

Navigating Organizational Politics in Indonesian Family Owned Health Service SMEs: Non-Family Employees' Lived Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how non-family employees in Indonesian family-owned health service SMEs interpret, experience, and respond to organizational politics rooted in kinship dominance, hierarchical privileges, and decision-making asymmetry. The study also examines how these dynamics shape employee well-being, psychological safety, and organizational outcomes. A descriptive phenomenological approach was employed to capture the lived experiences of non-family employees. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and audit trail documentation. The findings reveal three interconnected dynamics: (1) perceived inequality arising from kin-based favoritism and inconsistent sanctions; (2) constrained voice and role ambiguity due to opaque decision-making structures; and (3) emotional fatigue, disengagement, and reduced organizational commitment among non-family employees. Despite these challenges, some employees develop adaptive coping mechanisms, including emotional distancing and selective compliance. The study is limited by its single-site design. Future research should explore comparative cases across sectors to generalize the model of political dynamics in family business health services.

INTRODUCTION

Family businesses are one of the most dominant organizational forms in the small and medium enterprise (MSME) sector in Indonesia, including in the healthcare sector, such as primary clinics, medical equipment businesses, and small medical service units. A key characteristic of family businesses is the intertwining of kinship roles and formal managerial structures, creating a complex informal power arena. Numerous studies have shown that the internal dynamics of family businesses are driven not only by economic logic or managerial rationality, but also by emotions, social identities, and family power structures (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Chrisman et al., 2005; Hjorth & Dawson, 2023).

In the context of healthcare MSMEs, family influence tends to be stronger in decision-making structures due to the high-trust, service-oriented nature of the sector, and its sensitivity to interpersonal relationships. However, the reality on the ground shows that many family healthcare businesses in Indonesia operate with hidden governance patterns, where decision-making is dominated by certain family figures, which do not always align with the formal organizational structure (Waldkirch et al., 2024). This situation creates a dynamic organizational political landscape. Family conflict, emotional preferences, and favoritism can influence the flow of healthcare services and the work experiences of non-family employees (Ferris et al., 2002; Ahsan & Rahman, 2023).

One relevant framework for understanding this phenomenon is Socioemotional Wealth (SEW), which is the family's drive to maintain identity, control, and emotional continuity within their business (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). However, recent research suggests that SEW is not always unified or harmonious. In many family businesses in developing countries, SEW can be fragmented across family members, resulting in inconsistent direction, latent conflict, and relational tensions (García-Ramos et al., 2024; De Massis et al., 2023).

This fragmentation of SEW has important implications for non-family employees. Recent studies have shown that they often face role ambiguity, negative emotions, and pressure to “neutralize” family conflict (Brinker & Hack, 2024). Furthermore, they face uncertainty when formal authority is at odds with the emotional authority of the family owner, resulting in inconsistencies in policies and performance appraisals (Rondi & Keller, 2022).

In healthcare organizations, complexity increases because non-family employees often serve as liaisons between family owners, healthcare professionals, and patients. They are required to maintain operational stability amidst changing family political dynamics (Kammerlander et al., 2023). Many of them ultimately develop adaptive strategies, such as strategic neutrality, understanding family emotional dynamics, and maintaining relational distance for psychological safety.

Theoretically and empirically, significant research gaps remain. Most family business research focuses on the manufacturing or trade sectors, while literature on the dynamics of family politics and the experiences of non-family employees in the healthcare sector is very limited—especially in developing countries like Indonesia. There has been no in-depth phenomenological research

exploring how non-family employees interpret and navigate the fragmentation of family power, emotions, and organizational politics in healthcare MSMEs.

