

**NAVIGATING THE FAMILY BUSINESS: A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF DAUGHTERS'  
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

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# NAVIGATING THE FAMILY BUSINESS: A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF DAUGHTERS' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

## Abstract

*Previous research has explored the difficulties daughters experience entering family business management, but few studies have focused on daughters' experiences of taking over a firm. A gender-as-a-variable perspective has been widely adopted, and the gendering of succession remains understudied. This article addresses this gap by conducting a gendered analysis of how daughters navigate family businesses and construct identities as family business leaders. Using narrative analysis and case study research, our findings suggest that daughters construct and negotiate their gender and leadership identities in their interactions with others by opposing, expanding, and making use of the gendered scripts available to them. They move between concealing their leader identity and producing a masculinised identity as a strong owner. This necessitates tempered disruption and switching between different identities in different contexts. We conclude by discussing the theoretical aspects of a gendered perspective as they relate to identity construction in family businesses.*

## Introduction

While it has been established that gender influences processes and relationships within family businesses (Jimenez, 2009), the issue of how gender influences succession processes remains understudied (Glover, 2014; Ip and Jacobs, 2006). Successful succession is reported to be critical to securing the family business across generations and to ensuring family harmony (Gilding, Gregory and Cosson, 2013). Hence, succession is a key topic in family business research (Chrisman, Chua and Sharma, 1998; De Massis, Chua and Chrisman, 2008; Gilding et al., 2013; Helin and Jabri, 2015; Lam, 2011; Litz, Pearson and Litchfield, 2012; Sharma, Chrisman and Chua, 2003; Zahra and Sharma, 2004). However, existing research has been criticised for studying certain key events in a relatively narrow time frame, prompting calls for studies viewing successions as interactive, dynamic, and often lengthy social processes (Lam, 2011; Salvato and Corbetta, 2013). This is particularly important when it comes to gender, since the relationship between the incumbent and successor is cultivated over a long time period and the succession process is gendered from the start (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014; Daspit, Holt, Chrisman and Long, 2015).

Gender issues in family firms have primarily taken a gender-as-a-variable perspective (Henry, Foss and Ahl, 2015). Research has shown that women are unlikely to be named successors and has examined the roles of daughters in succession as well as women's invisibility (Jimenez, 2009; Martin, 2001; Wang, 2010), which is amplified by the differences in the tasks women and men perform, women's mediation of the family and the family business, and women's (sometimes unpaid) contributions (Jimenez, 2009). The primogeniture norm, according to which the firstborn male child will eventually take over the family firm, remains influential (Llano and Olguin, 1986). Daughters have been found to be denied leadership roles and to settle for less influential roles in the firm, or to self-select out of the business and into careers elsewhere (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014, 2015; Jimenez, 2009; Wang, 2010). Existing research ensures we know a lot about the barriers daughters face (Barrett, 2014; Constantinidis and Nelson, 2009; Dumas, 1989; Humphreys, 2013); however, only a few studies have analysed cases where women do take over the family firm (Humphreys, 2013; Remery, Matser and Flören, 2014). Importantly, there has been surprisingly little focus on the gendering of succession processes (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014). This study addresses this gap by examining the processes through which daughters become successors to the family business, asking the question: *How do daughters navigate becoming successors to the family business and construct their identities as family business leaders?*

To examine this research question, this study takes a doing-gender perspective (West and Zimmerman, 1987). In examining the succession process as gendered, we see gender as constructed (and co-constructed) in interactions between actors (between daughters, fathers, mothers, brothers, and other stakeholders within and outside the family) continuously negotiating and renegotiating what gender is (e.g. Gherardi and Poggio, 2007). Gender is not a property of the female successor but of the relationship between daughters and the gendered assumptions that are socially embedded in family business practices (Stead, 2015).

Further, we analyse the succession process as a gendered identity construction process because for the main actors the succession process involves adjusting to new social identities and learning new roles (Long and Chrisman, 2014). We rely on the social constructivist view of identities, understanding them as emergent and fluid and as a process of becoming (Down, 2006; Down and Warren, 2008; Hytti, 2005; Kasperova and Kitching, 2014; Watson, 2009; Warren, 2004). Within this view, identities can overlap, enrich one another, and be in conflict (Chasserio, Pailot and Poroli, 2014; Down and Warren, 2008; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Hytti, 2005). We also lean on the social theory of belonging (May, 2011; Stead, 2015), arguing that a key element in identity construction is creating a sense of belonging linked to self-confirmation (Hogg, 2006; Marlow and McAdam, 2015).

