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Spatial familiness: a bridge between family business and economic geography

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Family firms are the most common form of organization around the world, existing in different sizes, sectors, and locations (Astrachan and Shanker 2003; Bjuggren et al. 2011). From gigantic multi-national conglomerates like Walmart in the United States of America, Techint Group in Latin America, Easa Saleh Al Gurg in the Middle East, Pick n Pay in Africa, and Samsung in Far East Asia to the well-known Mittelstand family firms in Germany, scholars have characterized family firms based on family involvement in ownership, governance, and management and the resulting effect on firm behavior and performance (Basco 2013). However, only a few studies have investigated the economic spaces in which family firms dwell (e.g. Karlsson 2018). This research gap links family business studies with economic geography studies, but it was not until recently that these research streams started to cross-fertilize (Amato et al. 2020; Basco 2015; Basco and Suwala 2020; Stough et al. 2015; Suwala and Oinas 2012).

On the one hand, the presence of the family in the firm gives rise to unique characteristics in family firms in terms of their goal orientation (Aparicio et al. 2017) and resources (e.g. emotional, human, and social), which may represent a competitive advantage compared to non-family firms. Family involvement in economic activities makes family firms among the world's oldest firms (Goto 2014; The Economist 2015) as they tend to predominantly focus on long-term survival rather than on short-term performance indicators (Kachaner et al. 2012) and are particularly inclined to address social issues (Vazquez 2018) and/or non-economic goals (Basco 2017). Further, research has shown that family firms contribute significantly to economic and regional development by supporting employment (Amato et al. 2020; Banalieva and Eddleston 2011), investing in innovation (Block and Spiegel 2011), strategizing internationally (Baù et al. 2019), and taking over regional planning and administrative tasks (Albers and Suwala 2018). On the other hand, research has also shown that family firms often have high mortality rates during the management-succession process (Santarelli and Lotti 2005), lack professionalism (Bloom and Van Reenen 2007), experience volatile risk-tolerance behavior when their socioemotional wealth is jeopardized (Hiebl 2012), compete in submarkets, and have rigid positions and inflexibilities in their short-term decisions (Suwala and Micek 2018). Family firms are also associated with less developed regions (Chang et al. 2008) and are often the source of social and economic inequality (Fogel 2006).

Consequently, family involvement in economic activities may lead to paradoxical views of family firms as resilient/rigid, conservative/entrepreneurial, and productive/unproductive organizations – in other words, the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde effect (Basco 2015) – with positive and negative impacts on social, economic, and regional development. To tackle this paradoxical view and answer the call made by Stough et al. (2015), we introduce both the dimension of space in family business research and the dimension of family firm in economic geography research by linking these two fields of research. In this chapter, we explore the recursive effect between economic spaces and family firms. First, we explore economic spaces' effect on family firms by considering the influence different types of economic spaces have on firm behavior and firm performance. Second, we explore family firms' effect on economic spaces by attempting to clarify the role family firms play in different economic spaces. By presenting these two levels of analysis, we aim to review what we know about family firm and economic spaces, build a bridge between these two academic fields, present a combined model on the recursive relationship between family firms and economic spaces, and propose future lines of research.

The bridge between the fields of family business and economic geography

While the fundamental research questions in family business studies address how families affect economic activities and why family firms exist (e.g. Basco 2019) and exit (e.g. Santarelli and Lotti 2005), the *raison d'être* of economic geography is to explain uneven spatial development. These two fields of research have been disconnected from each other until the recent special issue of *Journal of Family Business Strategy* edited by Stough, Welter, Block, Wennberg, and Basco (2015) and the edited collection about *Family Business and Regional Development* edited by Basco, Stough, and Suwala (2020). This edited collection theoretically and empirically opened doors and offered opportunities to connect the family business and economic geography research streams by questioning whether the mere presence of family firm is good or bad for regional growth and development. In parallel, from the economic geography field, another school of thought started connecting the emerging discourse on management geography (Jones 2016; Schlunze et al. 2012; Suwala and Oinas 2012; Suwala and Schlunze 2019) and integrating economic spaces and scales at the micro-level (family firms).

