutes. The production of the flutes involves a number of stages, each of which is performed by a different craftsman [sic], skilled in that particular element. If, at any stage of the process, the craftsman receiving the flute assesses that it does not feel or look right, he passes it back to be reworked. The same system is used for training apprentices until they reach the point of being able to judge their own work, which marks the end of the apprenticeship. Craftsmen work side by side and although no one person has the skill to carry out all the elements involved in making an instrument, they have a deep knowledge and understanding of the distinguishing qualities of a Powell flute. They also have the ability and right to assess and make a judgement, not only on their own work but also on that of others. This feature of the culture, founded on the search for excellence, gives equal power, and responsibility, to all and is an example of relational power (Foucault 1984 in Law 1986, Follett 1924), although not termed as such in the case study.

Power within organizations, with specific reference to relational power, will be considered in more depth in the next section.

2.2 Power

The assertion that power preserves the public realm and is the lifeblood of the human artifice (Arendt 2018), places it at the centre of all human affairs, relationships and stories, providing shape and coherence to them. It follows, therefore, that if relations of power are present in any forum where collective action and speech take place, they will also be found in work organizations. Because of their traditionally hierarchical structure, however, businesses are some of the least democratic institutions of modern times (Clegg *et al.* 2006). The complex network of social relationships they encompass, comprising both those within the organization itself and external networks with suppliers, customers, the wider community and regulatory bodies, can lead to political pressures and influence from multiple sources. For a family firm, there is the added dimension of power relations among the individual family members themselves, as well as between the family, acting as both owner and senior management, and the employees of the firm.

The study of power, and the conflict often associated with it, has a long history and it is not within the scope of this research to address the extensive body of scholarship built up over a number of centuries. Rather, the aim here is to review perspectives pertinent to this research, focusing in particular on relational power and drawing out the contrast between that and dominant forms of power. Section 2.3 will briefly set the context from which the perspective

of relational power developed before proceeding to discuss its key concepts in section 2.4. Finally, power within organizations will be analysed, including a critical evaluation of Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1998) treatment of power and conflict within situated learning and communities of practice in section 2.5.

2.2.1 Contextualising relational power

Much theory on the nature of power has conceived of it as an existing force or resource, available to be grasped and wielded by individuals, institutions or other bodies and put to use in pursuit of their own aims and desired outcomes (Allen 2003). A definition of power as "the chance of an individual or a number of people to effect their will in social action, even when faced with opposition from others" (Weber 1999, p.107) highlights the potentially confrontational nature of power and the possible resultant conflict. The reference to social action hints at the subsequent interest in power as an inherent part of social life and the result of action, a perspective that is discussed further in this thesis.

Of direct relevance to the contextualisation of relational power is the diffusion model of power (Latour 1986), also termed 'power over' (Follett 1924) because of its central controlling force. It is a power that is viewed as being held or possessed and then delegated as necessary through an organizational hierarchy with clear lines of authority. The source of the power may reside in the mere potential capacity to take action, whether or not it is ever actually exercised. Under a structural functionalist perspective, power is seen as the central focus for the operation of an organization, enabling it to mobilise resources and achieve its system goals. Because it is also a social system, however, these goals need to be grounded in a value system, which regulates and legitimises them, while also commanding the loyalty of followers (Parsons 1960). Although Parsons' (1960) focus is at the macro-social level of the institution, his understanding of the importance of gaining the loyalty of followers acknowledges the need for those in power to gain legitimacy for their actions. It also foreshadows the subsequent shift in interest to the micro-social level, that is, to the individuals that comprise the social life of an organization.

It is pertinent at this point to consider the notion of authority. Power, as defined by Parsons (ibid), is directly derived from authority which provides the institutionalised legitimation for it (Giddens 1984) and offers the probability that commands will be obeyed, "a certain minimal willingness to obey" being an essential element in a model of domination" (Weber 1999, p.28). Domination, although sometimes viewed as violence, is more often achieved through relations of control which, in their most extreme form, restrict individual identity (Clegg *et al.* 2006). In

the context of examining the fundamental conditions of human life, Arendt (2006), while accepting that obedience is required, argues that this should not be achieved through force or persuasion; legitimacy comes instead from the authoritarian hierarchy itself, when both those who command and those who obey accept the rightness of the established order. It represents a less repressive and more consensual form of power, where people are acting together with a common purpose.

Critiquing Parsons' (1960) view of power as overstating the degree of authority in the social system (Giddens 1968), the structuration theory focuses on the mutually creative and restraining relationship between individuals and the social systems within which they operate. This approach is critical of the view that power is intent or will, seeing it rather as inherent in the constitution of social life and involving action, where to 'act otherwise' means being able to intervene in the world to influence others and the course of events. Such action logically involves power in the sense of transformative capacity; an individual is defined by his or her ability to create such transformation and make a difference to the status quo (Giddens 1984, pp. 14-15). The constant interplay between the action of individuals, or groups, and the social system within which it is situated, is termed "a dialectic of power and structure" (Lukes 1977, p.29). A further element in effecting transformation involves the use of resources within which power resides (Allen 2003). In the case of family firms, there is the added dimension of combined ownership and management, which may create its own particular dialectic and structural constraints or opportunities.

The power to bring about transformation, irrespective of whether it is intentional or unintentional, or of varying significance and relevance, is an attribute of human agents, acting alone or as a group. Such power comprises two essential elements: (1) the exerciser of the power could have acted differently (but still within the structural constraints) and (2) the individual(s) affected by it would have acted differently had it not been enacted. This point is illustrated by the contrasting situations of the manager required to select a number of individuals for redundancy, and, secondly, the liquidator called in to manage the closure of an entire business (Lukes 1977). The former situation provides an opportunity for discretion in the exercise of power whereas, in the latter, the process is totally controlled by structural constraints. Within social systems where continuity has been achieved over time, "balanced relations of autonomy and dependence" (Giddens 1984, p.16) may be possible, as a result of the modification of actions by the exerciser of power and the consequent reaction of those affected by it. In any case, those in subordinate positions always have some opportunity to influence the activities of their superiors (ibid). While control in organizations is normally

regarded as the prerogative of management, there are circumstances where workers may be in a position to influence management's actions, either through negotiation or direct action. This is referred to as a 'dialectic of control' (ibid).

This section has set out briefly the repressive nature of power as domination and the transition in thinking away from that conflictual perception of power towards a socially constructed, more diffuse and equitable model of power seen in the work of Follett, Arendt and Giddens. This understanding provides the foundation for the concept of relational power that will now be discussed.

2.2.2 Relational power

Relational power, also termed associational power (Latour 1986), is a relational effect which is to be found everywhere and, as the name suggests, is a product of social interaction (Allen 2003). Recognition of its importance can be found long before the term was used. Even at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when domination by force of arms was the principal manifestation of power, the importance of building alliances was recognised. Hiero of Syracuse is particularly singled out for praise; having risen from ordinary citizen to military commander and subsequently king. It was his ability to forge strong relationships with not only his own soldiers but also reliable allies that enabled him to retain power. Of equal importance was a ruler's ability to choose capable and loyal ministers, who were as committed to enhancing the ruler's interests as their own. In return, they deserved to be well recompensed, treated with respect, and credited with a share in any honours received (Machiavelli 2011). Translated to a twenty-first century business context the terminology would be different, but the principles still remain relevant.

Produced through action in networks of association, relational power resides within the group rather than belonging to any individual (Follett 1924; Arendt 1970; Giddens 1984). It is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature (Follett 1924), meaning that it is not diminished when shared. Because it is created through people acting together, its existence depends on individuals being persuaded to engage willingly in an enterprise and only continues as long as their temporary agreement exists (Arendt 2018/1958). For Arendt (ibid), the number of people recruited to the enterprise is immaterial to the amount of power generated.

Arendt's (ibid) view stands in contrast to that expressed by Latour (1986) who considers that the amount of power available derives directly from the numbers involved and may be of more relevance today when the availability of the internet makes the engagement of individuals in

an enterprise significantly faster and easier. Building contacts and maintaining communication, both within and across networks, is a key element in nurturing an environment in which relational power can flourish (Qin 2018). The reach of these networks can now be extensive through the growth of virtual communities of practice (Clegg *et al.* 2006). An objective of this present research is to investigate whether the two Cumbrian case study organizations are communities of practice, including an assessment of whether they participate in virtual communities.

Latour (1986), in contrast to his diffusion model, terms relational power a translation model where power is created collectively through commands passed on, or translated, between group members and which can only be explained by the actions of those who lend their support to the enterprise. Viewed from this perspective, power is not possessed or stored and is a consequence rather than a cause of action (Law 1986). Individuals engaged in such arrangements exercise voluntary power over themselves to resolve problems through integration of wants and jointly agreed solutions (as distinct from compromises), without seeking to gain power over others to satisfy a particular desire. Because of its collaborative, as opposed to oppressive, nature it has been termed 'power with', in contrast to 'power over' (Follett 1924).[4] A grower's cooperative created willingly by the coming together of its members, provides a good example of 'power with'. Members are able to share business processes and expertise, allowing them to achieve economies of scale without losing control of their core business (ibid). A further example of relational power can be found in the case study of the flight deck team of an aircraft carrier. The complex operation involved in the safe take-off and landing of multiple planes in a limited timescale can only be achieved successfully through a team effort involving 'heedful interrelating' (Weick and Roberts 1993), which requires the application of individual knowledge and the power of co-ordinated activity.

The two perspectives of power that have been discussed above, that is power over and power to (Follett 1924), demonstrate a marked contrast between, on the one hand, that of domination exerted by a group or individual over others and, on the other hand, that of an alliance of willing individuals aligning themselves to an enterprise and generating power through collaborative knowledge and activity. The idea that a stable situation using 'power over' may need to be established before collaborative, collective power can exist has been postulated (Mann 1986). The case where the two types of power can co-exist within the same

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[4] Foucault (1984) also talks about the self acting upon itself, and at times resisting itself. In keeping with his ideas of disciplinary power and knowledge, this is done on the basis of self-knowledge. The case study of recovering alcoholics cited by Lave and Wenger (1991) provides an example of such self discipline (Fox 2000).

organization with a greater or lesser degree of harmony may also be true. In the study of service technicians (Orr 1996), the canonical organization seeks to exert power over the technicians through the use of formal procedures. To help the technicians address the issues they encounter in their everyday reality, as opposed to the world represented in formal company policies and procedures, communities of practice develop and evolve their own non-canonical practices (Brown and Duguid 1991). The regular practice of technicians meeting up during their break time supports the assertion that relational power is dependent upon individuals' willing engagement in an enterprise (Latour 1986; Arendt 2018). There is no company requirement for the technicians to meet but they clearly see a benefit in the practice; on the one hand, it provides an opportunity for experienced technicians to relate 'war stories' of challenging repairs and establish their position as knowledgeable and influential members of the community, and on the other, it enables junior technicians to gain valuable knowledge of real operational issues. The outcome is positive for all members of the group, and a demonstration of the change away from perceptions of power as inherently negative and zero-sum that started with Follett (Clegg *et al.* 2006). However, the disjunction between formal procedures and what is happening in practice suggests that "the canonical organization becomes a questionable unit of analysis" (Brown and Duguid 1991, p.49) if power resides in communities of practice.

2.2.3 Power in organizations

Having looked at different perspectives of power, the following section will consider the nature of power within organizations and its potential impact on trust and learning. A critical evaluation of Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1998) contribution to the debate will be provided, with an assessment of the implications for situated learning and communities of practice.

As has already been discussed, social relations do not take place in a vacuum (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2000), and work organizations are influenced by the prevailing norms and power relations of society in general, as well as pressures arising from local circumstances, such as regional culture, the business community and labour market (Coopey and Burgoyne 2000). In addition, organizations are bound by their own hierarchical structure which is generally not designed to distribute power equally among members (Clegg *et al.* 2006). As a result, certain individuals and groups have a stronger voice and greater bargaining power (Coopey 2004, Coopey and Burgoyne 2000), meaning that other groups lacking the same power are marginalised. One group recognised as falling into the latter category is that of apprentices in

Europe and the United States, one of the most controlled and least powerful groups within a workplace, whilst also being one of the most valuable (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Once apprentices have overcome the initial hurdle of gaining admission to a community of practice, they then face the further challenge of establishing their identity as legitimate peripheral participants. Masters may prevent learning by acting as 'pedagogical authoritarians' (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 76) in the style of schoolteachers who "insist on having the upper hand in the relationship, searching for ways to augment and solidify control when it is disputed" (Becker 1972, p.89), rather than allowing apprentices to develop as peripheral participants. Other organizational constraints may also be allowed to impede their access into the community, as evidenced in the case study of apprentice meat cutters in a midwestern American metropolitan area. Factors restricting them from gaining the legitimate peripheral participation they needed to progress within the community included lack of support from experienced workers, lack of opportunity to acquire skills in butchering higher value cuts of meat, placement in areas where there was no opportunity to observe masters and long periods of time on low level tasks because of the lack of a new trainee to replace them (Marshall 1972).

It is essential to understand the power dynamics in a community of practice if knowledge creation and the dissemination of it are to be achieved (Roberts 2006). As the aforementioned case of the meat cutters demonstrates, in an environment where "the dynamics of power, mastery and collective learning are inseparable" (Blackler and McDonald 2000, p.848), failure to recognise these differing interests may hinder understanding of why learning occurs or, more seriously, why it fails to do so (Easterby-Smith 2000). These power dynamics may in part be the result of the nature of the work itself and the degree to which management is hierarchically structured; where the work is a highly standardised production system, workers are unlikely to have much, if any, discretion over their work methods. In an environment such as the latter, communities of practice may be less viable than in those with a more decentralised organizational structure, which offers greater freedom in decision-making (Roberts 2006).

An analysis of three bodies of knowledge, namely (1) communities of practice, drawing on (2) Actor Network Theory (ANT) and (3) Foucault's work is suggested as a fruitful approach to gaining deeper insight into power relations within communities - the connection among these three bodies of knowledge being a concern with concrete practices (Fox 2000). Community of practice theory (Wenger 1998) is largely silent on the processes involved in change and

innovation in a community (Fox 2000). In contrast, ANT explores the way in which separate actors can be enrolled in an undertaking and come to act as links in a chain through a 'sociology of translation', where power is generated in the present moment through the actions of those individuals, or groups of them, within the chain (Latour 1986). As an example of the latter, the project to domesticate the scallops and enrol the support of the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay (Callon 1986) shows, however, that the chain can prove to be extremely fragile, with the failure of even a single link leading to the ultimate breakdown of the whole chain, with the consequent loss of power. The project further highlights the role that non-human and environmental elements, for example the sea, can play in the success or failure of an enterprise.

