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Gender bias in Successor Selection: Case Studies from France

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Aim of the paper

Family business research has found that daughters are less likely to be considered as viable succession candidates (Ip and Jacobs, 2006; Martin, 2001; Dawley et al., 2004; Vera and Dean, 2005; Wang, Barrett, Walker and Redmond, 2008). Indeed it appears that the phenomenon of ‘primogeniture’ - whereby sons are favored for succession - largely still prevails (Curimbaba, 2002; Dumas, 1992; 1998; Haberman and Danes, 2007; Keating and Little, 1997). In light of the expected increase in turnover of ownership in family business in the coming decade, it is important to understand the issues facing women in the succession process. In this paper, we respond to family business scholars call for more research on gender and succession (Vera and Dean, 2005; Wang, 2010; Constantinidis and Nelson, 2009) and, like our fellow scholars in entrepreneurship, advocate more postmodern and constructionist feminist theorizing. We draw on feminist theory to 1) critically reflect on previous research addressing gender and succession in family business and 2) guide our empirical exploration of the role that gender plays in successor selection.

Contribution to the literature



First we contribute to the theorizing on gender and family business succession by applying a feminist lens to extant research. This has broader implications for family business research by suggesting that certain modes of theorizing and methodological choices have been favored and that other (post-modern and constructionist) avenues of research warrant further investigation. Second, we contribute to the understanding of gender and successor selection by emphasizing the importance of looking beyond women's essential characteristics and socialization as major explanatory factors. We also point to an interesting link with recent work on family entrepreneurial teams (Disca Cruz et al, 2012), whereby daughters may not be deemed suitable successors but have been aided and abetted in beginning their own businesses.

Data and results

In this study, we seek to look at how successor selection in family business is gendered. A multiple case study methodology was thus selected as the most appropriate research method in this instance. Case studies were sought where “the processes being studied are most likely to occur” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 370), which, for this study, were family businesses in a succession context. We chose various family configurations: instead of confining the study to families with potential daughter successors, we included a variety of male-female sibling configurations. We have a single case of father/daughter succession and five of father/son succession going from the second to the fourth generation. In four of the five cases, we held interviews with at least two family members (the one exception is the family firm Machine Parts Inc. where we spoke only with the daughter, Julie (the successor), after the premature death of her father (‘the predecessor’, Maurice). We interviewed 12 family business members (10 male and 2 female) from our five different cases. All interviews were later transcribed in full before being uploaded to Nvivo 10, a qualitative software package to facilitate data analysis.

We demonstrate the centrality of the family -through its norms, roles and rituals - in the patterning of gendered succession processes. We show how the family contributes to the separation and hierarchical ranking of male and female (Ahl, 2002; Constantinidis, 2010), making it more difficult for women to become successors. Finally, we provide an insight into family business in the French context, where while economic participation rates of women in the labor market are high, gender inequality among siblings prevails in the successor selection

process. Hence our study responds to the call to globalize the body of research in family business (Hoy, 2003).

Discussion and practical implications

Our case studies showed how daughters are often positioned as uninterested in succeeding the family business, both by their male family relations and themselves. Interest in the successor role is heavily gendered -daughters are presented as disinterested. We found that respondent's notions of management were also heavily gendered. Our case analysis thus points to the research possibilities of disregarding binary categorization of men and women, daughters and sons in family business. A postmodern gender lens focuses on 'doing gender' and can help lend insight into how parents choose between siblings, regardless of sex. As in the case of French Resto where the less 'masculine' son plays support role and the 'winner' becomes the successor. In Ice and Dairy, Nelly described herself in 'masculine' traits and positioned her brother as more feminine in his approach to management. Nelly was the preferred successor. We also think that it is significant that while three daughters in our cases did not become successors, they were subsequently supported in other entrepreneurial pursuits, albeit more 'feminine' sectors (horse-riding school; recruitment services; hotel business). While research has started to emerge addressing the issue of family entrepreneurial teams, we believe that the gender dynamic in family entrepreneurial teams is also worth addressing. We also look at the issue of socialization, or initiation into the family business. We found that differences do exist when using sex as a defining category. The initiation and exposure of siblings to the family business is gendered, with all sons having spent significant time in the family business in childhood and adolescence. However we also found that the father's support of his daughters integration into the family business, deemed of unparalleled importance (Dumas, 1998) has its limits. While Nelly perceived herself as her father's 'preferred successor', she didn't feel happy assuming a leadership role. Too much of the current literature treats gender inequality as a set of internalized stereotypes without consulting the exogenous reality of a social structure that holds women in an unequal position (Scott et al, 2012; Ahl, 2006). Julie also defies socialization theories, given that she succeeded despite her lack of exposure to the business.

We identified the importance of family as a prime site of gender inequality reproduction. Indeed we believe that our findings illuminate the role of the family as a site where processes



and practices of gendering reproduce social conditions of domination and subordination or potential emancipation (Calas, Smircich and Bourne, 2009). We document a clear patriarchal discourse where business is presented as ‘a man’s world’. We found many metaphors presenting business performance, leadership and succession as masculine territory. Family member roles are traditional in our five cases, the mother is primary caregiver and her role in the family business is at best glossed over (Ice and Dairy, French Resto) or not mentioned at all (Build and Sell; Machine Parts). Family member rituals demonstrate the exclusion of women via ‘after hours’ discussions over cigars in the office; hunting trips at the weekends or family dinners where women sit separately to men. In Ice and Dairy, an explicit family business ‘rule’ dictated the exclusion of ‘wives’ from the family business, as there were ‘less problems that way’. Family member roles as well as family rituals, routines and rules emerge as extremely important themes in describing the functioning of the family business. We propose that the gendering of these roles, rituals and routines strongly contributes to the successor selection process – from both the predecessor and the potential successor’s point of view.

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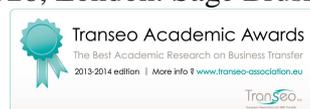
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