The family business field has focused on family involvement in firms. Family involvement in firms creates heterogeneity among economic actors because families bring economic and non-economic goals (Basco 2017) to firms, thereby affecting firms' bounded rationality. Family involvement in ownership, governance, and management affects how the firm is managed by altering the reference point (goals to achieve) to make decisions. The intention to pass the firm from one generation to another (Aparicio et al. 2017), for example, is not necessarily related to the profit-maximization premise that is usually associated with economic actors. Even though extensive research has been conducted on the phenomenon of family involvement in economic activities, this research has been contextless and spaceless (Gomez-Mejia et al. 2020; James et al. 2020).

On the other hand, the economic geography field has moved across different schools of thought from spatial analysis, regional science, and the rediscovery of the political economy to the resurgence of regional economics (Scott 2000). Space, place, and time have become relevant in the effort to break the classical economic perspective of equilibrium. In this sense, economies of scale and imperfect competition are the building blocks for explaining macro-heterogeneity across regions. However, this macro-heterogeneity across regions is a consequence of economic actors' decisions (Ottaviano 2011). Firms are responsible for deciding not only how and when to allocate resources within firm boundaries but also where to produce and sell products, how to interact with other economic actors (e.g. suppliers within and outside industrial systems, government and non-governmental organizations, and customers), and when to conduct and engage in economic and social activities. Even though there have been efforts to introduce the notion of the firm into economic geography since the 1950s (McNee 1958), the field lacks a paradigm to explain the micro-foundations of economic actors' heterogeneity (Dicken and Malmberg 2001; Maskell 2001; Taylor and Asheim 2001).

Taking the aforementioned research gaps in both economic geography and family business into consideration, our intention is to position in the center of the debate a view of the family firm as an economic entity, actor, and identity that is cognitively, socially, and economically embedded in the local and regional environment. In this sense, in the next two sections, we attempt to bond and bridge the family business and economic geography research streams. First, we present a conceptual model to interpret the spatiality of family management and address the limitations of family business research in interpreting how different spaces affect family management (Suwala and Oinas 2012). Second, we revisit the regional familiness model (Basco 2015), which aims to capture the embeddedness of family firms in social, economic, and productive structures within the spatial context, to explain the role that family firms play in regional development.

Spatial family management model

Neither “the firm” nor “the manager” have been properly acknowledged in economic geography due to the rather macro-perspective in classical regional science models (Capello 2014) assuming a passive homo economicus interpretation of individuals in economic activities. While economic geography has opened the black box of regions, firms have received less intellectual development in this field. The research stream of management geography (Schlunze et al. 2012; Suwala and Oinas 2012), sometimes also called managerial geography (Laulajainen 1998) or economic geographies of management (Jones 2016), attempts to explain managerial agency across and within spaces in relation to firms’ decisions regarding appropriate locations, local and international operations, strategic relationships with suppliers and customers, and their internal and external images. In other words, the aim of this research is to analyse the firms’ management of economic, social, and cognitive spatial domains in multi-scalar configurations, which in turn influence firm performance through concentration of economic activities, interaction of economic actors, and perception of economic experiences (Suwala and Oinas 2012). Family managers have to address three types of spaces (Figure 1)—economic spaces, social spaces, and cognitive spaces—each of which can be viewed on continuums between different types of economies and diseconomies arising from concentration/ dispersion, interaction/isolation, and perception/misconception.

The first type of spaces is the economic space which can be thought of as a location. A space gains economic meaning as a location by the simple fact that expenses occur over distances (e.g. transport and transaction), so a location is relative (compared to other locations), and spatial costs (e.g. transaction and transportation costs) can be calculated (Suwala 2014). Within this domain, family managers have to address different considerations related to location, such as their firm’s locational strategy, optimal spatial decisions regarding location factors, and internationalization decisions that take liabilities of foreignness into account (Suwala and Kulke 2017). The aim of managerial tasks is to optimize the economies of agglomeration which refer to localization economies, urbanization economies, and activity-complex economies. On the contrary, the diseconomies of agglomerations are linked to congestion, environmental fraud, or excessive location costs. Family business managerial task is about finding the optimal balance between the concentration and dispersion of economic activities (Suwala 2019).