The term 'community' can create an impression of consensus and harmony, and for this reason Contu and Willmott (2003) urge that the idea of 'practice' be emphasised in preference. Wenger *et al.* (2002, p. 144) remain adamant that communities of practice are not always "havens of peace or unbounded goodwill" since they reflect a microcosm of the wider society in which they are situated, with all its complex human emotions and behaviours. Learning involves transformation and change (Lave and Wenger 1991) and these bring with them the potential for conflict, leading to both positive and negative consequences. Such conflict may be the result of community members reacting to changes in ways of working or masters competing with one another to influence future direction (Fox 2000). The existence of power-distance relationships within a community can also play a part, both as a source of conflict and a barrier to the resolution of underlying conflicts, if junior members feel inhibited from contributing by the presence of a more senior member, especially where that individual holds a position of power in the organizational hierarchy (Pemberton *et al.* 2007). The case of an established research-based community of practice within UK higher education serves to illustrate the point. By asking to attend one of the meetings and then proceeding to "hijack" the discussion in order to put across their own views, a senior member of staff abused their position of authority and made existing members feel very uncomfortable (ibid).

The situation resolved itself as there were no further requests from the staff member to attend but, had there been, the community would have needed to find a collective response to address the situation. Whatever the cause of the conflict, regeneration of a community requires continuous effort to construct ways to resolve underlying conflicts (Lave and Wenger 1991) so that new meaning can be negotiated without past experience holding it hostage (Wenger, 1998).

Closely linked to the way in which agents, activities and their world mutually constitute each other and create meaning in a community of practice, are the processes of identity formation through relations of power (Lave and Wenger 1991). Although these relations of power and inequality within practice are not really addressed, power is given some consideration as part of identity formation (Fox 2000). The case study of Alcoholics Anonymous (Cain n.d. in Lave and Wenger 1991), while not a typical organization, provides the strongest evidence-based example of the nature of identity and the possibility that exists for change through the relational power of the community. Communities of practice play an important role in offering practitioners a home for their identity and a trusted environment where notions of competence can be contested and negotiated, and different interpretations accepted. In theory, contestability is open to all, irrespective of position, but power can get in the way, meaning that some voices are silenced. There is no guarantee either of equality of contribution. Greater experience of the practice of the community may carry greater weight when new ideas are being consider and decisions made, but the community has to be cautious about listening to every voice and wild ideas (Wenger 2016).

2.2.4 Summary

This brief review of power serves to highlight the contested nature of power relations which exist within any workplace. The view of power relations as positive or repressive is likely to vary in different organizations and even among individuals and groups within the same organization. Perceived consensus cannot be accepted at face value without understanding how it has been reached and whether it is genuine agreement or resigned acceptance (Contu and Willmott 2003). Thus, power relations influence the ability to participate in communities and in sociocultural learning processes, impacting not only an individual's future development, but also playing an important role in the wider reproduction of institutional structures (ibid). The decisions made by those with power in an organization, and the perceptions of those affected by these decisions, can have significant consequences for the future of the organization.

The next section will review the literature on family firms.

2.3 Family Firms

Longevity of the family firm may be measured in years or generations and can refer to widely different lengths of time. In the absence of a universal definition for longevity, the criteria used in this research are that it refers to the continuity of a family firm beyond the career span of its

founder, with both the name of the firm and the family's involvement in the business being essential requirements (Sharma and Salvato 2013). Research into the factors influencing family firm longevity has been extensive but inconclusive (Napolitano *et al*. 2015). This is perhaps unsurprising since longevity is a 'multifaceted phenomenon' (Löhde *et al*. 2020) involving not only succession issues but also cultural, strategic and organizational factors (Daspit *et al*. 2017).

Research into factors supporting longevity in family firms has created a large body of literature, much of which focuses on succession planning, along with the subsequent transfer of ownership from one family generation to the next, both of which are critical for the continuity of the business (Chua *et al*. 2003, Cunningham 2020). However, since the two firms investigated in this research have long-established family members controlling the business and neither firm had succession plans involving family members at the time the research was conducted, this aspect of longevity does not form part of the thesis. In line with the objectives identified, the review will instead focus on the nature of family firms, the cultural aspects and values associated with them and the relationships between family members and non-family employees. The subject of social learning and knowledge has already been discussed in chapter 2, section 2.1 so will only be referred to here where a particular aspect has specific relevance to family businesses. The next section will consider some of the key characteristics of family firms.

2.3.1 Characteristics of Family Firms

Family involvement in a business makes it unique and, although there are various definitions of a family firm, the common elements are ownership and management. However, these terms fail to capture the essence of a family business which involves the vision held by the family and its intentions and behaviour in pursuit of that vision which distinguish it from other businesses (Chua *et al*. 1999). Being defined as a family firm may be perceived as a positive attribute (Zellweger *et al*. 2010) and a source of competitive advantage (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner 2008) since these businesses are viewed as customer-focused, quality driven (Craig *et al*. 2008) and enjoy a higher level of trust than non-family firms. A global survey found that 75% of respondents trust family firms over non-family businesses, 66% are prepared to pay more for products or services from them and 54% would prefer to work for a family firm (Edelman Trust Barometer 2017).

Many different perspectives have been used to study family firms; this research uses the lens of organizational identity since its definition as the "central and enduring attributes of an

organization that distinguish it from other organizations" (Whetton 2006, p.220) has a particular resonance for family businesses since each has its own defining characteristics. The issue of identity is profound and has significant consequences but at the same time can be so difficult to define that it remains taken for granted (Albert and Whetton 1985). The three criteria that define the concept, namely those of central character, distinctiveness and temporal continuity, are more generally referred to as the central, distinctive and enduring features of an organization (Ibid). As such, organizational identity encompasses the values and beliefs that inform collective practices (Nag *et al*. 2007) and act as a reference point when difficult decisions need to be taken to ensure that the organization remains true to its collective understanding of "who we are as an organization" (Whetten 2006, p.221).

It is the values that make a family business special (Lohde *et al*. 2020) by creating internal cohesiveness and enabling change and continuity without loss of identity (Sharma and Salvato 2013; Miller and LeBreton-Miller 2003). The case study of a Swedish furniture manufacturer demonstrates how a company can change significantly over its 120-year history while staying true to its vision and focus based on its key principles. These have included never changing its product type so that the company's identity has always remained the same, sticking to local production, continuing to use wood as the principal material used in its products, consistently positioning itself in the higher quality segment of the market, maintaining strategic personal collaborations with designers and architects and collaborating with other family businesses in the sector (Haag *et al*. 2023). Values need to be constantly reviewed and re-affirmed, especially when new family members enter the business or non-family employees are introduced into it. In a study of three German family businesses established in the 17th and 18th centuries two of the families reported the critical importance they placed on holding regular intensive discussions about "who we are, who we want to be, what our values are and how that translates into our future aspirations (Löhde *et al*. 2020)."

Organizational identity is at the heart of the question of how family members contribute to a firm's success. This has been the driver for much of the research carried out into family businesses (Zellweger *et al*. 2010). "Family identity is unique and therefore impossible to completely copy" (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner 2008: 416) and it is the integration of this family identity with business life that gives family firms their uniqueness or 'familiness' (Habbershon and Williams 1999), defined as a bundle of resources particular to a firm because of the systems interaction between the family, its individual members and the business (ibid). When stakeholder perception of familiness is positive, therefore, it can help to promote assets that are highly valuable to a business, namely reputation and brand identity (Craig *et al*. 2008).

It should also be noted, however, that the interaction of these two systems, family and business, is not always positive and can prove the Achilles' heel of the family business when family disputes, autocratic rule, power struggles, poor management practices and nepotism lead to underperformance and even the demise of the firm (Kets de Vries 1993).

Family firms possess attributes that are distinct from non-family businesses (Berrone *et al*. 2012) and one of the key elements that distinguishes them is believed to be the importance that family firm owners place on preserving their socioemotional wealth (SEW), defined as non-financial rewards or affect-related value derived from their controlling position in the firm (Gómez-Meíja *et al*. 2007). For SEW to be preserved, family control and influence must be maintained (Zellweger *et al*. 2012) and this is demonstrated in the study of German firms where retention of transgenerational control of family assets was shown to be a greater driver than the longevity of the business itself (Löhde *et al*. 2020). Family members weigh commercial decisions against possible risks to their SEW and may even decide to trade off a more favourable financial outcome for the business in return for greater autonomy as in the case of the olive oil producers who chose not to enter into a cooperative arrangement (Gómez-Meíja *et al*. 2007). The potential disadvantages of SEW for non-family employees will be considered in section 2.9.

However, while family members may enjoy the influence they exert over the business and the exercise of personal authority, non-financial performance goals demonstrate a concern not to exert power in an exclusively self-oriented financial way (Zellweger *et al.* 2013). With family firms often bearing the family name and promoting the family identity in marketing material (Picone *et al*. 2021), reputation is precious, and any adverse publicity caused by irresponsible actions is potentially highly damaging to both the business and the family members. As a result, family firms are more likely to demonstrate greater social responsibility and community citizenship than non-family firms (Dyer and Whetten 2006; Berrone *et al*. 2010). An example of this is found in businesses operating in industries that create high levels of pollution who take care to minimise the level of contamination they cause as far as possible (Zellweger *et al*. 2013).

Further important factors which influence perception of family firms and contribute to their longevity involve the long-term vision that family members demonstrate and the passion for their core mission. This leads to a preference for a strategic orientation towards customers, suppliers and the community based on enduring relationships instead of transactions (Miller and LeBreton-Miller 2003). In addition, family firms are much more likely to be free of pressure

from short-term stakeholders and the demands of the stock market. As a result, the family directors can make decisions and act upon them rapidly to take advantage of opportunities and adapt to changing environments (Miller and LeBreton-Miller 2003; Napolitano *et al*. 2015). The combination of deeply embedded values and enduring relationships with stakeholders on the one hand, and the ability to respond swiftly to environmental changes and seize business opportunities on the other, may consititute one of the major strengths of family businesses.

There is also evidence that these firms may have greater resilience during difficult trading periods as they are prepared to sacrifice short-term gain for the longer-term survival of the business by ploughing profits back into it (Kets de Vries 1993). In doing so they demonstrate a "generational investment strategy [that] creates desirable patient capital" (Reynolds 1992 quoted by Sirmon and Hitt 2003, p.343). An example of this generational investment strategy is highlighted in the study of the three German family businesses (Löhde *et al*. 2020). While all three have a very strong commitment to the continuity of the family ownership of the company, one of the firms places particular emphasis on educating young family members that they are only trustees for the next generation since they are not the ones who have created the company's wealth (Ibid).

Supporting these family businesses, and dependent on them for their livelihood, are their non-family employees. The next section will consider the nature of employment in family firms and the relationship between family members and their employees.

2.3.2 Non-family Employees

Family firms are significant employers and data for 2020 shows that they were responsible for 51% of all private sector employment in the UK economy (IFS 2022). The attraction and effective management of their employees are of vital importance to the success of family firms and require a "give and take" in the relationship between them (Chua *et al*. 2003). They are also an area of increasing concern for firms. The war for talent was ranked as the top challenge facing family businesses in a survey of 2018, with 53% of respondents identifying it as one of their three major concerns, up from 43% in 2017 and 37% in 2016 (KPMG 2018). Non-traditional and technical roles, which are needed to drive innovation and enable family businesses to compete in the digital economy, are particularly difficult to fill. Companies lacking the skills required for these roles are forced to compete in the labour market against large and attractive employers (ibid). A study carried out in Belgium identified further issues facing family firms including higher voluntary turnover and lower labour productivity than non-family firms and less investment in off-site training for employees (Neckebrouck *et al*. 2018). In

the UK, however, there is evidence that family SMEs are addressing skills shortages internally, with 77% of firms surveyed planning to develop their existing employees to help grow the business (IFB 2022).

As family firms grow, they are likely to become increasingly dependent on their non-family employees, especially those in management roles that are critical to the success of the business but cannot be filled from within the family. There is evidence that the appointment of non-family managers is beneficial to family firms because the wider experience and heterogeneity of views they bring to the company help to generate greater flexibility and adaptability (Hatum and Pettigrew 2004), both of which are essential for family firm longevity. However, this is balanced against the family's SEW needs which may result in a reluctance to include non-family managers in the senior team (Vandekerkhof *et al*. 2015).

As already discussed in section 3.2, family firms are less subject to stockholder and stock market pressure and, consequently, under less pressure to downsize the workforce when trading conditions become difficult (Block 2010). This was shown during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 when only 32% of family SMEs with employees reduced paid staff numbers compared with 38.8% of non-family firms (IFB 2022). The increased job security offered by family firms is attractive to more risk-averse and less ambitious job seekers and for those aspiring to start their own business a family firm may provide valuable learning opportunities (Block *et al.* 2016). Communicating information about family ownership of a business does not of itself influence applicants' perceptions of the company or its attractiveness but information about the firm's size does. Size can evoke images of both positive and negative organizational characteristics based on an individual's previous experience and preferences. Firms need to take this into consideration when recruiting staff (Botero 2014).

Once non-family employees have been brought into the company their assimilation and retention become important issues for the business. Many factors can contribute to employee turnover but in the case of family firms the quality of the friendship networks within the company can have an impact on it. Strong friendships, particularly with family members, appear to reduce employee turnover (Vardman *et al*. 2018). However, the question of whether non-family employees can assimilate sufficiently into the company to be able to take on the identity of the firm has been debated. While it has been posited that they can (Zellweger *et al.* 2010), others disagree on the grounds that the family identity has developed through a long apprenticeship of interaction and shared experience resulting in deep tacit knowledge which is unavailable to non-family members (Cunningham 2020; Deephouse and Jaskiewicz 2013).

While this strong social and cognitive bond brings advantages to the family group, it risks creating a barrier between the family and its non-family employees. Where the family views the creation of SEW as a priority which legitimately resists the claims and views of others, the contribution and involvement of non-family employees is likely to be marginalised (Gómez-Mejía *et al*. 2011).

This marginalisation is shown in a qualitative study of seven small family businesses in Scotland that looked at non-family identity from the perspective of both the employees and the controlling family members (Cunningham 2020). While there was no hostility between the family and their employees there appeared to be an "occasionally unsympathetic indifference" towards the employees (ibid, p.2800). Employees were positive about the companies in many respects and the way that they were treated, noting favourably benefits such as flexibility and sensitivity to home-work pressures, which have been shown to increase commitment and reduce turnover (Davis and Kalleberg 2006), but there was a sense of detachment and a resigned acceptance of their status. Without the power of family membership and in the absence of any possible career progression, identity came from ownership of individual roles and a sense of pride in task performance rather than identification with the organization itself and its goals. The study concluded that attention to non-family employees is essential if family firms are to survive.