The article contributes to the family business literature by introducing gendered identity construction as an important element in understanding succession processes. Hence, it adds to the literature about daughters becoming successors (Jimenez, 2009) by focusing on the processes they follow when taking over the firm. Furthermore, we add to the literature on identity by examining the role of gendered identity construction in family business succession. Methodologically, the article contributes to the family business literature by developing a method that combines narrative analysis with case studies.

### **Gendered identity construction in family firms**

We acknowledge Nentwich and Kelan's (2013) argument:

In order to be categorized as a man or a woman, interactional work has to be done. This work is under constant risk of gender assessment as one is accountable for 'doing gender'. According to West and Zimmerman, one can never **not** do gender, because it is such an integral part of individual identity as well as societal structures. (p.122, emphasis in the original).

Hence, we assume gender is a fundamental social practice and part of an individual's identity (Hamilton, 2014), that is also present in family businesses. This view implies that men also do gender. The difference between men and women in terms of doing gender are the scripts accessible to men: most men relate to practices constructing masculinity (Connell, 1995), and business life is marked by masculinity (Alsos, Steen-Jensen and Ljunggren, 2011; Alsos and Ljunggren, 2015) consequently, such scripts are less accessible to women.

Research on identity is particularly relevant to studying the successor's takeover and navigation of the family business since it bridges *'individual agency, choice and creation of self, on the one hand, and history, culture and social shaping of identities on the other'* (Watson, 2009: 426). Within the family business, the question of identity and the ability to successfully construct a legitimate and credible identity for the different stakeholders, including the subject him or herself, is far more complex than in non-family businesses. This is due to the more numerous group memberships and roles that are salient, and relationship ties that are more complex in family businesses than in non-family businesses (Milton, 2008). The need to understand successions as interactive, dynamic, and often lengthy social processes involving multiple stakeholders with multiple roles has only recently been identified (Daspit et al., 2015; Lam, 2011; Long and Chrisman, 2014; Salvato and Corbetta, 2013). Succession is a process that exposes different perceptions (Helin and Jabri, 2015; Lam, 2011; Sharma et al., 2003) and related challenges to be resolved. Within the family business context, entrepreneurial identity is constructed in relation to being both a family member and an individual (Bjursell and Melin, 2011). Accordingly, daughters need to construct an identity as a family business leader that is legitimate for themselves and confirmed by others in order to be able to navigate into the leadership position. Socialisation is seen as an important vehicle for members of the younger generation aspiring to management and building an identity as a future family business manager (García-Álvarez, López-Sintas and Gonzalvo, 2002). Gender stereotypes mean it is

easier for men to identify with the external social identity of a family business leader than it is for women (Díaz-García and Welter, 2013; Lewis, 2011;).

A key element in the identity construction is creating a sense of belonging linked to self-confirmation (Hogg, 2006; Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Belonging as a concept connects the individual to the social (May, 2011; Stead, 2015) and illuminates the ways daughters in family businesses feel that they fit with the business or are out of place, are insiders or outsiders, or accepted or marginalised. May (2011) delineates belonging as an apt concept for exploring the relationship between the individual and society because it is person-centred, focuses on the everyday, and reveals that relationship as complex and dynamic. In the succession and family business context, it illuminates the complex gender dynamics and effects of performing belonging (Stead, 2015). The gendered identity view removes the constraints of investigating as separate processes the ways daughters are either socialised into the family business or are not (Garzía-Álvarez et al., 2002) or the ways daughters are given or denied the opportunity to demonstrate their readiness, skills, and competences to take over and run the firm (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014; Jimenez, 2009; Wang, 2010). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics between daughters seeking to take over family business management and construct an identity as a family business successor and leader within their social context, including the business, family, and environment (Stead, 2015). The processes of identity construction and belonging are not about being formally appointed to a position, such as that of CEO in a family business, but of feeling at ease with it and becoming accepted, recognised, and included in the family business (Marshall, 2002). It also involves individual agency and is connected to the identity and performing belonging, which involves the use of legitimacy practices and identity work (May, 2011; Marlow and McAdam, 2015).