Therefore, this research is important to:

1. Broaden understanding of family power dynamics and organizational politics in the healthcare sector.
2. Enriching the SEW theory and non-family employee identity through the perspective of the Indonesian context.
3. Offers empirical contributions regarding how non-family employees manage psychological and structural uncertainty in family health organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Business in the Context of Health Service SMEs

Family businesses are the most dominant organizational form in Indonesia's MSME sector, including in healthcare services such as primary clinics, independent practices, and medical equipment retail businesses. In family businesses, ownership and managerial control are closely intertwined, so operational decisions are heavily influenced by the values, emotions, and relationships between family members. Classical literature confirms that these characteristics create a unique dynamic of a blend of economic rationality and social values rooted in family identity (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Chrisman et al., 2005). Recent research shows that in developing countries like Indonesia, these characteristics are further reinforced by informal ownership structures, a paternalistic culture, and reliance on family authority figures (Hjorth & Dawson, 2023). In the healthcare sector, these dynamics are even more complex due to the industry's high-trust nature, ethical standards, and service quality. Many healthcare MSMEs in Indonesia are organized through what's known as hidden governance, where decision-making processes don't always follow formal structures but are heavily influenced by specific figures within the owner's family (Waldkirch et al., 2024). This structure often creates uncertainty for employees, especially those not related to the owner.

Organizational Politics in Family Businesses

Organizational politics refers to informal activities aimed at influencing decision-making processes to obtain resources, personal gain, or power (Ferris et al., 2002). In family businesses, organizational politics are heavily influenced by emotional relationships, a history of family conflict, and unequal role distribution, creating a more complex political arena than in non-family organizations. Research shows that family favoritism, conflict between family members, and the dominance of central figures can influence operational policies, reward systems, and promotion processes (Ahsan & Rahman, 2023). In the context of healthcare MSMEs, the impact is even more significant because biased decisions affect not only internal employees but also the quality of patient care. Organizational politics in family healthcare businesses are often emotional, personal, and unpredictable, increasing uncertainty for non-family employees.

Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) and the Fragmentation of Family Power

Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) is an important concept that explains the tendency of family business owners to maintain emotional control, family identity, and psychological continuity within their businesses (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). SEW emphasizes that family goals are not solely profit, but also symbolic and emotional values. However, recent research suggests that SEW is not always harmonious. García-Ramos et al. (2024) and De Massis et al. (2023) show that SEW in family businesses is often fragmented among family members, particularly when there are differing perceptions regarding the organization's direction or economic interests. This fragmentation results in policy inconsistencies, latent conflicts, and authority struggles that directly impact business operations.

In the healthcare sector, SEW fragmentation can impact service standards, supervisory mechanisms, and performance evaluation processes. When formal authority differs from the emotional authority of the family, non-family employees find themselves in the ambiguous position of having to adhere to the formal structure while simultaneously understanding the implicit power dynamics within the family.

Non-Family Employees' Experiences in Family Businesses

Non-family employees play a crucial role in stabilizing the operations of family businesses, particularly in the healthcare sector. However, their position is vulnerable because they lack kinship ties that offer political protection. The literature shows that non-family employees often face limited access to information, career uncertainty, and performance appraisal bias (Brinker & Hack, 2024; Rondi & Keller, 2022). Phenomenological research in family businesses also shows that non-family employees often mediate various internal family interests, while also serving as liaisons between the owner, medical staff, and patients. This pressure leads to emotional consequences such as work stress, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of being unappreciated (Kammerlander et al., 2023). They must also employ coping strategies such as emotional distancing, strategic neutrality, or situational compliance to maintain psychological safety.

Indonesian Perspectives and the Lack of Local Literature

Research on family businesses in Indonesia has largely focused on the trade or manufacturing sectors. Meanwhile, literature on healthcare MSMEs remains limited, particularly exploring the political dynamics of families and the emotional experiences of non-family employees. Furthermore, Indonesia's paternalistic and collectivist cultural context exacerbates family power dynamics, directly impacting healthcare operations. The lack of in-depth qualitative research, particularly phenomenological research, creates a significant research gap. Few studies have explored how non-family employees interpret family power structures, manage psychological distress, and develop coping strategies in the face of managerial uncertainty in healthcare MSMEs.