This review of the literature on family firms has highlighted several factors that contribute to a firm's longevity or, in their absence, its potential demise. At the heart of family business survival is the uniqueness of each family and the values of the controlling family members, together with their ability to learn and adapt. It also recognises that non-family employees can make a vitally important contribution to the business, particularly when provided with an inclusive and supportive environment.

The next chapter will set out the methodology adopted to address the aim and objectives of this thesis.

Chapter 3. METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter sets out the philosophical approach adopted for the research and the methods chosen to address its aim and objectives. The quality of the research design is reviewed against the tests of validity and reliability, before considering the role of reflexivity and its importance in qualitative research. Finally, the ethical considerations involved in obtaining and managing the data are discussed. Since the research aim and objectives are at the heart of everything discussed in the methodology, they are restated below.

3.1 Research aim and objectives

Firms in third-generation ownership have demonstrated their ability to adapt and survive; the aim of this work is to explore the part played by sociocultural learning in their longevity.
To address this aim, the following objectives have been identified:

1. To explore the nature of sociocultural learning in selected family firms
2. To critically evaluate how, and to what extent, that learning is shared between family members and their non-family employees
3. To critically assess what evidence exists for the concept of community of practice within the selected firms and in their relationship in their wider networks
4. To explore the effect of power on sociocultural learning in family firms
5. To critically evaluate factors that support family firm longevity

Table 3.1 provides an overview of the approach adopted to address the research questions, each aspect of which will be discussed.

Table 3.1 Overview of the research approach

Overall Approach	Qualitative
Research Epistemology	Interpretive
Research Ontology	Social Constructivism
Research Methodology	Inductive
Research Design	Case Study
Research Methods	Interviews supplemented with documentary evidence from company websites, newspapers, company accounts and published statistics (Cumbria Observatory and ONS), participant observation and direct observations
Research Analysis	Thematic analysis

3.2 Research Philosophy

Referred to as the 'three musketeers of metaphysics' (Moses and Knutsen 2019), epistemology, ontology and methodology define the research process. The stance that the researcher takes on them forms a basic set of beliefs or paradigm that guides action (Guba 1990, in Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Table 3.2 below sets out the philosophical assumptions that underlie each of them and they will be considered in turn.

Table 3.2 Philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research

Assumption	Questions	Character	Implications
Epistemology	What counts as knowledge? How is it justified? What is the relationship between the researcher and the research subject?	Subjective evidence obtained from participants; the researcher aims to understand the phenomenon from the inside.	Evidence from participants provided in the form of quotes and observations.
Ontology	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is multiple and seen from many views.	The researcher reports different perspectives as themes develop.
Methodology	What are the ways in which knowledge is acquired? What is the process of research? What is the language of research?	The researcher uses inductive logic and an emerging design.	The researcher works with particulars before generalisations, describes in detail the context of the study and revises questions during the course of the study.

Source: Adapted from Cresswell and Poth (2018)

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the study of knowledge and the criteria used to assess whether something should be accepted as true or believable (Seale 2018). From a positivist perspective, the use of 'I know' should be reserved for describing "a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact." The question to ask is whether it can make sense to doubt (Wittgenstein 1975, p.3e). In the case of social research, however "[s]trictly speaking, there are no such things as facts, pure and simple. All facts are from the outset facts selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind." (Schutz 1971, p.5). As a result, 'facts' are always interpreted and epistemology seeks to establish principles and rules that enable the researcher to assess whether a social phenomenon can be known, and how the knowledge of it can be validated and demonstrated (Mason 2018).

Because this study is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand social practices within family firms from the perspective of those involved in them, an interpretive epistemology, within an overarching qualitative approach, is considered most suitable. Such an approach

draws upon subjective evidence acquired through close study of the experiences of individuals (Cresswell and Poth 2018) and involves verstehen (understanding) to uncover the meaning behind actions (Flick 2018). Experience and reason can be useful epistemological tools for gathering evidence but, because they are influenced by individual perceptions and contextual factors, they cannot be regarded as "objective transmitters of truth" (Moses and Knutsen 2019, p.9). The output from interpretive research produces "reflexive narratives, not explanatory models or theoretical propositions" (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013). The importance of reflexivity in qualitative research will be examined in section 3.6.

Knowledge can be divided into three types: factual knowledge, knowledge of acquaintance and knowledge of how to do things (Pears 1972). As this research is concerned with the social and cultural aspects of learning, viewed through an interpretive epistemology, it focuses on the latter two categories but does also touch on factual knowledge obtained from documentary evidence.

Ontology

Ontology looks at the basic building blocks of existence and asks the question 'what is the world really made of?' (Moses and Knutsen 2019). Different ontological positions can result in very different versions of the essential properties that make up what exists and ideas about their shape and form (Mason 2018). Disagreements exist even about how to categorise 'the social' (ibid), ranging from the definition of it as a domain of reality to one of association between entities which come together, however briefly, because of "a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrolment" (Latour 2007, p.64).

A social constructivist ontology[5], which is adopted here, views reality as constructed intersubjectively through meanings created by those engaged in social activity (Guba and Lincoln 1994 in Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Berger and Luckman 1966). Rather than looking for absolute truth, constructivists acknowledge that observation and experience are filtered through the perceptions of individuals and there is more than one way to understand an event or experience. The role of the researcher is to gain an understanding of the social activity taking place in the chosen field of study and the reality it represents for those participating in it. The constructivist ontology is very relevant for this particular research as an understanding of the perspectives of both senior managers and other staff members is essential in making

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[5] It is noted that Social Constructivism can also be classified as epistemology.

assessments about the learning taking place in the case study organization, the influence of power relations on that learning and whether a community of practice can be said to exist.

Methodology

Methodology considers assumptions about the nature of reality in the chosen field (Bell *et al.* 2022) and sets out the logic behind the strategy for answering the research questions (Mason 2018). It is important that methodological congruence is achieved through the aim, questions and research methods all being interrelated so that the study is cohesive (Morse and Richards 2002 in Cresswell and Poth 2018). However, qualitative research is "endlessly creative and interpretive" (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, p.22), meaning that both the field of study and the researcher's perception of it are constantly developing. Internal and external factors can bring about change in the organization, participants may leave and meanings alter. In addition, as the researcher's knowledge and understanding of the field of study increase, their perspective and judgment undergo revision. The data collection strategy may, therefore, need to be amended to take these factors into account and ensure that congruence is maintained.

The chosen field for this research, namely family-owned firms providing continuity across three generations, is in stark contrast to the researcher's experience. Her background is in human resource management, predominantly with large multinational companies where major changes in management strategy and structure are made by main boards based outside the UK, and in which acquisitions, mergers and redundancies are common occurrences. Although staff were treated fairly and with respect in the companies where she worked, there was no long-term commitment or loyalty to them and shareholder interests were paramount. Her interest in family firms stems from the perceived differences they present to multinational companies.

Two factors particularly influenced the decision to study them:

1. Knowledge gained about the main case study organization as a customer for thirty years and the experience of high-quality service during that time.

2. Respect for the family's sense of commitment to the community, sustained growth and lack of ambition for personal enrichment.

The research does not start from a theory, but rather a curiosity about how the firms' longevity has been achieved and what role, if any, socio-cultural learning may have played in it. Of particular interest is the relationship between the family owners and their staff, and the way in which skills and values are passed on. As is often the case for the social researcher, the

starting point is "one of lack of familiarity with what is actually taking place in the sphere of life chosen for study" (Blumer 1969, p.33) and an inductive methodology is therefore adopted for this research.

In order to gain an understanding of socio-cultural learning within the firms, a qualitative approach, with an interpretivist / constructivist perspective, was chosen for the research as this is well suited to studying 'the local' through exploration of practices and experiences in the context of their lived environment, without assuming that they have universal validity (Toulmin 1990 in Flick 2018, p.13). The issue of validity will be discussed in section 3.5.

3.3 Methods

While the methodology explains *why* a particular approach is being adopted for the research, a method sets out *how* it will be achieved (Saldana 2015a in Mason 2018). This section presents the research methods chosen to deliver the methodological strategy, including modifications that had to be made over the period of the research due to a number of constraints and changes outside the researcher's control. The most significant of these were the Covid-19 pandemic, interruptions of study for medical reasons and the inability to gain access to participants.

A major disadvantage of the discontinuity was the need to reconnect each time with the work and refresh memory on return to study. There was, however, also an advantage; the extended period over which reflection on the data was able to take place, both consciously and sub-consciously, enabled greater recognition of linkages and meaning. This suited the researcher's learning style.

The researcher's interest in the field of socio-cultural learning arose initially from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 1998) and in order to understand the body of knowledge surrounding it, a literature search was conducted to identify other research contributions to the field. This uncovered the central role that power relations play in socio-cultural learning, something recognised but not explored by Lave and Wenger, and influenced the decision to include it as a key element of the study. The research into statistical data on family firms, which is presented in section 1.2.4, revealed the rare and valuable phenomenon of businesses that have survived to third generation ownership and management. These three elements, namely social learning, power and third generation family firms, formed the academic basis from which the research aim and objectives were articulated.

3.3.1 Case study

Case studies were chosen as the most appropriate method to gain an understanding of socio-cultural learning in family firms because they explore a contemporary situation in depth within its real-life setting by asking how and why questions (Yin 2018). It is worth noting that while the data collected from the participants in this study are contemporary, they reflect experiences and learning built up over the whole period of their relationship with the organization and its embedded cultural values.

A single case may be used, or more than one, the latter having the advantage of enabling comparison and providing more compelling evidence (Robinson and Seale 2018), although because large amounts of data are typically produced in a case study, the number needs to be small.

Criterion sampling, which seeks cases that meet certain criteria (Creswell and Poth 2018), was used initially for selecting the case studies in this research. The criteria were defined as medium or large firms based in Cumbria in the third generation of family ownership and management. In the absence of a definitive list of firms meeting these criteria, the researcher compiled a list of potentially suitable firms from a variety of sources. These included The Family Business Network, subsequently renamed The Family Business Community in Cumbria, company websites, attendance at a family business conference, in-Cumbria magazine, internet search and local knowledge. On further examination very few of them fully met the criteria and, of those, only two managing directors (MD) agreed to participate.

The main case study organization (Company A) is a medium-sized food producer based in Cumbria with six retail outlets, predominantly in the county. It is family-owned and led by two third-generation brothers, and it has around 200 non-family employees. The company has a reputation for quality and support for local producers.

The second firm (Company B) is a large haulage company with multiple lines of business. It employs around 300 people and is headquartered in Cumbria, although it operates throughout the UK. It is family-owned and managed by three directors who are grandchildren of the founder.

3.3.2 Interviews

In deciding how to obtain data from the participants on their knowledge and perceptions of the selected firms, it is important to pay attention to the ontological and epistemological positions adopted for the research (Mason 2018). This research takes the view that participants' individual experience, understanding and stories form part of the social reality that is being studied and talking and interacting with them provides a legitimate and meaningful way of gaining knowledge of the phenomenon of family firm longevity. It seeks to explore the depth, complexity, and even contradictions, that make up the phenomenon and qualitative interviews were chosen as the vehicle most suited to attempt "to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world" (Brinkman and Kvale 2015).

In qualitative interviewing, knowledge is constructed during the interaction between the researcher and the participant (ibid), providing the researcher with valuable new insights but also requiring difficult judgments and decisions to be made in the moment about which lines of questioning to pursue, sometimes at the expense of other previously identified topics. Table 3.3 below sets out the main features of qualitative interviewing.

Table 3.3 Features of qualitative interviewing

Features of Qualitative Interviewing	Implications
In depth, semi-structured	Fluid and flexible structure
	Thorough preparation of topics to be covered is required. Predominantly open questions linked back to the main research questions and phrased in a way that participants can relate to.
Interactional exchange of dialogue / Conversation with a purpose (Burgess 1984, p. 102)	Importance of rapport building at the start and use of appropriate language with which participants are comfortable/familiar
	Choice of questions influences the dialogue/conversation but participants can choose own words
	Sensitivity needed in conducting the interview
	Active listening, interpretation, with clarification where necessary
	Non-verbal cues, mood and atmosphere provide relevant data
	Reflexivity forms part of the process of data gathering
Situated and contextual	Relevant contexts need to be brought into focus
Format	Generally face-to-face, ideally in participants' own environment
	Recorded if consent is obtained
	Can be conducted by phone or online but this may change the dynamic of the exchange

Source: Adapted from Mason (2018)

As with every method, there are disadvantages to qualitative interviews, most notably the time involved in conducting the interviews, transcribing the recordings and analysing the large amount of data generated (Mason 2018). They are also of limited use in gaining insights into social interactions and behaviours and, because they rely on what participants can recollect and are willing to divulge, may fail to produce data on aspects of practice that would be of relevance to the research (Bell *et al.* 2022). There are times when relevant stories, that would add depth and colour to the picture being constructed cannot be included, either because they are obtained outside the formal interview when recording has finished and permission to use them cannot be obtained (Lilleker 2003), or where their use would be likely to breach a

participant's anonymity. Regrettably, such latter instances were encountered during the course of this study.

The intention was to conduct interviews in two phases.

Phase one: One to one semi-structured interviews lasting an hour were conducted with the MDs in Company A and Company B in December 2019 and January 2020 respectively and took place in their offices. From this, three further interviews at Company A were obtained, the participants being selected by the MD as representative of the researcher's request for managers with different lengths of service and from different locations. One was a senior manager based at the headquarters site and the other two were shop managers in different locations. Interviews were again conducted at the interviewees' place of work, providing the opportunity to gain further understanding of the physical and cultural environment within the organization. Although given a time limit of thirty minutes for each of these interviews, and despite advising the interviewees when that time was reached, all of them were happy to continue the interview and, in addition, the senior manager offered a tour of the production site at the end which was accepted. All the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Subsequent to the interview with the MD of Company B, it was recognised that it would not be possible to gain permission to interview staff there as part of the proposed second phase of data collection. It was, therefore, decided that Company A would form the main case study organization. Since only one interview was conducted with Company B it may not constitute a case study per se. However, it was felt that some of the material obtained from the interview had relevance for comparative purposes when analysing the data from Company A and so a decision was taken to include it.