## **Methodology**

Inspired by a recent article by Henry et al. (2015), we suggest a methodological innovation in this article by combining narrative and case study approaches. Narratives can be understood as ‘*processes of “practicing gender”*’, (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007:25) where gender is produced non-reflexively and interactively with other actors (see also Hamilton, 2014; Martin, 2003, 2006;). Second, as suggested by Bruner (1990) and Polkinghorne (1991), for example, narratives highlight cultural understandings of appropriate ways of behaving within the family firm, give access to any intergenerational tensions, and help to understand the processes of identity construction. In addition, the narrative gives us insights into how the interviewees worked with the interviewer to construct their own life stories and those of their families and businesses (Larty and Hamilton, 2011; Tierney, 2000), while the case studies help frame and interpret those narratives and specifically how the daughters account for their navigation around the gendered expectations in the context of their family businesses. The wider context of the empirical case studies is presented in Appendix 1 to explain the women’s leadership positions and gendered expectations in Finland. The cases selected are at least second-generation family businesses that had undergone a relatively recent succession process. This means that the family members were able to reflect on both past and future decisions with regard to the choice of successors. All firms had employees drawn from outside the family, and two were large firms with more than 250 employees. We used an event-based criterion (Neergaard, 2007) to ensure a purposeful case selection (Patton, 1990, 2005) and sought firms where daughters were (potential) successors. We obtained information from several family members for each case to reflect the perspectives of different stakeholders (De Massis et al., 2008). Our empirical material consists of between one and four interviews per firm conducted in summer 2012 (Table 1). Apart from one interview lasting only 20 minutes (the son in Case A), each interview took between one and two hours.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The interviews were open-ended, and the participants were invited to talk freely on the themes of the family history, significant events and the role of women. Hence, rather than the researcher imposing their gender and succession themes on the participants, these themes emerged in the interviews (Cope, 2005). It is a methodological strength that participants were not asked directly to reflect on the decision making surrounding successions and the role of gender but that the topic of succession processes emerged as the participants narrated their own histories and that of the family business. The interviews therefore generated narrative data (Larty and Hamilton, 2011).

### **Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Initially, all interviews were read, and sections dealing with the role of women and men in the past, the present, or in the future were noted. The analysis focused on the sections related to succession decisions that had been or were about to be taken, or those that talked about the unfolding of events, reflecting the interviewee's understanding of those decisions. The case descriptions combining and triangulating information from the different interviews were constructed to create an overview of each case company and their histories (Appendix 2). Basic information and key events are also summarised in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

In the second step, the interviews with the daughters were each re-analysed and subjected to narrative analysis (Hytti, 2003; Riessman, 1993). We were interested in identifying the narrative causality and plot (Czarniawska, 1998) and how the interviewees constructed their attempts to take over the family businesses. Hence, the research interest focused on interpreting why it made sense for the participants to talk about particular events in the ways that they did. The analysis was focused on the simultaneous practise of gender and family business, and on



the situationally shifting identities (Cope, 2005; Hamilton, 2014). Accordingly, the current research aims to make a methodological contribution to the emerging field of narrative research on family business succession (Dalpiaz, Tracey and Phillips, 2014).

## **Analyses**

### ***Cathy's narrative in CASE A: 'Textile'***

Cathy has always considered it self-evident that she would take over the firm. She had worked in the firm and then moved away before returning to the area where the firm is located in 2008.

But then we made the decision that we are not coming back unless my future is here in the business. And I made it clear that my future is not here if somebody else owns [the firm]. My father [Matt] wanted to sell the company to an outsider, but I didn't let him'.

In 2008, Cathy started to work in the company, but due to the weak economic situation, the succession was not completed until 2011. Then, they had a board meeting where she suggested hiring a new salesman to permit her the time to acquire new customers. She had been discussing the recruitment with her father, but due to an unsuccessful recruitment the previous year, Matt was not keen on making the decision.

Then suddenly, Ollie, the chairman, said that now we'll decide who will be the CEO in this company, and he gave us two hours to decide. Then I said that I won't be a CEO unless I also get some shares.