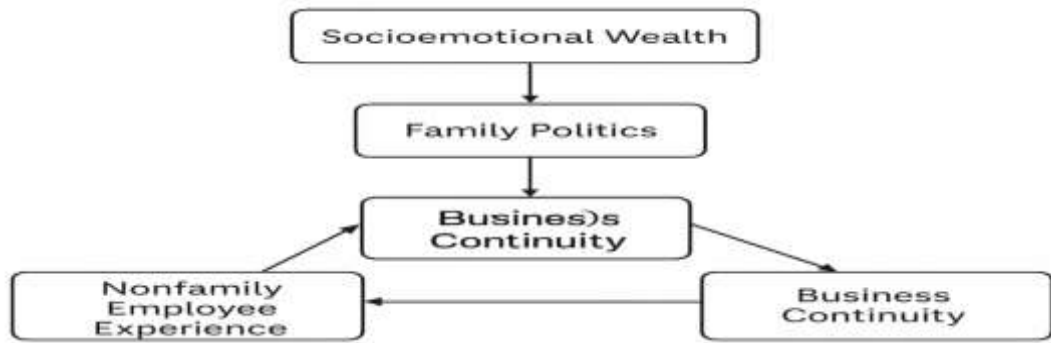


Figure 1 Family Bussiness Interralationship

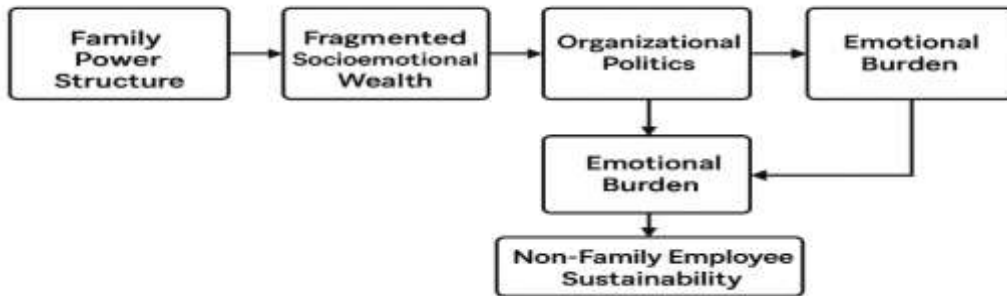


Figure 2 Family Power Structure

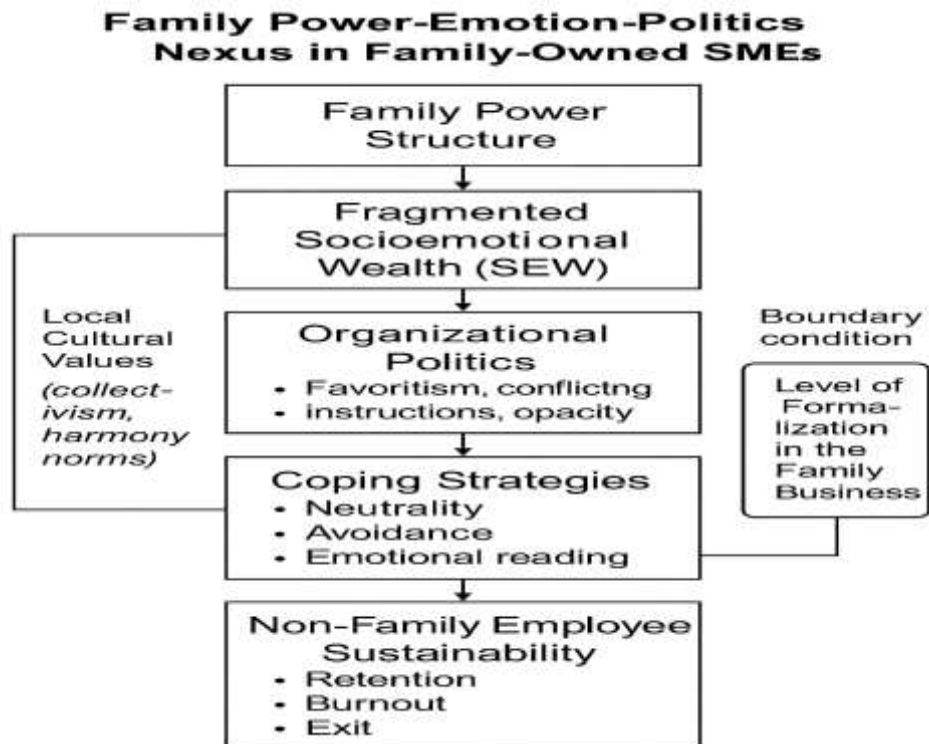


Figure 3 Family Power Emotion Politics

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design, which aims to capture the meaning of the lived experiences of non-family employees in dealing with the dynamics of organizational politics, the fragmentation of family power, and emotional uncertainty in healthcare MSMEs. The descriptive phenomenological approach was chosen because it is appropriate for understanding phenomena that are subjective, complex, and related to the structure of individual consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a rich and in-depth description of how informants interpret power relations, favoritism, and their emotional experiences.

Research Location and Organizational Context

The research was conducted at a family-run healthcare MSME in Indonesia with an informal organizational structure. The owner has several family members working in administrative and operational roles, while others are non-family employees. This context is relevant because there are striking differences in communication patterns, decision-making, and treatment between family and non-family employees. This organization is also representative of typical family healthcare businesses in Indonesia, where managerial practices are intertwined with emotional preferences and kinship ties.

Research Participants

The primary participants in this study were non-family employees who had worked at least two years at the MSME. This criterion was chosen to ensure that the informants had sufficient experience to assess family power dynamics, emotional interactions, and the organization's operational structure. A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure that the informants had a depth of experience relevant to the research objectives. While the number of participants was limited, interviews were conducted intensively and in-depth, resulting in rich, layered, and comprehensive narrative data. Despite the limited number of informants, the phenomenological depth enabled detailed explorations that could not be achieved through surveys or superficial interviews.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured format. The interviews lasted over an hour and were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Interview questions focused on the informants' experiences dealing with the owner's family members, perceptions of injustice, emotional dynamics, and coping strategies used in dealing with conflict or uncertain situations. The interview process was conducted flexibly to allow informants to share their personal stories and reflections without rigid structural constraints. In addition to interviews, researchers also used field notes to record nonverbal expressions, emotional shifts, and conversational context not captured in the audio. Field notes helped enrich interpretations and strengthen the credibility of the analysis.