Phase two: Following the data gathering with non-family managers, the intention of this phase was to gather data from non-family employees without management responsibilities. It was originally planned to use focus groups, which would have provided an added dimension of group interaction and discussion. However, because of Covid-19 lockdowns and the continuing risk of spreading infection by bringing staff together, this plan was amended to individual interviews. Permission had been obtained in principle from the Chairman[6] of Company A to invite members of staff to be interviewed outside of working hours. However, despite attempts to discuss dissemination of the invitation to staff with the new MD, this was not

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[6] As a result of a reorganization in Company A, at the time of the second phase of data gathering the MD had moved into the position of Chairman with a new MD being appointed from within the company.

forthcoming. It was not possible to ascertain the reason for it, but the pressures that all businesses have been facing for some time now, combined with the change of roles in the senior management team and the researcher's lack of previous personal contact with the new MD, may all have been contributory factors.

3.3.3 Participant-observation and direct observations

As the name suggests, participant-observation involves some form of role in the phenomenon under investigation, with such roles taking a variety of forms and different levels of involvement. The researcher in this study is a longstanding customer of Company A and during visits to their shops was able to observe interactions not only between staff and customers but also between different members of staff. This provided an additional source of data to set against participants' reported behavioural observations gathered during the interviews. It did not, however, afford an opportunity to question more deeply or take notes at the time. These had to be written up subsequently, which was done without delay.

Direct observations can reveal insights that other data collection methods such as interviews are unable to uncover, either because individuals are unaware of them or simply fail to report them (Morgan *et al*. 2017). Direct observations were used in this study to gather information about the company's premises and staff behaviour when visiting them to conduct interviews and during a tour of the food production site in Company A.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis involves the ability to organize material from a variety of different sources and then apply judgment in deciding what is of value in producing meaningful knowledge (Mason 2018). For this research, thematic analysis was used and table 3.4 sets out the actions taken in each of the six steps. With an inductive approach, the process of coding the data does not try to fit them into a pre-existing framework, rather the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton 1990 in Braun and Clarke 2006). Since meaning and experience are seen as socially produced within a constructivist perspective, individual motivation is less important than the sociocultural contexts and environment within which the data is gathered (Burr 1995 in Braun and Clarke 2006).

Table 3.4 Phases of data analysis

Phase	Actions taken
1. Familiarisation with the data	Transcription of interviews, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas and documenting thinking processes.
2. Generation of initial codes	Coding interesting features across entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Search for themes	Collating codes into potential themes and gathering data relevant to each potential theme.
3. Review of themes	Checking themes work in relation to coded data extracts and entire data set, making modifications as necessary and generating a thematic map of the analysis.
5. Development and assessment of interpretations	Continuing analysis and interpretation of the themes against contextual understandings and the analytical framework in the literature.
6. Representation and visualisation of the data	Selection of vivid and compelling extracts, final analysis linking back to the research questions and creation of standpoint.

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Cresswell and Poth (2018)

3.5 Quality of Research Design

The design of any case study research, in common with other social science methods, needs to demonstrate robustness against four tests, construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. In the case of exploratory studies, however, which is the category this work falls into, the third of these is not applicable (Yin 2018). This section will, therefore, review the research design against the other three tests.

Construct validity

Construct validity focuses on the quality of design and operationalisation of a concept and is judged by the extent to which the measures employed enable a study to achieve its stated aims (Gibbert *et al*. 2008). This can be a difficulty with case studies which may not be designed to prove anything but simply to provide learning (Flyvberg 2006) or understanding (Ruddin 2006), and risks the criticism that findings are biased by the researcher's preconceived views. To address these issues a comprehensive review of literature was conducted, and the aim and the objectives of the research were based on knowledge and concepts that had already been

defined, challenged and expanded by previous researchers. Although data gathering was conducted predominantly through interviews, it was complemented by both direct observations and participant-observation that provided different insights. The data from Company B, although limited, added a valuable source of comparative evidence and contributed to the triangulation which is extremely important in a case study (Yin 2018).

While it was not possible to completely eliminate the risk of bias, where preconceptions were recognised, these were acknowledged and taken into account. A contemporaneous diary was kept and after each interview there was a period of reflection on its content and the researcher's reaction to it. Qualitative research produces rich narrative data which is not always suitable for summarizing and generalisation (Flyvberg 2006, Peattie 2001). In the interests of retaining the quality of the data collected and minimising researcher bias in its presentation, the decision was taken to use much of it verbatim.

External validity

The issue of whether a study's findings can be generalised is particularly problematic in the case of family firms. If one accepts the assertion that "[p]redictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs [and] concrete, context dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable (Flyvberg 2006, p.224), the resulting conclusion must be that attempting to generalise is of little value at best. The validity of the understanding is instead judged in terms of trustworthiness and authenticity (Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

Not only are family firms unique because of their entwined family and business relationships as discussed in section 2.7.1 but, as with any social system, there is a constant interplay between individuals and their environment which creates social dynamics particular to that organization. The view taken in this study is that while there are some general similarities in the way companies operate, each has its own distinctiveness and, therefore, the issue of generalisability is not relevant. Data may be compared, however, and conclusions drawn that suggest the existence of common elements or practices.

Reliability

Records of the interviews conducted, and the observations made have been retained, and if the same study were to be conducted again it could be based on them. However, taking the points made in relation to external validity, it would be impossible to replicate the exact conditions. Organizations, their stakeholders and their environment change constantly, in

both major and minor ways. These changes can affect the business environment, physical artifacts, social relationships and, consequently, individuals' experience and perceptions of the organization.

3.6 Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers are not neutral observers or reporters, and their writing is a reflection of their own interpretations of the social and cultural world (Cresswell and Poth 2018). Excellent qualitative research, therefore, requires sincerity, which involves honesty and transparency from the researcher about their values, preferences and conscious biases, and a genuine attempt to identify the influence these may exert on the research (Tracy 2010). Reflexivity is an important part of ethical practice, particularly in the areas of power relations between researcher and participant, ethical judgments and accountability for the knowledge generated (Ali and Kelly 2018).

As the research progresses, reflexive analysis is required to explore implications of the data collected and maintain the integrity of the study. This is aided by contemporaneous notes made throughout the research process (Cresswell and Poth 2018, Cresswell and Cresswell 2018), including those that record feelings and reactions and the process they undergo in sensemaking. The researcher sought to address these issues through a diary recording both factual observations and personal reactions to interviewees' responses to questions. Transcripts of interviews were read many times and analysed for nuance and possible misinterpretations. In cases where there was any possibility that data might breach the integrity of the study or cause harm if recognised, it was discounted, however valuable its contribution would have been to the study. A balance needs to be maintained, however, between presentation of the data and reflection on it. In this respect the researcher adopts the approach suggested by Tracy (2010), where self-reflexivity is 'shown', rather than 'told', by weaving it throughout the thesis.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Separate applications were made to the University of Central Lancashire's Ethics Review Panel for BAHSS for the two phases of research. Conditions were required to be met, primarily relating to concerns around the maintenance of anonymity within such a restricted field of study. This legitimate concern was addressed, and approval was then granted.

As identified by the ethics committee, anonymity and confidentiality have been key ethical considerations in conducting all aspects of this research. Consent was obtained from all participants on the understanding that the data would remain confidential and only anonymised content would be used in the final written presentation of it. The purpose of the research was fully explained, along with the areas to be covered in the interview and participants were advised that they could terminate the interview at any point and withdraw from the study up the specified date of final analysis of data.

All aspects of the research were conducted in line with GDPR regulations. Electronic data are stored on secure servers; notes and documents in paper format are kept in a locked cupboard and once converted to electronic format will be destroyed via the university's confidential waste service. Data will be retained for seven years.

Data analysis involves choices about which contributions will be included in the final presentation of the data, and which omitted, and the significance attached to them. This creates an ethical obligation to interpret the data collected as accurately and honestly as possible, an obligation which the researcher accepts. As discussed in the previous section, reflexivity, and the integrity that is part of it, play an important role in this (Ali and Kelly 2018 in Seale 2018).

3.8 Conclusion

Having outlined the approach taken to the research and the methods used for data collection, the next chapter will present the interpreted findings from the data gathered.

Chapter 4. THE RESEARCH: OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the data that were gathered from the main case study organization, Company A, and the comparator organization, Company B, and discusses the implications and relevance of that data in relation to the extant literature set out in Chapter 2.

4.1 Data themes: Company A

Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the themes that will be used to address the aim and objectives of the research in respect of Company A.

Figure 4.1 Data themes for Company A
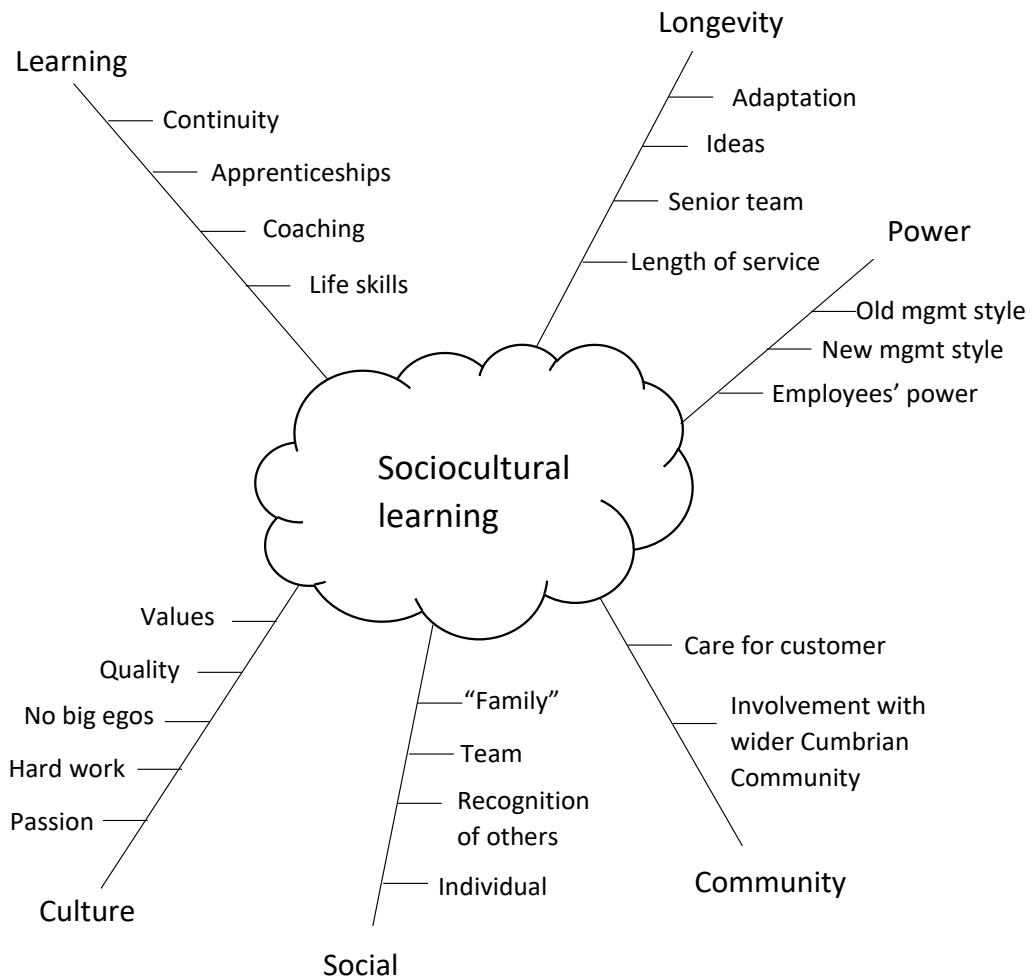
4.2 Sociocultural learning

Although the term sociocultural learning can be understood as a composite concept, the three elements that make up the term, namely social engagement, culture and learning, form a closely linked and mutually dependent whole. Since these elements are discrete, however, the empirical evidence for each is presented separately. Culture will be considered first as it embodies the fundamental assumptions, beliefs and values of an organization and represents the "ontological status of the collectivity" (Yanow 2000). It also reflects and contributes to a firm's particular body of knowledge and ways of knowing (Vickers 1976 in Cook and Brown 1999). This exploration of the nature of sociocultural learning addresses the first objective of the thesis.

4.2.1 Culture

A starting point in trying to understand an organization's culture is an examination of its stated values, followed by a search for evidence of whether they are demonstrated in practice and, if so, in what way. Two statements of values were found in the case study company's literature, the first of which related to its three core values, and these were explored with the Managing Director (MD).

> **You've got your three core values, quality, produce and service which are very..[7]**
> *Could be anybody couldn't it!*
> **Yes! (laughter) The trick is to live to them**
> *Yes, yes, yeah!* (Managing Director, Company A)

By way of illustration, he went on to talk about steaks as an example of the competition with supermarkets, and the fact that 21-day aged steaks are now being promoted everywhere. He explained that to produce a quality steak requires far more than 21 days in a chiller; the breed of the animal, the selection of the meat and whether it is hung on the bone are all important aspects that affect the end product, something that is not always understood by customers.

> *If you think it's harder to sell product ranges and someone else is making claims, you've got to hold it and not take short cuts because you know the product won't be as good and the customer might not recognise it today or two months' time but maybe over the year, but bit by bit…you've got to hold your nerve.*
> (Managing Director, Company A)

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[7] Where dialogue is quoted, the researcher's speech is shown in bold type.

In his view retail is going through a big change and it is important to take a long-term perspective (Miller and LeBreton-Miller 2003).

> *when times tighten up that's when it's more important to hold to those values. I guess that's probably because we like doing it right as well, it's what we do, it's why we're, I hope we're different.* (Managing Director, Company A)

'Doing it right' and taking pride in the quality of the products and service offered seem to be widespread in the organization, and two entries in the research diary record personal experience of it:

> 20.08.2020: Asked for a rack of lamb that was on display. Butcher serving me got it out of the chilled display cabinet and said he just needed to trim it better as there were some things left on it that should have been removed.

> 15.09.2020: Went into one of the shops shortly before closing and asked for three lamb chops that were on display, butcher serving me said they'd been out all day and weren't looking fresh enough so went and cut three new ones.

These examples, particularly the first one, have echoes of the attention to detail and quality shown in the Powell flute company (Cook and Yanow 1993). While they do not replicate the very specific way the work of each team member is checked by the next person in the process and passed back if the flute 'doesn't feel right', the same care is evident. Any failure to meet the required standard is rectified before a product is allowed to leave the shop.

The second statement of values talks of a "down to earth respectful culture where everyone is given a voice". The extent to which individuals are able to express their views, challenge practice and put forward new ideas was explored in the interviews; two aspects are used here as illustration. The first is the ability to challenge, which was expressed passionately by one participant.