Cathy chose not to push the CEO decision but assigned the responsibility to Ollie and demanded shares.

Cathy acknowledged her parents' reluctance to see her take over the firm.

When we [in the family] talked about becoming a CEO, Matt said that it's not a job for a mum with small children. And even my mother [Hanna] – she did not want me to become a CEO either, but she knows her daughter – that she has to accept it because it's something that I want.

This excerpt clearly shows the male construction of the CEO position – it is not a job for a mother. But Cathy opposed this gendered script, constructing her identity as a woman and mother in a different way.

The interviewer asked Cathy who she discusses the business with. After suggesting that her husband is an important discussion partner, Cathy spoke of the role of her parents:

And I also talk with Hanna. But I don't talk about all things with her because she easily says no, no, don't try to take everything at the same time, save yourself a little. And then of course I talk with Matt [although previously Cathy had said that it is not easy to discuss with him and she needed to convince him of the need to talk]. When there's a bigger project it starts with us talking. And if there is a consultant coming, I ask him to join because he has the bigger vision. And then I swallow everything that comes along, because he has the habit of having hindsight...I have understood that hindsight is real common in family businesses where they have undergone a succession [laughing].

Despite wishing to take over the firm, Cathy respected her father's knowledge and accepted a subordinate position by relating the decision to common practice in family firms. Her respect for her father was evident when Cathy talked about Matt's identity struggles:

I have thought that it has been difficult for Matt, for his identity that he is no longer the CEO. I have thought that I will print him business cards that say 'chairman of the board'. But I have also thought that I need visibility and now that we have a young woman as a CEO, if that doesn't give you visibility [then what does?] ...So I sent out a press release, and we got quite good visibility. But then my face was everywhere. I have tried to acquire my own authority.

Hence, Cathy found a balance between creating a visible role for her father in the business and publicising her own appointment, and also establishing her authority. Cathy negotiates her father's role in the business to maintain his masculine authority as former CEO and at the same time renegotiates gender as she tries to carve out her own CEO role that fits her other role expectations.

Cathy's idea of not assuming the driver's seat is further explained when she talks about the firm's business in Russia:

I don't have authority there...I haven't been there. They continue working with Matt. I have decided to approach Russia from another angle by working from the sidelines. Making sure that this unit is kept alive so that there is enough work for the machinists [in the Russian production unit]. The contact persons in Russia don't know how much decision-making power I have, and I haven't corrected their views because of the cultural

differences and age difference. I don't see it necessary to...to undermine Matt's credibility there as "Mr. President" to enforce my own. I'd rather work in the background.

Thus, Cathy is concealing her leadership identity in the context of different business cultures and gendered expectations.

Cathy is now the CEO and offers an insight into her way of managing the firm:

It is nice to work in the production [area]. We have one employee who is very quiet but when you start working with him, he tells you all sorts of things. [...] I sit in the open space with others. I've been asked why I don't take the corner office but I think that authority comes from participating the work and knowing what's it all about.

For Cathy, it is important to be among the employees and manage the company from that position, constructing a modern and feminine leadership style.

Cathy strongly identifies with her role in the business and presents the classic entrepreneurial role of being in charge:

I want to participate in all aspects. This is my business, and I have a vision. It is nobody else's. I am more on the same level with Matt than Hanna has ever been. It must be the married couple thing, it is not about if one is a woman or a man. As a young woman it's now easier to approach our clients, all our ten most important clients are women.

Cathy evidently perceives herself to be more equal with her father than with her mother, and she downplays and renegotiates the meaning of (her own) gender in business due to the firm's female clientele. By actively creating differences from both her father and mother, Cathy reconstructs her identity as a female CEO.

### ***Norah's and Nina's narratives in CASE B: 'Engineering'***

The sisters Norah and Nina were interviewed separately, but their narratives reflect and resonate with each other's in many respects. The interviewer began by asking Norah about the main customers, competitors, challenges, and opportunities in the firm *'to get*. Norah replied:

I don't know much more than what's on the website. I have not familiarised myself. We have a CEO who in principle manages the leadership...And we are not like bosses here. We are owners and then we work here.