Data Analysis Process

Data analysis was carried out using Colaizzi's seven-step approach, namely:

1. Read the entire transcript to get an overview;
2. Extracting significant statements;
3. Identify the implicit meanings of the statement;
4. Grouping meanings into initial themes;
5. Compile master themes (cluster themes);
6. Integrate findings into a comprehensive phenomenological description;
7. Carry out verification with informants (member checking).

The Colaizzi approach was chosen because it provides a systematic analytical structure but still gives researchers space to interpret informants' experiences in depth and naturally.

Data Validity (Trustworthiness)

This study ensures trustworthiness through four main aspects:

Credibility: Achieved through member checking, triangulation between audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes, and prolonged researcher engagement.

Transferability: The researchers provide a rich description of the organizational context (thick description), so that readers can assess the relevance of the findings to other family business contexts.

Dependability: This is done by recording an audit trail that includes the interview process, initial codes, theme changes, and analytical decisions.

Confirmability: The researcher maintained objectivity through self-reflection (reflexivity) to minimize bias, especially since the researcher has experience in health service management.

Ethical Considerations of Research

The entire research process adhered to ethical principles of social research. Informants' identities were disguised to maintain confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained from the interviews. Data was stored securely and used only for scientific research purposes.

RESEARCH RESULTS

A phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts reveals the complex dynamics of non-family employees' experiences in a family-owned healthcare MSME. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), these experiences are interpreted not simply as empirical events but as constructions of meaning that reveal the power structures, emotional relationships, and organizational politics that shape daily work life. From the in-depth exploration process, seven main themes were identified that were interrelated and reflected the structural challenges experienced by non-family employees.