The second type of spaces is the social space which can be thought of as a place. The notion of place is constructed through social ego-centric relationships between individuals; hence, it is relational. In other words, a “social space involves the network of functional relationships and social interactions” among economic actors (Trip and Romein 2010, p. 5). Places are about context, and they can only be understood by investigating actors’ social and relational embeddedness (Brinkhoff et al. 2012). Within this domain, family managers have to balance family relationships, internal and external firm ties (e.g. suppliers, customers), and friendship networks (Suwala 2019) to solve the fundamental problem of coordinating relationships between economic actors (Boschma 2005). These relationships are characterized by different types of proximities (e.g. spatial, cognitive, organizational, institutional, and cultural) (Knoben and Oerlemans 2006). The economies of proximities may become important when fueled by power, trust, and reciprocity resulting in place-based knowledge and learning processes (by means of face-to-face meetings, buzz, noise, and so on) (Storper and Venables 2004). On the contrary, the diseconomies of proximity may arise as consequences of under- and over-embeddedness—that is, of lock-out or lock-in of actors in places (Grabher et al. 2018). Family business managerial task is about setting up relationships between economic actors and finding the optimal balance between interaction and isolation.

Finally, the third type of spaces, the cognitive space, can be seen as landscape. Landscapes are the result of topo-centric relationships of individuals with space. Individuals are bound together not only by (ego) relationships among themselves (relational view) but also by topo-relationships directly with space. In this sense, the cognitive space is the topical field where individuals collectively share similar cognitive images, spatial mindsets, and particular atmospheres without necessary knowing each other personally (Brinkhoff et al. 2015). Within this domain, family managers specify firm and family ethics in order to establish a long-lasting firm culture reinforced by images of the family name, house symbols, and logos. Family business management task is about a “stockpile of knowledge, traditions, and memories and images” (Scott 2010, p. 123) that helps create a (mutual) atmosphere to stimulate particular perceptions and holistic experiences. The economies of experiences may result in entertainment, educational, aesthetic, and escapist experiences (Suwala 2014) depending on the intensity of managerial attention and the memorability of extraordinary events and may arise from overlapping perceptions (Lange et al. 2014) among individuals. On the contrary, the diseconomies of experiences arise from the plethora of impressions that are not captured by or able to be interpreted by individuals engaged in a stimulating environment. Therefore, family business managerial task is about finding the optimal balance between perception and misconception.

Managerial decisions in the context of family firms have to balance the aforementioned types of spaces—economic spaces, social spaces, and cognitive spaces—where each of them can be interpreted as continuums between different types of economies and diseconomies arising from concentration/ dispersion, interaction/isolation, and perception/misconception. Each of these types of spaces comprises different managerial roles, such as a concentration role as a locational explorer (classical view, economic spaces, and concentration), an interactional role as an embedded gatekeeper (relational view, social spaces, and interaction), and an informational role as an experienced preceptor (topic view, cognitive spaces, and perception). However, each of these types of spaces and their economies and diseconomies have to be seen through the family business lens which captures the coexistence of family-oriented and business-oriented goals (Aparicio et al. 2017) imposed by family involvement in the firm.