> *I'm very cheeky, and I don't think I've changed much in the years. Apart from more professional.*

> ***So if there's things you don't particularly like or you think could be changed, you'll say so?***

> *Oh god yeah! Yeah, we believe that you should be able to challenge. Personally myself and everyone else, the directors as well. The apprentice should be able to challenge you if he thinks you're wrong, as long as he's got a good case to put forward, he should be able to challenge you. The youngest person in the building should be able to challenge you. Whether they're the youngest, oldest, less professional, less title or whatever it doesn't matter. They should be able to challenge your decision. As long as they can come back with, in a respectful way*

> *and with a decent enough answer, fine. I have no qualms whatsoever; they can challenge me whatsoever.* (Senior manager, Company A)

Being cheeky may be helpful when presenting unpalatable truths to those in positions of power, but less confident individuals may feel more inhibited about doing so. There is also evidence to suggest that challenge may not always have been as well received in the past as it is now. This will be discussed in section 4.4 in the context of power relations.

A second aspect of being given a voice involves the generation of new ideas, particularly in respect of products. Here, it became clear that although there is a central development team, this is not the sole source of ideas.

> *So ideas will come in from the shop floor, so there tends to be, nobody's appointed, but there tends to be certain people in certain shops who come up with the ideas.* (Managing Director, Company A)

The MD went on to refer to an assistant manager who picks up ideas while shopping in the supermarket, adding *"but they're not all his ideas, sometimes they're filtered up from one or two people of his staff"* indicating that the manager passes on the credit where it is due, a characteristic that is noticeable in the company. This inclusivity was reinforced by a shop manager who said:

> *the mentality is to ask everybody a question, including the dish washer, because everybody will have an opinion, everybody will have a thought on everything.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

He goes a step further, however, and is prepared to give staff the opportunity to try out potentially good ideas for a trial period.

> *It's a win-win if everybody understands what I'm trying to do, what I'm trying to achieve and how I'm trying to achieve it. If there's anybody that says 'do you know something that's a really good idea but have you tried it this way?', I'll go away and think about it and say: 'right,…. we'll give that a week, we'll give that a shot for a fortnight and see how it works, review it and if it works you've got ownership of it.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

The "down-to-earth" aspect of the culture is both sensed and demonstrable through specific actions. Hard work is clearly part of it, with different managers making comments such as *"the Christmas weeks gone we worked a straight nine days this year"* (Senior manager, Company A) and *"people care about their job, the company, once you get into the ethos of the culture that we do care, we don't switch our phones off at the end of the day. We are, as a manager we're always contactable morning, noon and night, which we are"* (Shop manager 1, Company A).

The caring aspect of the company's culture referred to here will be discussed further in section 4.3.2.

While participants expressed considerable pride in their work and the company, there was a notable absence of personal pride or desire to claim credit for successes. All but one participant, the shortest serving, praised both the achievements of members of their team and their personal qualities. Typical of such comments were:

> *[Name] and [name] have the best organizational skills out of anybody here because [of] their chef background ….It is just phenomenal their organizational skills and they know that, I tell them that.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

> *[Name] is good with people, people like her so they like to come to her with ideas.* (Managing Director, Company A)

> *And because of his skills and his army training, how to create a team and to look after each other's back and to motivate and take it forward…he's been an inspiration to me, other people here.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

Two answers provided an insight into the meaning of "down to earth" in the everyday life of the organization.

> ***When you're recruiting people, obviously different jobs need different skills, but are there particular qualities that you're looking for in your people?***
>
> *Yeah, there are. We're not very formalised so we're looking for I guess a 'can do' attitude. I just had a chat with [name] who's manager of [department], he's looking for [job title] so I said: "for god's sake don't get anybody with an ego". I said: "we don't want anyone with an ego in the place", because that just gets in the way and so when somebody's trying to big up their job or defend something it's….I guess if I can describe it, it's more about their output, what they can do, rather than their position.* (Managing Director, Company A)

A story told about the family directors by a senior manager corroborates this ethos of hard work, service and lack of self-aggrandisement:

> *for years these guys here [name] and [name] they were always reluctant to buy nice cars because it was perceived as they were doing too well. ….But it's not like, they probably could afford really flash cars but they won't do it and I always say to them: 'you've earned it, you've earned the right to have what you want in life because you've worked your socks off.* (Senior manager, Company A)

The accounts accord with the impressions gained during the interview with the MD and recorded in the research diary:

> 6.11.19: Came across as very genuine and modest. Answered questions fully and thoughtfully, in some cases gave me more information than I expected although not sure he enjoys being interviewed. Unpretentious office next to Reception, set within a larger, busy office. Although he says he spends about half his time behind a desk, gained the impression that he is happiest when out and about around the company.

Despite the fact that being in control is an important aspect of the SEW of family firm owners (Gómez-Meíja *et al.* 2007) and evidence of this trait in the MD was obtained during the course of the data gathering, particularly in the maintenance of standards and quality, he came across as humble about his achievements and unimpressed with status.

During the present generation's ownership, the company has experienced many serious challenges including foot and mouth, mad cow disease and an outbreak of swine flu in China, which caused a steep rise in the price of pork that could not be passed on to the customer. The company survived these crises through learning to adapt, *"not by cutting corners but by looking at efficiencies within machinery, staffing, things like that, not getting rid of staff but by evolving them and making them work more efficiently."* (Senior manager, Company A). The values remained the same and the established management team found solutions that have become part of the company's way of knowing, which is now being passed on to newcomers, demonstrating the key criteria for a culture (Schein 1984).

4.2.2 Social Engagement

This section and 4.2.3. address the third objective of the study by considering the social interactions taking place between those working in the firm and the firm's links to the wider community of Cumbria where it is based. They examine the extent to which the firm displays the qualities of a community of practice (Wenger 1998).

Not only is the company a family firm in terms of its ownership, but also in the wider sense of a community with a 'family feel' to it, and characteristics similar to a clan (Ouchi 1980) or familial form of kinship without blood ties (Durkheim 2013). This came out very clearly in two of the interviews with non-family managers. The first was with a long-serving senior manager who, in talking about the enormous changes in food hygiene regulations and the "insurmountable" paperwork trail now required to track animals "from farm to fork", was very clear about the family ethos.

Yes, we still are that family-oriented business but there's a bigger side hidden behind it as well that you don't see and you don't realise.

Which is really professional?

Yes

And has to be?

Yes, that's how it has to be. It's your due diligence. You have to have that in place. And to me the family ethos thing hasn't changed that much over the years. A little bit. It has to be more professional. You can't go back to when I was a young lad, I used to get a clip round the ear. That cannot go on nowadays. It's not seen to be right. That's totally changed, that's gone out the window. But the family ethos behind the business is still there. It is there.

So, do you feel part of the family?

Oh yes, very much so. I've been here it'll be 36 years this year.

(Senior manager, Company A)

While the manner of interaction between individuals has changed, in line with the norms of acceptable behaviour within society as a whole, which will be discussed in section 4.4, the feeling of belonging to a kinship group has remained.

The second example came from a long serving shop manager who talked about 'family ethic' and staff helping, encouraging and supporting each other, but also said; *"There's always sniping and that's just part of family."* (Shop manager 1). This honest acknowledgement of both sides of family life, the supportive bond that ties the family together, but also the frictions and disagreements that arise from close proximity and daily frustrations, mirrors the assertion that communities of practice are not always harmonious (Wenger *et al*. 2002). However, the supportive aspect outweighs the grumbles and the manager talked about how he takes the personal needs of his staff into account wherever he can.

> *When I'm doing the rotas I've got to think 'well [name] needs Monday off because she's looking after her grandkids, [name] needs Thursday off because she's looking after the grandkids, he's got swimming on Tuesday night so he needs to be on an early shift.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

In return, his staff are also prepared to be flexible:

> *But if there's somebody on holiday 'can you do an extra day?' 'yeah no problem.'…We've got a group chat on Messenger and 'such and such has phoned in sick, can anybody cover a shift tomorrow?' 'No problem'. Nine times out of ten*

somebody will do it. And that's, it is, to have that support makes my life so much easier and their life so much easier I hope. (Shop manager 1, Company A)

In the same way that the manager tries to understand and accommodate what is happening in his staff's family life, they also support him when he has personal issues that intrude into his professional life. A story offered in illustration of this was an occasion when an urgent personal issue arose which required his immediate attention and a member of his staff said '*just jump in my car mate and I'll take you down, you need to go to that meeting. So then he's looking after me. So that works, that's the way it works. That's, we'll do anything for each other*.' (Shop manager 1, Company A). All members of staff are valued for what they can bring to the team:

> *some don't have any skills[8] but you can see that they're very, very caring and loving and you don't care whether they're, that's the good thing about being in a community, everybody knows something, you just get the best out of everybody.* (Shop Manager 1, Company A)

Despite having grown to an organization at the top end of the medium-sized category, informality and inclusivity are still important aspects of the company, as explained by another manager.

> *We're all friendly here whereas if you go to some big organization, you're just a face and a number. Whereas here you're not. [MD] goes round the factory every morning, speaks to everybody as he goes round the place.* (Senior manager, Company A)

Everyone in the company is on first-name terms and this has been the case as far back as the previous generation of the family. At a time when it would have been normal for school leavers to call older people Mr or Mrs, the senior manager, as a 16-year-old apprentice on his first day at the company, was told by the owner to call him by his first name. The words 'team' and 'we' were often used by participants, sometimes referring to the company as a whole, sometimes to the unit level.

4.2.3 Community connection

Although shops are instantly recognisable by their branding, core product ranges and style of display, each one has a different feel, resulting from its location, history and customer base. In one particular shop the customers are not interested in talking to the staff, they just want to

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[8] The word 'skills' was used frequently with a general meaning of butchery skills, however when referring to specific skills these would be clarified.

make a purchase as quickly as possible and leave. In contrast, the manager of a shop based in a market town talked of the close relationship between customers and staff:

> *But here you, because we're 80% of us live in the community we've always got something to say to somebody and some days because of the age of the population, some days you know that some days that old person might not have talked to anybody else so 'how are you doing, are you all right?' making sure things, touching base with them. You do because they can come in here and get a couple of slices of bacon, a couple of sausages and a slice of ham, they'll come back tomorrow and get something else for their lunch. It's just part of their routine and it just, it's kind of what we do, we care a lot about our, because we're in a community that cares, we care for our community.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

> **Researcher observation**: These statements accord with observation and experience as a customer. All shops offer good service but with some it is largely transactional. The second shop referred to above is frequently busy and, as well as staff and customers chatting, it is not uncommon for people to bump into an acquaintance and stand in the shop catching up with them.

The example highlights the convergence of interests of the employees of the company, the customers from the town, and its surrounding area, and the company, for whom the local population make up the majority of the shop's trade. This is in contrast to some of the other shops where a far greater proportion of their business comes from passing trade. By building rapport and acting as a de facto community hub, the shop offers two important social benefits; a friendly environment for social interaction, particularly important for those with limited access to companionship, and choice over the quantity bought so that it is affordable, and waste is limited. For the company there is the added advantage of regular customer communication and feedback on the products.

There are other ways the company interacts with the community. School visits to the production site begin with a talk by one of the master butchers and then pupils are allowed to make their own burgers, which they can take home to their families. According to one manager, requests from the community are met wherever possible:

> *if anybody approaches me to do something, to sponsor something, to do a talk or a demonstration, I'll do as much as I can to try and make sure I get the time to do it.*
> (Shop manager 1, Company A)

More fundamentally, food and its associated activities, play an important role within the social and economic life of a community. The iconic Cumberland sausage, of which the company is a prominent, well-regarded producer, and which has now been granted Protected Geographical Indication status, might be regarded as a boundary spanning object (Star and Griesemer 1989).

It has a recognisable identity across intersecting communities in Cumbria, with a specific meaning for each. Figure 4.2 shows the communities involved.

Figure 4.2 Cumberland sausage as a boundary spanning object
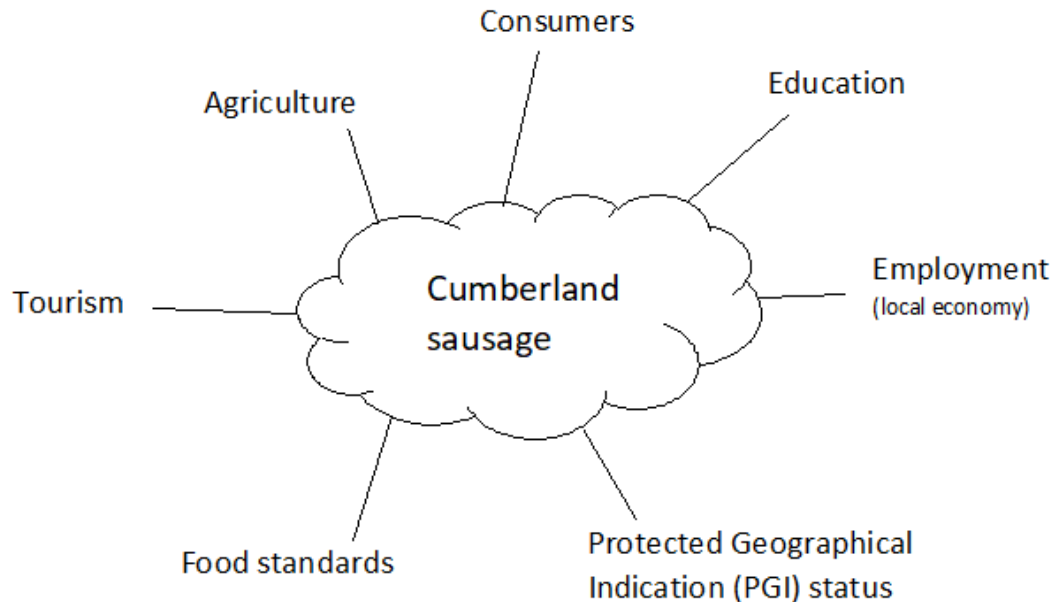
Sausages have always been a staple of Company A's product range but in the early days only thick Cumberland sausage was available. Now termed Traditional Cumberland Sausage, it has Protected Geographical Indication status and continues to sell in large quantities. However, as consumer lifestyles and preferences have changed, there has been a desire for greater variety and wider choice in food. In common with Powell flutes (Cook and Yanow 1993), changes within the company, including new products, are developed with great care and attention to quality and thoroughly tested before going on sale. The range of sausages is now much extended, with some premium varieties having a higher meat content than the traditional Cumberland and considered by some to be an even better product. Certain sausages are available all year round and others make a guest appearance for a limited period. While the changes in this example are in a different order of magnitude to the Powell company, the underlying desire to maintain the highest quality possible is the same.