Outsider Position And Structural Exploitation Experience

One of the most fundamental experiences that emerged was the feeling of being positioned as an "outsider," a relational status that influences how they

are treated within the organization. Participants described how employees who are not related by blood often receive greater workloads and demands. "*Outsiders are more exploited.*"

Informant 01

MSMEs

This statement indicates the existence of a kinship-based hierarchical structure, which indirectly regulates the division of labor and performance appraisal. In a phenomenological context, this experience is understood not only as an inequality of tasks, but as a concrete social boundary formation: non-family employees recognize that they operate within a system that prioritizes family identity as the center of legitimacy. This condition creates the interpretation that anything done by non-family employees will always be under the shadow of suspicion or higher requirements of proof compared to family members.

Like-Dislike Politics As An Instrument Of Organizational Power

The second theme highlights how likes and dislikes become an informal mechanism that influences various organizational decisions. Participants emphasized that personal relationships determine everything from performance appraisals to the acceptance of reports. "*The like and dislike factor is high obviously.*"

Informant 11

This experience demonstrates that the organization is not run through a meritocratic system, but rather through subjective preferences. In the IPA analysis, this emerges as a perception that professional values are not the primary basis for decision-making. This situation leads to an affective power structure: decisions are not neutral, but rather depend on emotional closeness to the business owner.

Furthermore, participants said:

"The owner only wants to listen to reports from family members... all reports are considered true."

Informant 1

11 MSMEs

This situation indicates that access to ownership carries high political value. The family serves as the gatekeeper of information, and non-family employees do not have equal access to influence policy. This structure creates a deep-rooted imbalance.

"A Kingdom Within A Kingdom": A Layer-Layed Power Structure Within Family-Owned SMEs

The following participant's statement provides a symbolic illustration of how power works in family MSMEs:

"You must not create a kingdom within a kingdom."

Informant 3

Within the IPA framework, this statement reflects a power dynamic that is not only hierarchical but also fragmented. Each family member has their own

“domain of power,” and non-family employees must be careful not to appear to usurp any family member's sphere of influence. Instructions that are changing, conflicting, and dependent on which family members are involved in the decision indicate that power in family MSMEs is personalistic, not procedural. This results in a workspace full of ambiguity and uncertainty of direction.

“More words are conveyed so that it becomes more flexible... so that other fields can be ACC, this one not.”

Informant 4

This quote shows that the interpretation of information is used as a tool of control.

Family Conflicts That Inflate The Workspace And Disturb Operational Consistency

Conflict between family members emerged as a source of organizational instability. Participants described:

“The tension between the brothers was high... not conducive to his efforts.”

(lines 94–101)

This experience indicates that family conflict not only impacts internal relationships but also impacts program implementation, task flow, and service quality. This conflict creates intense emotional tensions, often spilling over from the private sphere to the operational sphere.

In a phenomenological interpretation, family conflict creates emotional dynamics that non-family employees must “read” and anticipate on a daily basis. Without a clear decision-making structure, non-family employees must navigate a workspace fraught with sudden changes and policy inconsistencies.

Rejection of Criticism and Confidence of Operational Information

Participants explained that information disclosure was uneven, and criticism was often perceived as a threat:

“The finances aren’t transparent... if I talk about it, they’ll immediately yell at me.”

Informant 5

This phenomenon indicates a defensive mechanism within the family owner. Criticism from non-family employees is treated as a boundary violation, not as professional feedback. Structurally, this indicates that the organization lacks a robust two-way dialogue system, resulting in a weak evaluation culture.

Reward & Punishment Injustice As A Structural Pattern

Double standards in sanctioning emerged repeatedly in the narratives. Participants asserted:

“If the family is at fault... there are no sanctions.”

Informant 4

This statement demonstrates a consistent pattern of unequal application of behavioral correction mechanisms. This reinforces the notion that family employees are outside the reach of formal regulatory systems, while non-family employees are subject to more stringent systems. From an IPA perspective, this

experience creates a sense of moral uncertainty, where non-family employees feel they are in a space that does not allow them to fight for a sense of justice.

Non-Family Employees' Adaptation Strategies in Dealing with Family Political Uncertainty

In the face of various tensions, non-family employees develop adaptive strategies to maintain their psychological and professional stability. Although not expressed directly, narrative patterns indicate a tendency to:

- Keep your distance from conflict,
- Be careful in your actions,
- Reduce excessive initiative for the sake of positional security.