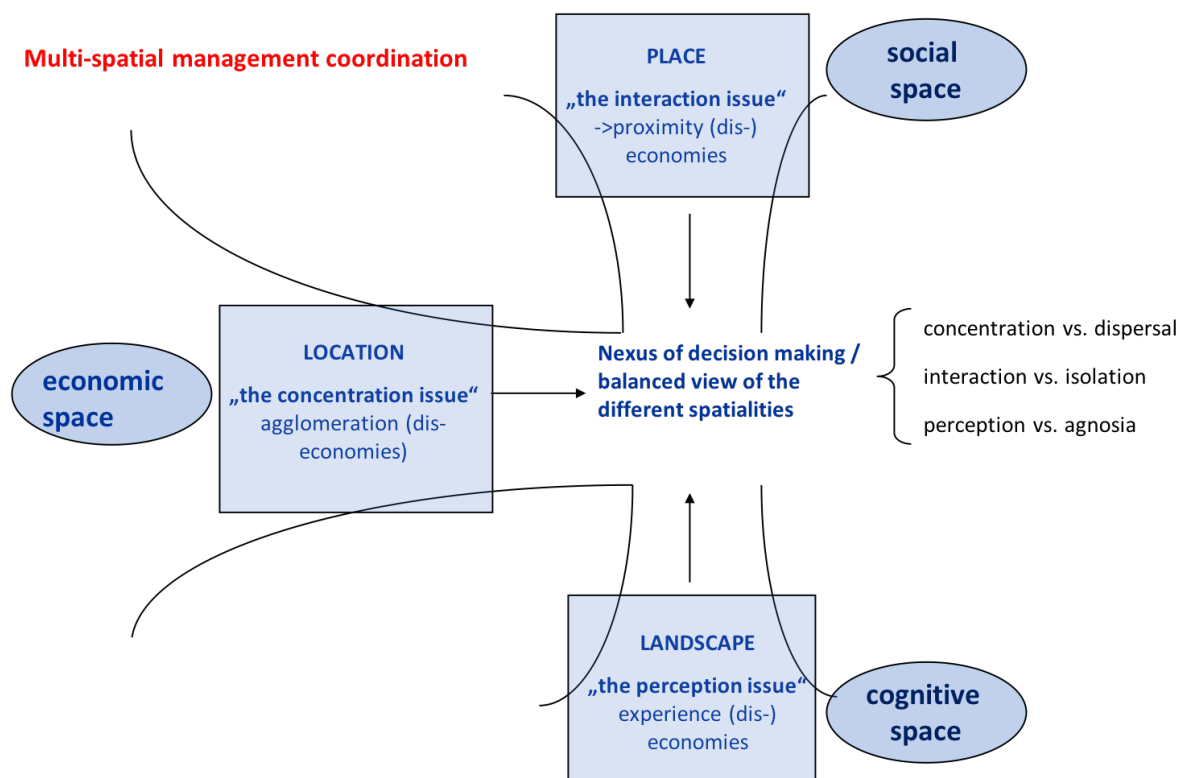


Figure 1. Spatial Family Management Model (adopted from Suwala and Oinas (2012))

Regional familiness model

The micro-foundations of the spatial family management model need to be linked to the meso- and macro-foundations of economic geography in order to theoretically and empirically interpret the effect of family firms at different spatial scales (e.g. local or regional). In this sense, the regional familiness model can be used as a lens to explore the meso- and macro-foundations of family business in economic geography.

Following Basco (2015), we define regional familiness as the consequences of family firms' embeddedness in spatial contexts that alter regional factors (i.e. tangible and intangible factors) and regional processes (e.g. spillovers, information exchange, learning processes, social interactions, competition dynamics, and institutional dynamics) through regional proximity dimensions (i.e. relational, institutional, organizational, social, and cognitive proximity). The importance of the regional familiness model (Figure 2) lies in its intention to interpret (not prescribe) the role that family firms may play in regional development. In this sense, the family firm is not an important actor merely because of its presence but because it is a driver of heterogeneity that affects proximity dimensions, regional factors, and regional processes. However, researchers need to explore family firms' effect on regional factors to unpack family firms' connection to the meso-level. Regional factors need the spatially regional processes which are responsible for exploiting and allocating them. The main regional processes are spillovers, information exchange, learning processes, social interactions, competitive dynamics, and institutional dynamics. The quality of regional processes can accelerate or slow down the productivity of the regional factors and can have consequences for regional economic and social development. By recognizing the existence of regional processes, it is possible to move the interpretation of economic spaces from an absolute and relative perspective to a relational perspective. This shift is important because regional processes demarcate the concept of space. When the phenomenon of study is based on the relational space embedded in processes, the functionality of regional processes is determined by proximity dimensions.