As discussed in section 1.3, agriculture is an important part of the Cumbrian economy with pork used in traditional Cumberland sausage required to be locally reared. Company A has longstanding supply agreements for the majority of their meat with local farmers, whose high

standards meet their own, thus providing them with a guaranteed market for their meat. PGI[9]

status ensures consumers a quality product, meeting rigorous hygiene standards that are

inspected and approved by the Food Standards Agency. Companies producing and retailing

the sausage provide employment for local communities and the consumption and purchase of

it by tourists and visitors aids the economy of the county. Schools are committed to educating

young people about the source of their food and promoting healthy eating.   The company

contributes to the local economy through the employment of a significant number of staff and

its sales of Cumberland sausage to tourists and other visitors.

The next section reviews the data collected on learning within the company and completes the

exploration of sociocultural learning, as well as addressing the second objective.

4.3 Learning

4.3.1 Butchery

Butchery is where the business started and although the product range has diversified over

time into a greater variety of cooked products and delicatessen, butchery is still at the heart of

the company.

> *Butchers are the foundation, so if you take the factory for instance everything*
> *comes from the butchers, everything filters down from the butchers to every*
> *department.* (Senior manager, Company A)

Apprenticeships have always formed an important part of learning in the organization and a

qualification obtained through this route is held in esteem. One participant talked of starting

his apprenticeship back in the 1980s, when it took five years and began with practical learning

about the farming side of the meat industry, animal welfare, different breeds of animal and

what to look for in them. Unlike the experiences of some of the apprentice butchers in

Marshall's (1972) study, training was comprehensive and well supported.

> *We started off making sausage, black pudding, potted meat, you'd be given bones*
> *to strip, you weren't even given a brand new knife when you started, given second*
> *hand knife because they didn't want you cutting yourself. Put in charge of learning*

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[9] PGI status emphasises the relationship between the specific geographic region and the name of the
product, where a particular quality, reputation or characteristic is essentially attributable to its
geographical origin (Geographical Indications and Quality Schemes 2023).
Traditional Cumberland sausage was awarded PGI status in 2011, it must contain 80% meat, be at least
20 millimetres thick to achieve the characteristic coarse texture, and be sold in a coil (Assets Publishing
Service 2023).

> *how to sharpen your knife, put with one of the older guys who would teach us the skills we needed.* (Senior manager, Company A)

It is clear that the family directors have also acted as role models, continuing to use their butchery skills regularly until about ten years ago *"when they started to back it down"* and leave more to the staff.

> *Them guys, they don't do it now, but they used to work on the tables with all us guys, they've done whatever we do, it's not as if they've sat in an office all their life.* (Senior manager, Company A)

All the interviews were with master butchers and their passion for the work was clear in both what they said and the way they said it. Despite now being a senior manager, one participant's real passion comes from being a butcher.

> *I still have a set of knives that I use from time to time and a chain mail apron and a chain mail glove and I help out……I love it! My favourite job is being a butcher, it's not being the manager, it's being the butcher, love it, absolutely love it, it's creative, I love creating.* (Senior manager, Company A)

The research diary entry following the interview records the passion with which the same manager hosted a tour of the production area:

> 23.01.2020: Following the interview with [the senior manager], was offered a tour of the production area with him. Production finished for the day so no activity other than the Polish tray washer but impressive facility and everything explained with such pride and commitment. Impression of a really genuine, down-to-earth person who loves his job and lives and breathes the company's values. Wondered how often he must have shown visitors round and yet still manages to do it with the same enthusiasm.

The manager of one of the shops rarely does any butchery himself these days but clearly still enjoys it when he does.

> 25.06.2022: Went into the shop today and unusually [manager's name] was at the bench doing some butchery, seemed very happy.

Latterly the requirements for butchery apprenticeships have changed, along with perceptions of butchery as a career. According to the British Meat Processors Association (BPMA 2022):

> Butchery is skilled work that requires up to two years training and many more to perfect. However, unlike in many European countries, British school leavers and job seekers see it as less desirable than some other careers. (BPMA document)

The company has been affected by this trend and, as a result, is now recruiting older apprentices seeking a career change. While apprentices in general may be one of the least powerful groups within a workplace (Lave and Wenger 1991), this research would seem to indicate that there are circumstances which mitigate this fact. The mature applicants who are increasingly filling the apprentice positions, bring with them a range of skills and knowledge acquired in their previous careers. This existing knowledge may be of immediate benefit to the company and enable the apprentice to contribute more fully at an earlier stage than would be normal for a traditional school leaver apprentice. In the case of those transferring from catering with previous experience of meat preparation and knife skills, the foundations of the apprenticeship curriculum will already have been covered.

The relationship between butchers and other members of staff was explored in the interviews and produced a mixed response with one participant very clear that:

> *The butchers aren't put on a pedestal. They're not on a pedestal, they're a member of staff like everyone else.* (Senior manager, Company A)

He went on to cite the example of another member of his team who he regards just as highly as the butchers.

> *I always say in that factory we have one guy called [Name] he's a Polish guy, worked here for 8/9 years. And he has the worst job in the factory to me. He works on a big, gigantic tray washer all day. But he's the most pleasant bloke in the factory. And he's one of the most important people in the factory. He's controlling hygiene within the factory.[10]* (Senior manager, Company A)

However, a shop manager acknowledged that *"there was a lot of them and us" (Shop manager 1, Company A)* between butchers and sales staff in the past but this has now vanished, with everybody acting as part of the team and helping out wherever they are needed. To free up staff to concentrate on the additional Deli work, sales assistants are being trained in chopping and slicing meat, although they are not expected to do the more skilled boning work. This system of distributed knowledge which enables staff to work across a wide range of tasks is

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[10] This is particularly noteworthy from the researcher's perspective as the contribution made by people in jobs that are often classified as 'low-skilled' or even 'unskilled', is not always recognised or valued. Without heedful execution of these essential functions, organizations are unable to operate effectively.

similar to that identified in Hutchins' (1996) study of the process involved in learning to navigate.

It had been intended to explore the views of sales assistants on staff relations in general, and on those between butchers and themselves in particular. Without the proposed second round of interviews, however, it was not possible to do so.

4.3.2. Development of staff in the shops

Discussion of how staff development was handled showed some differences of approach in the two shops. In one of them the process for new starters was described as following an initial standard company and shop induction,

> *and then just kind of regarding which department they'll be, I'll just pass them on to whichever department they'll be in and they'll get trained on the job by the supervisor or key members of staff on the shop floor. And they'll have sort of week 1, week 2, week 3 reviews and after the first month reviews after that.*
> (Shop manager 2, Company A)

Thereafter, some staff are interested in going on to learn more, while others are content just to do their job and have no wish to develop their skills or increase their knowledge.

> *So you have to accommodate everybody. You know we've got… and it's funny, some of the ones who just come in and work and go home and don't want any responsibility or to necessarily learn anything new are probably the ones who have been here the longest sometimes. And sometimes the ones who want to learn and do things maybe don't stay a long time.* (Shop manager 2, Company A)

This observation about old timers in this shop is in contrast to the continuing passion for the butchery work expressed by senior managers and the dedication of the Polish tray washer. The manager went on to speculate that the restricted number of manager and supervisor roles, combined with the inability to pay for additional responsibilities, might be a reason for people not wanting to take on more duties or leaving the company once they had gained some skills. The issue of pay was not raised in any of the other interviews.

In the other shop the approach to training staff was summed up by the manager as: "*it's part of the culture to learn. I will teach everyone everything I know if they want to learn….if somebody wants to progress there's opportunity for growth if you prove your worth*" (Shop manager 1, Company A). This notion of 'proving your worth', echoes the MD's comment that

what matters is people's output rather than their position or title. The manager's passion for passing on his knowledge extends to the customers as well as the staff.

> 24.10.2018: Went into shop looking for chicken thighs but there weren't any in display cabinet. Asked at the counter and manager served me, said there weren't any ready but he could cut some off whole chickens. Said if he was going to do that I'd take the whole chicken but could he joint it for me. He said yes and then gave me a demonstration, with commentary, on how to do it.

It is not just the manager, however, who is involved in passing on his knowledge and know-how. The whole team has responsibility for inducting newcomers because shift patterns mean that individual staff members are not always going to be in work at the same time as the trainee. Having a flexible arrangement ensures that there is always an old timer available to answer questions and support the newcomer's learning. It has the added advantage of providing input from a wide range of individuals with different skill sets.

> *You know they'll work with them on a daily basis and get them talking to the customer and trying to upsell and get them to know something like just quiz them 'what's in that? How much are them? What's the offer on that? What's on special offer?... What can you link in from this department to the dry goods that are on special offer?* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

This team approach to training clearly accords with the features of a community of practice (Wenger 1998), although on the evidence gathered, it is not possible to know how widespread it is in the firm.

If there are products left over at the end of the day, new staff are encouraged to take them away and try them so that they have personal knowledge of what they are selling. The ethos here is one of not pushing people hard but allowing them to develop at a pace which suits their learning needs. If an individual is struggling, the team will flag it up to the manager who will try to identify the problem:

> *And you've got to think, are they being a bit hard, you know have they had a few bad days with them or it's finding the story from the person, 'how's things at home? Is there any problems?' It's doing all of that and then because a lot of it now, gone are the days when you know, 1,2,3 you're out, it's more coaching, counselling, 'what's going on? Is there something you're not understanding? Is there something we're not telling you?' You know we'll try and put a plan in place for training, a training plan, we'll talk to the rest of the team and get different opinions, different views, different ideas off other members of the team to see how they can help you, we give everybody every chance.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

It was not possible to gain individual staff members' views on the development they had received. However, an incident recorded in the research diary provided support for a statement from the manager that he did not push people hard, preferring instead to get them to understand that they needed to develop themselves, as much as the company needed to develop them:

> 18.09.2018: Shopping at [location] shop, there was no bar code on the item, after much searching the counter assistant found it. Two other staff members came up after the transaction was completed and asked her to show them how she had got to it in the system. Didn't need to do this; demonstrated self-motivation to learn.

This situation also highlights the heedful interrelating (Weick and Roberts 1993) shown between team members, who have an awareness of what is going on outside their immediate work area. In some cases, members stepped in to support each other when they realised that a colleague was struggling with a problem, or that customer numbers had reached a point where a queue was developing. In those cases where situated actions occurred, individuals coordinated their actions spontaneously to seek a resolution for a problem. (Suchman 1987). Such co-ordination can be particularly important in an environment where knives are being used by a number of individuals.

The company is happy to take on young, part-time staff, formerly termed 'Saturday lads', knowing that before long they will be leaving school or college and moving on in their lives. Although a few subsequently become butchery apprentices, the majority enter careers in different fields. These employment opportunities offer young people socialisation into the world of work and the opportunity to gain important life skills. An example quoted by a shop manager, who had himself been a Saturday lad for two years before becoming an apprentice with the company at the age of 16, was of a sixth form student hoping to become a doctor. She took a Saturday job with the company in order to gain experience of how to talk to people. A second example also focuses on the issue of communication and the need to build rapport with customers. Equally importantly, it highlights the practical coaching style of learning that is prevalent in the company.

> *I had a couple of Saturday lads….and because they were so uncomfortable talking, the customer's like 'what?' 'mumbles'. I said: "right come on lads. So I put one of them at one end of where we wash the dishes, I put one at one end and one at the other and I wrote something on a piece of paper and said: "say that to him there". And I started clattering a few dishes and they didn't catch that and I was banging*

and crashing….I said people can't hear you, mumbling isn't good and you've got to be able to talk to people.[11] (Shop manager 1, Company A)

This practical demonstration was then reinforced by the manager talking about his own feelings and the strategy he had adopted to help him communicate effectively.

I said you know for me it's an act and that's what it is. It's my show, that's my stage. Me, that's not me, a lot of the time that's not me, that's just how I am, I'm a bit quieter, reserved, I like to think about things a lot more. I'm a reflector but you've got to put yourself out of your comfort zone and get people interested in what you're trying to tell them. (Shop manager 1, Company A)

Experience gained in the workplace, and the development of the interpersonal skills needed for effective performance, are as important to a young person's development as technical skills (Becker 1972).

Although some of these young newcomers never return, others remain available for a period afterwards to cover staff leave during the main holiday periods, which coincide with their vacation periods. While they do not become old timers, they may gain a sufficient level of skill to be accorded the status of competent contributors to the community of practice.

4.3.3 Identity and meaning

Through the interviews and interactions with staff, identity was observed to take a number of forms. One strand was the senior butchers' pride in having the standing of masters in their trade and the sense that their work was the foundation of the business and key to its success. It meant more to them than title or position. According to one:

My title doesn't mean a lot to me. …..If you see me on the street, if I bumped into you and I was on holiday, and [you] said '[name] what do you do for a living?' I'd tell you I was a butcher. That's about all I'd tell you. That means more to me, it took me a lot more to be a butcher than it did to be a manager. And my skills as a butcher are massive. (Senior manager, Company A)

Powerful artefacts (Gagliardi 1996) that form part of the butchers' identity are the knives and protective chain mail. These are only used in the production area where the heavy work of cutting up the carcasses takes place but would have been used by all the butchers at some stage in their careers. Butchers in the shops do the less physical, but equally skilled, work of

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11 A UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2015) report found that the number of students aged 16 -17 who were also working had dropped from 42% in 1997 to only 18% in 2014. Not only does this impact on young people's transition into the workforce and their future prospects, but it also has implications for businesses in the quality of their future workforce.

boning-out and trimming the meat ready for display to the public, so do not require such high protection. A further important aspect of the role in the shops is advising customers on how to cook different cuts of meat, recommending which cuts are most suitable for particular purposes and, on occasions, dissuading customers from making an unsuitable purchase. Butchers with previous experience in other careers, such as catering, will make reference to it and use the knowledge gained from this work in advising customers. For some it appears to provide an important additional dimension to their sense of identity.

For the long serving senior staff, a second strand to identity comes from the sense of belonging to the company; it is not possible to comment on other groups within the company, however, as no data was obtained from them. The senior operations team, all joined as apprentices and have spent their whole working lives with the company. Through the disagreements, learning and adjustments that have occurred over this time, the values and approach to business, that have been shared over many years, have created strong bonds with a similar mindset and common terminology. The frequently used phrase 'doing it right', for example, does not need definition or explanation because it is understood between the team.