These conditions create a form of "safe working mode," where employees focus more on avoiding political risks than on innovating.

Analytical interpretation shows that this strategy was formed not because of laziness, but as an adaptive response to an unpredictable family system.

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the research findings by linking them to the literature on organizational politics, family business behavior, and employees' lived experiences, particularly in the context of healthcare MSMEs. The discussion demonstrates how the experiences of non-family employees reveal the complex interplay between kinship-based power, informal organizational practices, and family emotional dynamics within the business.

Outsider Position and Intensity of Kinship Politics

Findings indicate that non-family employees experience different treatment than family members—primarily in the form of heavier work demands, tighter control, and less legitimacy in decision-making.

Example quote:

"Outsiders are more exploited."

Informant 3

This phenomenon aligns with research on family embeddedness, which states that family organizations inherently construct identity boundaries between insiders (family) and outsiders (non-family). The literature explains that family members are often perceived as more "owned" and more trustworthy, so outsiders are automatically required to prove themselves more. These findings reinforce the theory that power relations in family-owned MSMEs are not only structural but also emotional. Outsider status is not simply a personal category, but a control mechanism that defines who is trustworthy and who must be monitored.

Like-Dislike as an Organizational Political Mechanism

This study found that subjective preferences (like-dislike) have a significant influence on operational decisions.

Participant quotes:

"The like and dislike factor is high... obviously."

informant 3

The literature on organizational politics notes that in small, family-based organizations, subjectivity often trumps formal systems. Emotional connections are more decisive than SOPs, work quality, or customer performance. In the context of the interviews, even budget proposals or minor decisions can be influenced by the personal preferences of certain family members. This supports previous studies that suggest the family often serves as an "informal authority unit" that supersedes professional management functions. Thus, the findings of this study confirm that family MSMEs present a political structure based on personal closeness, not professional transparency.

"A Kingdom Within A Kingdom": Fragmentation Of Power Within The Family

One of the most powerful findings is the concept of a "kingdom within a kingdom," where each family member has their own domain of power. This is reflected in the quote:

"You must not create a kingdom within a kingdom."

Informant 1

This statement emphasizes that non-family employees must navigate the differing interests and instructions of various family members. Family business literature refers to this phenomenon as multiple authority centers, which results in:

- Changing policies,
- Inconsistent decisions,
- Conflicts between family figures enter the operational realm.

Field findings directly confirm this theory. Non-family employees must adjust to a dynamic that lacks a clear command structure. This results in working conditions fraught with organizational uncertainty, where stability depends on emotional family relationships, not on management systems.

Family Conflict and Its Implications on Operational Consistency

Based on the findings, conflict between family members has a major influence on the direction of the organization, for example in programs that do not run, delayed policies, and inconsistent tasks.

Quote:

"The tension between the brothers was high... not conducive to his efforts." Informant 3

Family business literature emphasizes that conflict within families is not always merely personal; it often hinders organizational processes, especially when family members occupy strategic positions but lack managerial professionalism.

The findings of this study validate this perspective. Family conflict results in:

- Erosion Of Trust Between Staff,
- Uncertainty In Decision Making,
- And Potential Role Ambiguity For Non-Family Employees.

This shows that operational stability is very fragile when the management structure is controlled by emotional relationships.

Reward–Punishment Inequality as an Instrument of Power

One of the most striking findings is the disparity in the application of rewards and punishments. Non-family employees often receive harsher reprimands than family members, even if their offenses are the same or even less serious.

Quote:

"If the family is at fault... there are no sanctions." Informant 1

This phenomenon illustrates the moral double standard often portrayed in family business literature. Family members enjoy protected privileges, so their mistakes tend to be forgiven or overlooked. Meanwhile, non-family employees are held to a higher professional standard. This finding strengthens the theory that structural injustice is a common characteristic of family organizations that have not adopted professional management systems.