Proximity refers to the state, quality, sense, or fact of being near or next in space, time, or relationship (Basco 2015; Torre and Wallet 2014). Following Boschma (2005), we conceive proximity as more than simple geographical proximity related to the physical distance between economic actors and regional factors. The concept of proximity has different dimensions. Cognitive proximity refers to "the similarity of the subjective mental framework of actors and the tacit and codified knowledge owned by actors" (Cappellin and Wink 2009, p. 112). Social proximity refers to the socially embedded relationships among agents based on trust derived from friendship, kinship, and experience (Boschma 2005). Finally, while organizational proximity refers to the individual relationships within the boundaries of an organization itself and to the relationships among organizations, institutional proximity is the general macro-level framework. Because family firms are locally embedded and have their historical roots in their territory, the regional familiness model proposes that the thickness and quality of the proximity dimensions are affected by the aggregate effect of family firms in the local/regional productive structure. For instance, while family firms generally intend to stay where they are even during difficult times, such as crises (Zhou et al. 2017), the geographical distance between participants cannot be altered, so diaspora families could bridge this geographical distance (Elo et al. 2019). In this sense, family firms can make geographical proximity stable across generations. The most promising aggregate effect of family firms is related to cognitive and social proximity due to the intrinsic relationship between family, firm, and local communities. Family firms are active actors in the regional socialization process, whereby the economic, social, and emotional connections generated between the family and the firm and extended to the rest of the social and economic actors in the local community create a common codifying mental system to interpret the world. Additionally, the kinship and friendship relationships within and beyond family firm boundaries contribute to establishing a trust-based society. The organizational nature of family firms stimulates organizational proximity by

developing communication channels among firms (within and outside the region) and generating cooperation and competition actions. Finally, to a certain extent, family firms are responsible for developing the institutional proximity—that is, they are responsible for developing the implicit and explicit values, cultural norms, ethical principles, and formal rules that frame local and regional economic activities.