There may also be a third sense of identify through connection with the wider community. This certainly exists in one of the shops, as already discussed, but it was not possible to ascertain to what extent, if any, it exists in other parts of the company.

The disagreements, learning and adjustments referred to above, have also played a part in the power relations within the company. The perceived shift within those relations during the period of the current family members' tenure will be considered in the next section.

4.4 Power relations

This section presents data to address the fourth objective of the study. Since participants talked of how management used to be and how it has changed, the evidence is structured under the headings of original management style and current management style. While decision-making still ultimately rested with the family directors at the time the interviews were conducted and appears likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future, there was evidence to suggest that changes were planned which may have an influence on power relations. This has now taken place and will be addressed in section 4.5.

4.4.1 Original management style

All the participants talked of the change in attitude towards the treatment of staff that had taken place in the company, which "took a long while". The participant with the shortest service recalled the culture changing even in the ten years he had been with the company. Referring back to past behaviour towards staff, the three managers interviewed all talked about it as having been a 'finger pointing culture'. One described it as being a time when "we wanted to say, well you did that, what did you do it for?" He went on to state that he believed it arose because:

> our business is about we want the best, so we're always looking for perfection, even though perfection doesn't exist…..You're not thinking about the human error that's in there. (Senior manager, Company A)

This blame culture seems to have resulted from the desire to achieve consistent quality across the business, in line with its values. Rather than seeking solutions to problems as they arose, however, it appears to have added to them, by creating an environment that was not conducive to understanding the causes or addressing learning needs. The manager went on to expand on the consequences of this culture:

> If you're going to get into trouble, shouted at, you start making more mistakes because you're trying to cover that mistake. And you find that a culture when it's like that, that culture is not as honest because you're covering up mistakes, so you'll get lies in there. (Senior manager, Company A)

One participant recalled that when he first joined the company he used to be "shouted at in an old-fashioned way of 'get that done, get on with it, stop twining'", (as well as the clip around the ear referred to in section 4.3.2) so when he became a manager:

> my management style was based on my peers so I would shout and growl at people. (Senior manager, Company A)

This 'power-over' style of management (Follett 1924) was a direct result of the culture within the organization at that time influencing the individual's social learning.

A second participant, the shortest serving, talked of similar experiences:

> When I started there was still quite a lot of 'it's this way or no way', a bit of shouting and you know 'this is the way it's done' and 'this is it'. And they've either mellowed or realised this isn't the way to do things now. But when I started there'd be a lot of telling off was the main way of getting things done if they're not done right. (Shop manager 2, Company A)

These comments align with the MD's acknowledgement that:

> *the first 10 or 15 years you just give direct orders and expect it to be done" [when there were 5 or 6 staff].* (Managing Director, Company A)

He went on to talk about how a manager had walked out of one of the shops and a young butcher, who would not long have been out of his apprenticeship, was promoted to take over the running of the shop. Because the MD was so involved in all aspects of the business:

> *I would probably give him hell sometimes when I shouldn't have done. Because you know what's right and what's wrong….but he's survived that so you've got to learn to manage a lot differently.* (Managing Director, Company A)

The young manager referred to is still with the company and now in a very senior position (he was not one of the participants), so in surviving, he not only became socialised into the company's values and culture, but also subsequently became part of the team bringing about changes to the management style.

The adoption of a 'power-over' style of management (Follett 1924), whether deliberately or unconsciously, may have resulted from several factors. Firstly, having learned about butchery skills and the meat industry from an early age, and attained the status of master butchers, the family directors had gained a deep understanding of the industry, a knowledge that was combined with power of ownership of the company (Foucault 1984). Secondly, the company had gained a reputation for the quality of its products and service during the leadership of the previous generations and, as already discussed, this continues to be a key principle in management thinking and decision making. The MD's desire for everything to be right may at times have made him hard on those who failed to achieve the high standards he set. Thirdly, there may be a cultural aspect common to the butchery trade in general, as suggested by one of the participants:

> *There's not a lot of praise goes on in general. I think that's an ingrown sort of thing into the old style of doing things that's very hard to do. We sit on the courses and they tell you that praise is a good way of getting, you know, reactions from people but historically that's not the way a butchery company tends to work.*
> (Shop manager 2, Company A)

4.4.2 Current management style

Two of the managers believed that the blame culture had disappeared, and one said it had been replaced with an attitude of *"right we've made the mistake, what do we [do] to go about not making it again? How do we move on from this?"* (Senior Manager, Company A)

One of the shop managers was more ambivalent in his response, commenting that "*to a certain level it's [the management style] changed and to a certain level it's not changed.*" (Shop manager 2, Company A)

In answer to the question 'what do you think has brought that change about?', participants cited more awareness of everything to do with employment law, mental health and the pressures on families now with children and elderly relatives to care for "*and it's just, you know if you want to get the best out of your staff you've got to be fully understanding and supportive of them* (Shop manager 1, Company A)". The introduction of a human resources function was also mentioned as having a positive influence by one manager, who spoke of looking to them to stop him getting into trouble:

> *Because HR helps us with that culture of shouting at people as well. Because you can't do that no more and they're pointing it out to you. So that makes it more of a positive, because you're not thinking 'aah I don't have to look over my shoulder here' because yes, I'm human, I will make mistakes, but I'll learn from them and move on and HR's there to support me.* (Senior manager, Company A)

The transition to a more inclusive, relational style of management as the company grew, with responsibilities being cascaded further down the organization, has brought greater opportunities for learning for individual members of staff, but is not without its frustrations for the MD:

> *I'm now working through other people, through other managers and it's a little bit more, it's just even more key that you're managing the people correctly so that they know what they're doing. So that's been the big change and it does get frustrating when you know what you're going to do and bang do it, but sometimes you've got to let someone assimilate it and think it through and sometimes go a little way down the wrong way and then come back again.* (Managing Director, Company A)

In answer to the question *"how do you keep in touch with things without interfering?"*, his initial response was: *"I don't know if I do sometimes!"* A good source of information comes from going round the shops once a week, with no particular job to do but just talk to people.

I used to go and help set the shop up in the morning, so you'd work two hours and then you'd learn so much with just being at that table cutting the meat, whatever it is and people chat to you. And I guess because I've done that and I've grown up through that people still talk to me and tell me if I ask them a question. There's not many are thinking what they should say, I don't think. You know, they won't give me everything I know that but I can read between the lines. It just, I don't know, it's being visible and I guess the history of working with them as well. Because they know, I guess, I do know a lot of the practical side. (Managing Director, Company A)

He has often been visible around the shops, as observed by the researcher, and appeared approachable, so this claim appears plausible although it could not be verified.

The shops all have the same branding and similar layout, tailored to the size and dimensions of the particular building in which they are located. They also all conform to the same strict hygiene regulations. The question of how much autonomy the individual shops have within the corporate requirements, elicited the following response from one shop manager:

So long as you're fitting in with the company's core values, is you've got a fairly free rein. It hasn't always been like that, it's been, things are a bit freer.
(Shop manager 1, Company A)

The MD, when talking about how much freedom individual shops have over stocking particular items and the way in which they are displayed, said,

we don't have a must have, might have, never list, well, actually, there's a few things never, but there's no list on it….[the shop manager and area manager] will talk things through and agree what should go in and what shouldn't go in and basically, say for instance, they've gone for something and I think 'what have you got that in for? And so if I think it's really wrong, I'll just say to them 'let's get that out' but 90% of the time it's 'right, ok, do the numbers on it, use the [computer] system, show us how it'll work'. (Managing Director, Company A)

By implication this would seem to indicate that 10% of the time proposed ideas are still vetoed. One such example occurred when the MD overruled a decision to display bacon in the shop window. While he understood what the staff were trying to do, he also knew from experience that bacon discolours when exposed to natural light, giving it a very unappetising appearance, and hence making the decision inappropriate.

Although there was evidence of the management style changing, there were still indications that the old style of control by the family directors had not completely disappeared. During the interview the MD talked about succession planning that was starting to take place. As part of that, an external body had been brought in to help with a review of the company which included gathering views from a wide range of people, *"some of the comments came through*

that nothing happens without my say so, but we're trying to cascade those responsibilities down" (Managing Director, Company A)*.*

The individual shops also have some discretion in deciding which raw and kitchen-ready products are stocked, as well as the items produced in store:

> *"Because each shop develops slightly differently from the custom and from what they and what the staff are keen on too. So there's a bit of both. Sometimes you know they might like producing certain things and then if they like producing those they'll sell them better, whereas if we say 'no, you can't have those, it's got to be that', they won't get behind it as much*. (Managing Director, Company A)

This approach makes good business sense but also indicates that employees do have an element of power, which they can exercise in the way they execute their duties (Giddens 1984). This may not always be done consciously, however, but whether it is deliberate or a simple reaction, it has the power to influence customer perception and affect company performance. A more direct use of individual power is the ability to challenge management decisions or practices, which was discussed in section 4.2.1 and was claimed to be acceptable by managers. Staff perceptions of the reality of this statement, however, would need to be explored before it could be accepted as a recognised right for all within the company.

In summary, the company has evolved towards a more inclusive style of management with greater delegation to non-family members and ideas drawn from a wider pool. However, at the time of the interviews, it appeared to be a work in progress, with the family directors continuing to maintain close oversight of the firm.

4.5 Longevity

Three key areas emerged as major contributors to the longevity of the company; the people, the ability to learn and adapt, and the values. Each of these aspects has already been touched on and will now be critically evaluated to address the fifth objective.

4.5.1 People

The MD summed up the importance of people to the business as it grew.

> *And all along the line the people have been key to, to just getting the right people in the right place. I know that a lot better now than I did 20 years ago, because 20 years ago you would just get on and do it.* (Managing Director, Company A)

The strong ties that the family directors built with some of the apprentices of a similar age to themselves, or not much younger, formed the foundation of the senior team today and the core butchery expertise throughout the company. The tradition of training apprentices still continues, and the change in the profile of recruits has had the advantage of bringing new skills and knowledge into the business. Although the data gathered was partial, and only from managers, there was clear evidence of recognition and praise for the skills and contributions of a wide range of team members.

4.5.2 Learning and adaptability

The company honours its history through reminders of its early days and the contribution of previous generations (for reasons of anonymity these cannot be identified). While still supplying meat butchered in very much the same way as it would have been in the past, this is now only one part of the business, albeit an important one. The company has been transformed into a modern food producer, operating to modern standards and offering a wide range of products and services. "We move on and adapt" sums up the attitude and an illustration of that was provided in the context of the huge price increase in pork following the swine flu epidemic in China. A further example was provided by a shop manager talking about the work his staff had been doing looking into trends in sales of cheese:

> *We've created massive growth in our cheese turnover…working with the different creameries, the different dairies so that'll be [name] and [name] just trying to look at different cheeses and if we can get them pre-packed rather than us having to constantly overwrap them, re-price them, re-label them. Cutting down on labour. It's just looking at little things like that.* (Shop manager 1, Company A)

The two members of staff referred to in the example are relative newcomers but brought with them valuable transferrable skills from previous employments and have gained the respect of the rest of the team, including old timers. The integration of traditional skills possessed and passed on by old timers, and the fresh perspectives and complimentary skills brought in by newcomers, can be a productive combination, although it can also cause friction (Lave and Wenger 1991). The data gathered did not allow an assessment of how widespread such positive relationships between newcomers and old timers are in the company.

4.5.3 Values

While the production methods, appearance of the shops, and range of goods have changed completely, the values of the company, and the way they are manifest in the day-to-day

operation of the business, have remained constant. The evidence gathered from the interviews appears to confirm the assertion, quoted at the beginning, that it is important to live to the family's traditional values of quality, produce and service and 'do it right'. The very personal management of the company by the family directors, and their deep knowledge of the business for such a long period, has provided stability and continuity for staff and customers. The MD reflected that:

> *Always feel I've been slow to lay things off, feel I could have done better if I'd worked harder on management of people, whether that's right or not I don't know but if I'd put more into developing people earlier, I wouldn't have had to do as many hours.* (Managing Director, Company A)

It may indeed be true that he would have been able to work less hours, but it also raises the question of whether greater devolution of responsibility to others would have resulted in the same attention to quality and personal service that is the hallmark of the company. Also illuminating was his answer to the question:

What's the best thing about running a company like this from your point of view?

> *I enjoy making it work, I like food, I just get a kick when it works, get a bigger lift when it's been a problem and you've overcome it…It all has to be right, products got to be right, the people, the profitability. (*Managing Director, Company A)

It raises a further question of how someone, who cares so much about everything being right and enjoys the challenge of dealing with management problems, would have coped with less direct hands-on control of the business. The answer to this may be provided in the future.

Since the interviews were conducted, the company has announced a senior management reorganization, with the two family members scaling back their involvement, whilst remaining directors of the company. Long serving key members of staff have been promoted to handle the day-to-day operational aspects of the business. With all the movements being internal, the change offers continuity and an evolution of the company's existing approach and values, rather than a change of direction.

4.6 Data themes: Company B

Although the data collected on Company B was limited to just one interview with the MD and some supporting documentary evidence, five themes were identified that were relatable to the themes explored in Company A. They were:

- Relationship with staff
- Focus on apprentices
- Hard work and strong values
- Heritage and innovation
- Power relations

The evidence for each of these themes will be presented and evaluated.

4.6.1 Relationship with staff

Just as with Company A, there is a strong connection between the family members and their workforce, with a history of different generations from the same family being employed at the company. In the same way that knowledge of the business, and the values underpinning it, began to be acquired tacitly very early in life by the children of the second generation owners, it seems likely that children of employees also gleaned knowledge about the company and its ethos from what they saw and heard within their own families.

The organization has a very flat structure with what was described as an 'upside down organization chart". Drivers are at the top because

> *they're the ones that are speaking to the customers, they're the ones at the forefront and we're at the bottom and alongside, we're in a supporting role. It's like the football team, we're back office, the team are out there and we've got to support them.* (Managing Director, Company B)

Any member of staff can go direct to one of the senior managers, although the MD admitted that some of the managers are a bit uncomfortable with that, *"but you have to, anybody can come and knock on my door at any time and I make, my phone number is there for anybody to use*" (Managing Director, Company B)*. This availability and sense of service to employees is also reported by shop manager 1 in Company A in section 4.2.1.

The transition from a small family firm to a much larger business has inevitably brought with it a number of changes, including an increase in the number of managers. At middle manager level they have all come through the business, at senior level it is half from within and half recruited externally. This has presented challenges in disseminating the knowledge and know-how relating to the customers, company systems and the background to haulage industry regulations that have been built up by the family directors from an early age. The MD sees

dissemination of this information as an important part of the role, which appears to contain elements of mentoring, although it was not described as such.