Nina shared the same idea about hiring a CEO:

Luckily we are so clever that we don't try to do things that we really cannot do. We were not up to running the place. And then we offered him [the CEO] the whole package, gave him the keys. [and she continued later] In the beginning, we visited all our customers, when the CEO was new. But in other ways we don't keep in touch with them. He is in charge and it would be silly to start jumping in.

Both sisters emphasised their own roles as employees and viewed the CEO as the manager and thereby confirmed with gendered expectations that women are subordinate to men. In this plot, they construct secretarial identities for themselves.

Norah discussed their father's death and how the sisters decided to continue running the firm:

When our father died, it was awful. The newspapers wrote about it, and people started calling asking us if we wanted to sell. And we weren't even sure if we had inherited the business or if there were large debts – we had no idea. We contacted the lawyer, who explained that we did indeed own the firm. But all our employees were also freaking out, wondering if we were going to sell the firm or not. It was chaotic. I did not want to sell the firm.

Their mother, Beth, is also an owner, but Norah downplayed her role:

At the turn of the year, we will buy our mother's shares. It is so useless that she is here. She is not interested and doesn't know anything about the firm. And then me and my sister have decided that we don't tell her anything either because she doesn't necessarily understand things the right way, and then she will get stressed if she misunderstands things.

Nina echoes this message:

We have kept our mother out of this... because she does not have an entrepreneurial mindset... We want to buy her out, but it's not certain that she will sell.

Both sisters thus construct the role of their mother as invisible, and not knowledgeable. Both do however acknowledge that they are not fully informed about the business, instead choosing to rely on their hired CEO. Thus, by constructing their role as relatively superior to that of their mother's, they safeguard their legitimacy as business owners.

Norah talks about her own identity in the business:

I consider myself as a regular office worker; definitely not as a boss or manager or entrepreneur. I go to the office every day, and then I go home. The biggest difference now is that I don't have to be there every day. I'm not accountable to anyone. There are others who take care of the work.

Nina expresses similar ideas about their role:

And we are, in principle, doing the same things as before: secretarial work and managing running things, and we try to support the CEO.

The two identities of an owner and mother are also reflected in Nina's narrative:

I just go to work, take care of my job, and then come back home. The only difference is that as an owner, the work day never really ends. In principle, we work all the time. Now when we have kids, it's great that we can take them to kindergarten and fetch them early. We are lucky. But even if we're at home, it doesn't mean that we're not responsible. Sometimes we are in the office very little: we can be there for a few hours and then away for a couple of days.

The sisters' identities as business owners mean they are never really free of responsibility, although having hired a CEO, they have the flexibility to decide when to be at the firm's premises. On the other hand, owning the business makes it possible to construct their identities as mothers.

However, both sisters also portrayed how they had constructed strong decision-making authority in the firm. Norah said:

It is Nina and I who ultimately decide on the investments. We have got the last word. It is our business and, in principle, our money. But it is the CEO who does all the preparations for the investments. We cannot buy any machinery, as we don't know what they're good for.

Here, she aligns with the understanding of (young) women not knowing about machinery and takes a subordinate position. However, Nina also acknowledged that their identities have changed over the years:

I don't know if our employees consider us bosses; it's more like [the CEO] is the boss. It's easier. They are men in their fifties, and we're two women in our twenties, so it's difficult if we suddenly are above them. But there have been occasions where we have drawn the line; they are only our employees. In the beginning, we thought that we'd keep the firm to secure the jobs, but little by little, our thinking has changed: we do not exist for our employees but for our customers.

Thus, with time it became easier for them to identify with the business rather than with the employees, and thereby with an identity as owners and being in charge. Time and gaining experience facilitates constructing a stronger leadership identity.

It is important for both of the sisters to be in the business together, as Norah's narrative suggested:

I like working with my sister. We are very close. This is not my dream job, but we have decided that if we sell the firm, we sell it together.

Nina affirmed this idea:

If I was left here alone, it would be an insane (burden). Now you have somebody who agrees with you, or is on the same side. It's good that we don't get these feelings of insecurity at the same time.

Clearly, the sisters do not construct individual but dual ownership identities.

### ***Mary's narrative in CASE C: 'Media'***

Despite her best efforts, Mary has not attained a leadership position within the family firm. She suggests that this is not because of her personally, but because of gendered practices, which she explained by talking about the previous succession:

Our father also inherited the business, and Lisa, our aunt, inherited other property. But not necessarily in a fair way, but she did not want to cause any arguments. She respected her father's will.