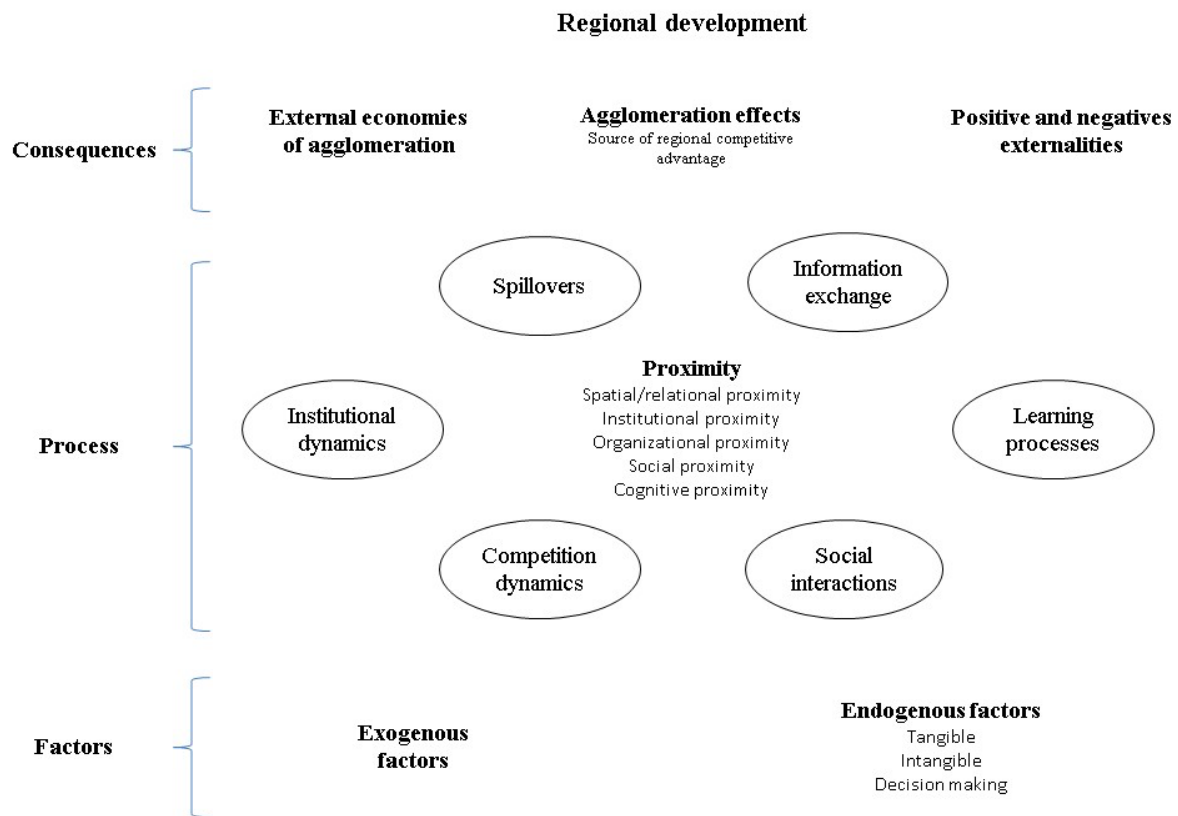


Figure 2. Regional Familiness Model (Basco (2015))

Combined model

The spatial family management and regional familiness models can be combined to draw a big picture that links the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis when connecting the fields of family business and economic geography. While the spatial family management model attempts to incorporate spatialities into family management decision making in terms of place, location, and landscape, the regional familiness model attempts to unpack the role that the family firm plays in regional economic and social development. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of both models by outlining their assumptions, rationale, understanding of space, spatial configuration, spatial self-reinforcing mechanisms, scales, main research questions, and applicable methods.

	Spatial Family Management Model	Regional Familiness Model
Assumption	Two sources of firm and regional heterogeneity. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiness: family affects family business goals (family-oriented and business-oriented) altering the way and organization is owned, governed, and managed. • Spatiality: locations, places and landscapes affect particular managerial practices within family firms 	
Rationale	Decision making comprise three spatio-sensitive continua: concentration- dispersal, proximity-distance, immersion-agnosia) within the family logic	Due to the family and spatial specificities, the embeddedness of family firms in the geographical space alters regional resources and regional process.
Understanding of space	Relative, relational, and topic	Absolut, relative, and partly relational
Spatial configuration	Factors (relative positions), ego and topo--centric relations	Factors (relative positions), ego-centric relations
Spatial self-reinforcing mechanisms	Agglomeration (dis-)economies Proximity (dis-) economies Experience (dis-) economies	Family firm embeddedness affects proximity dimensions and, consequently, regional processes (i.e. spillovers, exchange and learning, social interactions, competitive and institutional dynamics)
Scales	Micro to meso Contextual allocation of meaning	Meso to macro “regional” dominance
Main research question	How to manage the multi-spatial coordination of locations, places, and landscapes in family firms?	What is the role that family firms play to explain the uneven development among regions?
Methods	Rather qualitative	Rather quantitative

Table 1: Main Characteristics of the Spatial Family Management and Regional Familiness Model

Conclusion and future research directions

This chapter attempts to connect the fields of family business and economic geography by introducing the economic space dimensions to family business research and the family firm dimensions to economic geography. We believe the cross-fertilization between economic geography and family business studies could open new possibilities to better understand the family business phenomenon across economic spaces. The spatial family management and regional familiness models can be combined to create a spatial familiness research stream. Spatial familiness attempts to integrate the logics of space and family in the micro-, meso-, and macro-foundation approaches. In studying the micro-foundations of spatial familiness, researchers aim to understand the family business phenomenon beyond the boundaries of the classical link between family and business systems. In this sense, the spatiality of management combined with the family and business logics could explain family firm heterogeneity and better clarify family business behavior

within economic spaces. In studying the meso-foundations of spatial familiness, research aims to explain the role that family firms play within economic spaces and spatial scales by considering family firms' regional embeddedness and its effect on regional factors and processes. Finally, studying the macro-foundations of spatial familiness enables researchers to explore the extent to which the prevalence of family firms in local and regional productive structures explain the uneven economic and social development across regions.