> *But for instance, where you've had an insurance claim or a claim for a customer with something gone wrong and I ask various questions and the manager goes, 'I didn't know that' and so I explain it all. 'And how do you know that?' 'Well, I know it because I've been here such a long time it's, you know, how did you know to ask that question.' It's getting all that out and to all these managers and I just have to disseminate that sort of information and it's people's learning within the business.* (Managing Director, Company B)

The genuine passion shown by the MD for passing on knowledge and supporting the learning of employees provides compelling evidence for the evaluation of the second objective of this research.

Like the MD in Company A, as well as keeping in touch through meetings and written communication, the MD makes a point of talking to all the staff.

> *We need to make sure we're still talking to people and it's not just all electronic.*

> *I like to talk to everybody. I'll go out and talk to drivers and technicians and the managers as well. And there's drivers that, and technicians that have worked here for 20/30 years and so I'll have a chat with them or there'll be a bit of banter. And occasionally their manager will go 'what was all that about'? I say 'oh well you know I worked with their dad' or I'll give them a bit of the family tree of that family.* (Managing Director, Company B)

The impression created is that of an extended family community consisting of many families brought together under the umbrella of the family ownership and management of the firm and contributes to the assessment of the third objective of the research.

4.6.2 Focus on apprentices

The importance of apprentices to the success of the company, and the way in which they were, and continue to be, valued and treated with respect from the moment they join, came across very clearly and accorded with the data from Company A. The MD's father *"was passionate about helping and supporting young people"* and a tribute from a former apprentice following his death explains the relationship he had with them:

> *For many of us, [first name] treated us young un's [sic] like young men, empowered us to make the decisions regardless if right or wrong, this taught us all a real work ethic. … A true gentleman that we can all aspire to be like.* (Company B document)

Other words used about him were "our wise council" and "unassuming". As a mark of the respect felt for him, apprentices carried the coffin at his funeral.

Following the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 2001 and the loss of many livestock drivers to other industries, the training of apprentices took on a new urgency for the company. The training is now professionally run, and apprentices receive considerable support not only during the apprenticeship, but also during the period following it when they are still gaining practical experience. Both driver and technician apprentices are buddied up with an experienced member of staff and always work with that person. For the new drivers, there is also someone in the office they can contact if they encounter a problem while out on the road.

> *They can talk to their line manager but they can always speak to [name] in training because he will do their driving assessment. He also keeps hold of the uniform and uniform's important. These boots are not right, well I'll get you another pair or try this, try that. And it's sort of part of keeping them happy as well I think.* (Managing Director, Company B)

In addition to a heavy goods vehicle licence, livestock drivers require a sound knowledge and practical experience of how to handle livestock. This know-how (Ryle 1949) is typically acquired through an upbringing in a farming environment and involves an element of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966).

4.6.3 Work ethic and values

The work ethic referred to in the tribute above appears to have been a constant theme. A saying of the MD's father was that "if you are not fishing, you should be mending your nets". As with Company A, the emphasis was on "doing things right and not taking short cuts" but work was always mixed with family life and made fun. Hard work is still part of the family culture, but with the recognition that lifestyles and social norms are changing.

> *People do work long hours and it's what you put into it but there is a point at which you can't expect that of other people.* (Managing Director, Company B)

4.6.4 Heritage and innovation

As the company has grown in numbers and expanded its facilities, the supply of local drivers has no longer proved sufficient to meet all its requirements, and staff have also been needed in other locations as well. An important part of the company's aim is therefore to be, and be

seen as, a progressive employer in order to attract suitable candidates from a wider pool. This is particularly important for hard to fill positions like HGV drivers.[12]

> *But we also need, we've very conscious of our heritage which is great and the family business and what we've done in the past but we have to look forward as well and we have to be seen to be modern and forward looking because the whole part of communication and PR is it's getting people to work for us. We must have, you can't grow the business without people and people are so important.*
> (Managing Director, Company B)

Here again there is a similarity with Company A; the successes of the past are remembered and celebrated, but the focus is firmly on addressing current issues and finding innovative approaches for the future. The biggest challenge in recent times for Company B was the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001, which destroyed a large part of the business overnight. Although some drivers did leave, redundancies were avoided as a result of an approach by DEFRA to manage a project for the slaughter and transportation of animals. The size of the project was so massive that it required the enrolment and coordination of other local hauliers and drovers.

> *there was so much goodwill within, it wasn't just the business, it was the businesses throughout Cumbria all pulled together and all these family businesses, ours being one of the larger ones, but very small single operators as well.* (Managing Director, Company B)

This story highlights the strength of participation in the wider community of practice and the benefits of cooperation and mutual support between businesses, particularly in difficult times. The fact that the company was able to persuade other businesses to work in collaboration with it on the project is also indicative of the position of authority that it holds and provides an example of actor network theory's concept of interessement, in this case reaching a successful conclusion (Callon 1986). The MDs of both companies have also held senior roles within their respective industry bodies, and participated in consultation and lobbying on policy formulation, indicating voices which carry authority in and beyond their wider industry communities.

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12 The shortage of HGV drivers is a longstanding problem, more recently exacerbated by Brexit and COVID-19. The number of working drivers fell from an estimated 321,000 in the year from July 2016 to June 2017 to 268,000 in the year July 2020 to June 2021, the largest decline occurring amongst the age group 46 – 55 and indicating a retention problem. In the 3 months to September 2021 there were 52,000 vacancies for posts in transport and storage, the highest since records began in 2001 (ONS 2021b)

4.6.5. Power relations

Power relations in the company appear to have remained fairly consistent over the past two generations in contrast to Company A. As part of the strong personal relationships built up by the past and current MDs with the company's employees, there was evidence to suggest a no-nonsense but caring style of management. Both through the position as head of the company, and knowledge of the business and industry gained over many years, the MD gave the impression of being in firm control of all aspects of the business, but without any desire for status or deference. Comments made during the interview about mistakes illustrate these points:

> People do make mistakes and I always say: 'tell me the truth, what happened' and so you know a lot of the processes that we've built up over the years are still in place and I think if you know that the boss will stand beside you if you tell the truth it helps. I don't get, occasionally I get called the boss but I don't really like it.
> (Managing Director, Company B)

There is an echo in this of the dislike of big egos expressed by the MD of Company A.

While very willing to share information and knowledge with staff members, the MD appears to be finding it difficult to disengage from close contact with all aspects of the business. This is possibly due in part to the desire to see that things are done right, and no corners are cut, a core value that has already been discussed.

> But even today there will be various things that I do myself that people will say 'why do you do that, you should be delegating' and I go 'delegate! I have delegated everything.' I started out doing everything. It is difficult. There's always more and more to, it's a bad habit I suppose to do it all myself. (Managing Director, Company B)

In addition, factors that came across very strongly during the interview, namely the passion for the business, the nature of the work and the interactions with staff, may explain a reluctance to step away from the MD role.

> And there's still lots of projects that I'm forever spotting, things that we need to be doing but I think there's recruitment to do as well because I do need to move to another level. I probably shouldn't be, at this stage I shouldn't be MD. I should be moving towards a chairman.
>
> **You say should, do you want to?**

No, so they keep asking me 'what are you gonna be doing? When are you going to retire?' and I say 'you're not going to be getting rid of me. (Managing Director, Company B)

Without being able to gather a wider range of evidence, it is not possible to draw conclusions on how the MD is viewed within the company. However, the fact that there are many long serving members of staff, some from different generations of the same family, would seem to indicate that the company, and the way it is managed, is well respected.

The next chapter will review the aim and objectives of the research and assess the extent to which they have been met.

Chapter 5. CONCLUSIONS

5.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the aim and objectives of the research which were set out in Chapter 1. It assesses the evidence that has been presented in support of each of the objectives and critically evaluates the extent to which sociocultural learning has been demonstrated to contribute to family firm longevity. The limitations of the research are acknowledged, and an assessment of the contribution made to the body of knowledge on family firm longevity is offered, identifying areas where further research would be valuable.

5.1 Aim and objectives

The aim was to explore the part played by sociocultural learning in family firm longevity. To address this aim, the following objectives were identified:

1. To explore the nature of sociocultural learning in selected family firms
2. To critically evaluate how, and to what extent, that learning is shared between family members and their non-family employees
3. To critically assess what evidence exists for the concept of community of practice within the selected firms and in their relationship in their wider networks
4. To explore the effect of power on sociocultural learning in family firms
5. To critically evaluate factors that support family firm longevity

The next section will review the data presented in evidence for each objective.

5.1.1. The nature of sociocultural learning

The first objective considered the nature of the three elements that make up sociocultural learning and identified that at their heart are the family's values upon which the culture of the firm rests. These were demonstrated in both case study companies. A mixture of long serving members of a company and newcomers ensures that a balance between tradition and innovation can be maintained and when good social relationships exist, quality learning can be achieved between the two groups. Furthermore, the opportunity offered to apprentices in Company B to make their own decisions in a supportive environment is a very powerful example of how sociocultural learning can lead to positive and lasting effects on an individual's development.

5.1.2 Learning occurring between family members and their non-family employees

The second objective was to evaluate the extent to which learning is shared between family members and their employees. Clear evidence of learning being passed on from family directors to members of staff was found in both companies. In company A this took the form of working alongside staff performing butchery activities and providing guidance to shop managers. In company B the Managing Director reported spending a lot of time talking to managers and passing on the extensive knowledge of the firm and its systems that had been acquired over many years. Additionally, in the case of Company A, there is evidence of the Managing Director learning from employees, partly through the ideas they bring back to the business from their experiences of other retailers and partly from information he gleaned personally while involved in setting up the shops in the morning.

5.1.3. Community of practice and the wider community

The third objective set out to assess the evidence for communities of practice in the case study organizations and their relationship with the wider community. Company A provides a notable example of a characteristic of a community of practice (Wenger 1998) in the way that the whole team is involved in the induction of a new member. The importance placed on the development and inclusion of apprentices in both companies is a further indicator of a community that takes the promotion and sharing of knowledge and skills seriously, with old timers passing on their skills to newcomers but also learning from them. This is aided by the level of communication evidenced in the companies.

Both companies have strong links to their communities, although in the case of Company B the evidence for this was largely due to the number of local people employed by it, many of them from different generations of the same family. Company A has a wide variety of community connections, and, in some cases, these might be categorised as overlapping or even extended communities of practice. There is a very close relationship between the company and the local farmers who supply their meat, built up over many years, and a shared interest in all aspects of the rearing of the animals and the butchering of the meat. This connection might be regarded as falling into one of those categories. There are a variety of other links with the local community involving education, contact at points of mutual interest and good citizenship but these do not fall into the category of communities of practice.

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5.1.4 The effect of power on sociocultural learning

The fourth objective was to explore the effect of power on sociocultural learning and the research data revealed both the positive and negative effects that it can have on this learning. The original blame culture in Company A resulted in mistakes being covered up, with the consequence that learning opportunities were missed, and possible reputational damage caused to the company. In contrast, the move away from this culture, although possibly not complete yet, has led to a focus on identifying and taking the action needed to ensure that the same mistake does not happen again. The power relations in Company B, which seem to have remained constant over the period of the previous and current managing directors' tenure, appear to be closer to relational power than that originally seen in Company A. Evidence of this is provided by the empowerment of apprentices and support for employees who make mistakes but admit them. Power relations are complex, and these conclusions are necessarily tentative as they are based on limited data. Further research involving a wider range of participants would be needed to offer deeper insights.

5.1.5. Factors that support family firm longevity

The fifth objective sought to evaluate the factors that support family firm longevity and three factors that may contribute to it have emerged from this research. The first is the values of the owning family members that inform those of the firm. The second concerns the ability to select and retain people whose values and aptitudes align with those of the company. They may range from school leaver apprentices, with little or no experience of the workplace, to those bringing with them highly relevant transferable skills and behaviours acquired in previous employment. Once selected, the management of these people is crucial to ensure that they can work at their best.

 The final factor in family firm longevity is the ability to learn and adapt, in order to address changing circumstances and lifestyles, whilst retaining the essential qualities of the company. Examples of this were demonstrated in the involvement of employees in putting forward ideas for new products and in contributing to new ways of working in order to reduce costs, without having to make staff redundant. While each family firm is, by its nature, unique (Konopaski *et al.* 2015) and no rules for success and longevity can be applied from firm to firm (Leach 2007), this does not preclude beneficial learning occurring between firms within wider communities of practice. Such learning, if it is to be beneficial to the company, is likely to require adaptation to its specific circumstances and practices.

5.2 Limitations

The data on which the analysis and conclusions are based is limited. This was due significantly, although not entirely, to the difficulties caused by Covid-19. As already stated, this data was obtained primarily from five interviews, although statements made in them were corroborated against other testimony or observations wherever possible. The inability to conduct a second round of planned interviews with members of staff in non-management positions in Company A has meant that the evidence presented provides a less than fully rounded perspective of that organization, albeit that the views of staff are partly represented. It would have been useful to gain further perceptions of the management style from non-managerial staff, however, this did not happen due to the combination of factors previously outlined.

5.3 Contribution to the literature on family firm longevity

As identified in the family firm literature, longevity is a complex phenomenon dependent on many factors and this study has only been able to explore one small aspect, namely that of sociocultural learning. It does so through a qualitative methodology which has been under-represented in research in this field in the past. While the data collected is limited in scope it, nevertheless, offers insights into the longevity of two successful family businesses and their relationships with their non-family employees.

A key contribution is an insight into the personal qualities of the family directors which appears to indicate that these may play a major part in the way SEW is perceived by them. While influence and control are important in maintaining high standards of quality, this study found that there was an absence of self-importance or desire for status or personal wealth on the part of the MDs in the case study firms. More important to them were consistent and genuinely held values, their social relations with a range of stakeholders and the sharing of their knowledge and skills, all of which are aspects of sociocultural learning. These qualities lie at the heart of their approach to the business and ensure that 'things are done right' for the benefit of employees, customers and the wider community.

A second contribution to the literature on firm longevity arises from the data collected from, and about, non-family employees. This has highlighted the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages the retention and commitment of one of a family firm's most significant assets and adds to the work of Cunningham (2020). The development of newly recruited employees involving the whole team benefits all parties and creates shared values and understanding, leading to greater affective engagement. While promotional

opportunities may not be available within the company, the benefits provided by membership of a community of practice may offer attractive compensations.

Neither of the above in isolation can be said to lead to longevity but they are recommended as powerful contributors to it and worthy of further research.

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