Adaptation Strategy: Political Navigation as a Survival Skill

Non-family employees develop adaptive strategies to cope with uncertain organizational environments, such as:

- Avoiding conflict,
- Holding back opinions,
- Follow the changing flow of decisions,
- Focus on job security rather than innovation.

In science, this is called sense-making adaptation, which is how individuals construct life strategies in systems that are not completely rational. This phenomenon supports the theory that in family organizations, non-family employees tend to reduce political risks for the sake of their continued position.

Discussion Summary

This chapter shows that:

1. Outsider status shapes experiences of structural inequality.
2. Family politics becomes the center of organizational power.
3. Subjective-based decisions create policy inconsistencies.
4. Non-family employees must navigate emotional family relationships as a survival mechanism.

These findings broaden our understanding of how power, emotions, and family identity shape work life in healthcare MSMEs.

Theoretical Implications

This research makes a number of important theoretical contributions:

1. Broaden understanding of organizational politics in the context of family MSMEs. The findings show that organizational politics in family businesses is not only related to internal competition, but is also closely related to the family's emotional structure and kinship dynamics.
2. Strengthen the concept of “dual authority system” in family business. The research findings show how organizational decisions are influenced by two forces: formal structures (SOPs, rules) and informal structures (family relations). These often collide, creating ambiguity for non-family employees.

3. Provides new empirical evidence for the theory of identity and sense-making in the family environment. Non-family employees engage in distinctive sense-making in the face of family politics, thereby expanding the IPA literature on workers' emotional experiences in the context of unequal power relations.
4. Offers the concept of "emotional-political work environment." The combination of family conflict, relational subjectivity, and policy uncertainty creates an emotionally and politically charged work environment – a concept that can be sharpened in the study of family business in the Southeast Asian context.

Practical Implications

This research provides practical recommendations for family MSMEs, particularly in the health sector:

1. The importance of building a professional management system. Family-owned MSMEs need to separate the family and operational spheres so that policies are more consistent, objective, and fair.
2. There needs to be a transparent reward-punishment system. Input, criticism, and mistakes should be assessed equally without considering kinship status so that work motivation increases and conflict is reduced.
3. Strengthening two-way communication channels. Formal communication mechanisms need to be developed so that information is not monopolized by certain family members who have the potential to distort messages.
4. Training for family owners on professionalism and governance. Training in conflict management, decision-making, and human resource management will help family MSMEs become more stable and sustainable.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explores the experiences of non-family employees working in a family-based healthcare MSME. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study demonstrates that work dynamics in family businesses are shaped by a complex interplay of kinship-based power, informal organizational practices, emotional politics, and identity negotiations between "family" and "non-family." Core findings indicate that non-family employees often occupy structural outsider positions, where treatment, expectations, and access to organizational decisions are heavily influenced by kinship status. Subjective preferences (likes and dislikes), internal family conflict, and unclear lines of authority create double standards in reward and punishment and fuel job insecurity.

Furthermore, the owner's family serves not only as a formal authority but also as a political actor, controlling the flow of information and establishing internal legitimacy. This situation forces non-family employees to develop adaptation strategies to maintain job stability, including reducing initiative, maintaining emotional distance, and adapting behavior to the family's political dynamics. Overall, this study confirms that work experiences in family MSMEs cannot be separated from the layered structure of family relations, which shape

the power system, communication patterns, and emotional configurations within the organization.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Limitations of The Research

This study has several limitations, namely:

- Involving one main informant so that the experiences explored are in-depth but do not represent all variations in the conditions of family MSMEs.
- Focusing on one healthcare MSME, generalizations to other sectors need to be made with caution.
- Using IPA, which is interpretive in nature, so that the research results are very dependent on the depth of meaning and reflection of the informant and the researcher's analysis.

These limitations are normal for phenomenological research, but still need to be noted in academic studies.

Suggestions For Further Research

To enrich understanding, future research can:

- Involve more participants, both family and non-family, to capture a variety of perspectives.
- Using data triangulation methods (observation, internal documents).
- Analyzing the dynamics of cross-generational family conflict.
- Comparing family MSMEs in the health sector with the trade/services sector to see patterns of similarities and differences.

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