Future research avenues emerge from the integrated model of spatial familiness that can be explored further by distinguishing three levels of research: micro-, meso-, and macro-foundations (Table 2 summarizes the most important research questions).

Research direction	Topic/Main theme	Main Research Question(s)
1	Micro foundations of spatial familiness	<p>How do the different economic spaces affect family management decision making?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do family managers balance different types of economic spatialities? • How do family managers decide upon the right location when initiating, expanding, or internalizing their family business? <p>Are there specific family-related location factors that affect decision making?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do family members orchestrate the flow of (new and disruptive) economic ideas across time and space? Do proximity dimensions catalyse or hinder the adoption of new trends, such as digitalization? • How do family managers develop/create relational distance without losing social or family ties? • What type of family firm images do family managers create to balance family, firm, and territorial identities? • How does the atmosphere in family firms differ from that in non-family working environments?
2	Meso foundations of spatial familiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does regional family firm embeddedness alter spatial self-enforcing mechanisms? • How does the presence of family firms in local productive structures alter proximity dimensions (i.e. relational, institutional, organizational, social, cognitive proximity)? • Does regional family firm embeddedness affect regional factors and processes? If so, how? • Does family embeddedness influence positive and negative agglomeration economies? If so, how?
3	Macro foundations of spatial familiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can family firms' effect on regional development be aggregated at the regional level? • Does the aggregate output of family firms in terms of productivity, internationalization, innovation, and employment affect regional economics and social development? • Are there any mechanisms or causalities between spatial agglomerations of family firms and the abundance and/or scarcity of production factors (e.g. land, labor, capital, and knowledge)? • Does the presence of family firms create novel regional trajectory paths or lead to regional lock-ins instead? • Are regions with a higher stock of family firms more resilient than those with a lower stock of family firms? • What is the relationship between family firms and labor markets across different economic spaces?

Table 2: Future research directions

In terms of the micro-foundations, future research should open the black box of family managers from a spatial perspective to shed light on the spatio-sensitive agency of family firms. To further investigate the pivotal role of family firm management as a location and expansion agents, as embedded gatekeepers, and as experienced preceptors. In this sense, considering the three types of spaces described above, further research is needed to better understand the multi-spatial management coordination challenges that emerge for family managers: (1) optimizing the concentration and dispersion of economic activities within and across locations; (2) orchestrating proximity and distance between individuals in family, intrafirm, and interfirm networks; (3) designing a family firm image that balances between immersion and misconception.

In terms of the research on meso-foundations, which rests on the ideas of family firms' spatial embeddedness (proximity) and the impact of this embeddedness on regional factors and processes, future studies should assume the challenge of measuring regional factors and regional familiness factors (i.e. those factors that are specific to family firms' territorial embeddedness to capture the family essence of regional factors), which will require specific methodological approaches such as comparative regional analysis. Additionally, since there is heterogeneity among family firms across economic spaces, future research can explore how family firms' spatial embeddedness creates, develops, and/ or destroys regional assets. Moreover, it is also necessary to better understand how family firms' spatial embeddedness boosts or hinders regional processes. These research efforts require scholars to account for the proximity dimensions that accelerate or slow down processes in meso-scale regional settings (e.g. industrial districts, clusters, and innovative milieus, among others).

Finally, because research on the macro-foundations rests upon comparing different scales (e.g. regions or provinces), future research should explore and analyse the extent to which family firms explain the uneven development, prosperity, and decline within and across regions and nations. To further advance in this research line, scholars need to define how to measure family firms' aggregate effect on regional economic and social development in terms of productivity, internationalization, and employment. In this sense, future investigations should focus on spatial agglomerations and the prevalence of family firms.

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