Apparently, women were not supposed to have a significant role in the business.

Mary talked about her upbringing and the way her mother particularly encouraged her daughters to forge their own destiny:

Our mother always said to us that you need to get an education, not to be dependent on a man. And coming to work in the firm meant that you needed to earn your position. It was not self-evident. But for our father, the boys were boys and girls were girls, and the boys were quite strongly coached to be heir to the throne. I don't think my eldest brother was even given the opportunity to consider other options.

The narrative conveys that positions in the family business were not self-evident for either the sons or the daughters, but for the sons it was easier as the primogeniture norm applied, and they were strongly socialised to become successors to the family business.

Mary discussed her feelings about the ownership division in the previous succession:

Then, the shares were divided into A and B shares, and the sons got the A shares with voting power and the daughters got the B shares without voting power. Apparently, the boys had been involved in the discussion, but for us it was just presented. I was really angry with my father about this: it was like dividing his children into A and B children. I considered what to do: whether to refuse the shares altogether or start a quarrel. I discussed it with some trusted people...and they advised me to accept my father's decision. It was his property. His explanation was that those in operational power need to have the decision-making power. I understood this from the business perspective, but personally it was really hurtful. And it was peculiar that it was the daughters who happened to get the B shares. Even when considering the educational background, I think he underestimated my abilities to think with business rationality.

Mary did not feel comfortable starting a quarrel with her father and, rationally, she understood his reasoning. However, it was emotionally hurtful to Mary to be cast among 'the B children' with the B shares, despite her acquiring a solid business education in marketing. As a daughter she is able to relate to paternal decisions that she refutes as a business professional.

Both Mary and her husband were business school graduates, and her father wanted them – and in particular, her husband – to work for the firm. At that time, Mary felt her marketing specialisation did not give her sufficient competences and did not want to work in the firm with her husband. The job she was offered also felt wrong:

The accounting manager had just retired, and this was presented as a good job for me. I think this reflected the kind of chauvinistic thinking: the accounting manager has always been a woman, and that it is a suitable job for a woman. But I had studied marketing. So I declined the offer.

At that time, Mary was not able to construct a strong enough professional identity to demand a position in the company that suited her education and interests, and was not willing to work in the female dominated accounting function. She opposed the narrow gender construction she perceived in the job offer; she wanted a job suited to her education not her gender.

Then things got worse economically, and Mary talked about the events leading to her husband's resignation from the family firm:

In the early 1990s, there were financial difficulties, and somehow, a lack of trust emerged between my father and my husband, and I was caught in between. It was really tough, so in the end, I pushed my husband to resign. He started his own company, but my father made sure to sabotage his business. I got really angry and cut any relations with him for two years. We moved to Helsinki, but then our marriage ended.

After their divorce, Mary moved back and applied for a position as a marketing manager in the family firm, which she explains to have felt ready for:

I had closely followed my husband, so I was aware of everything and learned a lot on the go. But I wasn't selected, and then I asked my father directly why I did not get it. He said that he had discussed it with my brother, and he also thought that our chemistry did not work well. My brother said that I lacked the capabilities. I was angry with him, too. He had been given the opportunity, and I thought I deserved it, too; the opportunity to grow into the job.

After the years away, and having followed her husband, Mary felt that she could, like her brother, grow into the job if given the opportunity, but both by her father and brother denied her that opportunity. Mary wondered if the quarrel with her former husband influenced their decision making.

When Mary was not able to get access to the operational side of the firm, she began exercising her power through the board:

I demanded a change in the board operation. This means that board meetings are actually held, and the meetings follow the rules and all shares get to be represented in the board. Although not having voting power, everybody gets to be heard. I also want it to be more transparent in the future so new owners are prepared for the ownership – unlike us.

Their co-operation on the board was, however, not altogether smooth, as Mary explained:

The A and B shares are between us. On the board, my brother constantly reminds me not to take part in the operational decisions, but I argue that of course, as owners, we need to understand the business. Sometimes the other siblings question why I have to be so stubborn and against everything. I don't do it on purpose, but I think it's our responsibility; I see it that way.



Thus, Mary explains her demanding behaviour from the perspective of the business. Her actions can also be interpreted as renegotiating the gendered role she opposes, that of the quiet and polite B-shareholder and B-offspring.

***Bridget's narrative in CASE D: 'Conglomerate'***

The company had been owned by women for two generations; Bridget inherited the company from her mother. Despite the firm's heritage of female owners, Bridget was not able to strongly identify with her mother due to what Bridget calls her 'unhealthy behaviours':

My mother was really strong, but not perhaps always in a healthy manner. My mother was never allowed to work. So she couldn't channel her energy into constructive work. This was the epoch when my mother had to be at home and take care of the children and organise dinners and so on.

It is this gendered construction of the role of women as owners of, but not working in, the business that frames Bridget's upbringing and early career.

Despite the fact that her family felt that women were not supposed to lead firms, Bridget received a business education and started working in the family firm. Nevertheless, she was not socialised into taking over the firm:

My father gently guided me into studying business, and then I got to work in the firm. I worked in different departments and, of course, it took a long time before the employees trusted me, the owner's daughter. I got the same salary as everybody else and I needed to live from it. I got to know everybody, and I learned a lot. In the 1980s, [my father] said that no woman will ever work in management, or even in sales. It's inappropriate. He never thought I'd work here, let alone that I'd be the owner.

When Bridget's father died in 2000, she felt that many of the male managers tried to take advantage of the situation and claim leadership. Her mother became the chairman of the board, but was hard of hearing, so Bridget convinced her mother to appoint her to the board. They hired a male CEO to run the company:

He turned out to be a real crook, and we had to fire him. And then we had had some previous CEOs who had been unsuccessful, too. At this point, I luckily got help from one consultant, who said that there was no other choice than to become the CEO myself.

Otherwise, the media would have a field day with this female-owned company. If I, as a female owner, fire a CEO, the problem is not the CEO, but me, that I don't get along with others.

Bridget clearly illustrated the gendered expectations that strongly influenced her stepping into management. In order to oppose the difficult female owner script, she was pushed to take over the leadership.

The failures of the previous male CEOs allowed Bridget to break the glass ceiling, which she acknowledged exists in family firms through her description of an interaction with a customer:

The glass ceiling is still in many places. We went to see one of our customers; it was an older man in his 70s and his daughter. In reality, the daughter was in charge of the firm, but I could not believe what I heard when listening to the father. The daughter was like air to him. But in our case, too, if my father had had a son, he would have been trained into the firm, and the succession would have been made. Now it happened the wrong way – via a death, which is the worst way.

Bridget also spoke of the company's future:

We are currently contemplating what to do with the next generation and the succession. I don't know if my children are up to running this kind of a big corporation. It could be easier to own a business than to run it. They have different values and interests.

In Bridget's case, the owner identity seems to be more important – at least when thinking about the future generations – than the need to keep the management of the firm in the family.

### **Cross-case analysis**

The cases reveal the different ways in which daughters navigate the route into leadership positions in their family businesses. In three of the cases, the daughters succeeded in taking over management positions. In the fourth case, the daughter holds a board member position. A key insight is that for the daughters, the process of taking over the management position means taking action, that is, their being actively involved. Succession is not something the daughters in any of the cases were guided or socialised into (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014; Wang, 2010). Second, that action necessitates navigating gendered expectations with regard to successions

and their role in the family business. As the narratives show, the female successors construct and negotiate gender with the individuals surrounding them throughout the succession processes: with their mothers, fathers, brothers, aunts, or other stakeholders. Doing so requires continuous identity work as they *renegotiate their gendered business identities*, trying to *expand the gendered scripts* they are offered. Alternatively, the threat of being constructed as a difficult female owner created space for Bridget to step forward and take the CEO position. Gaining power requires the daughters to *manage the shadow negotiation* ‘where the unspoken attitudes, hidden assumptions, stereotypes, power relations, and expectations, play out’ (Nelson, Maxfield and Kolb, 2009: 63). It is in these negotiations where women position themselves as legitimate successors and construct identities as family business successors. This action starts early, long before the succession takes place, and can also be a gradual process occurring over time and continuing after the formal succession.

We find that in these negotiations daughters need to construct the family business leader identity (1) in their own eyes, (2) in the eyes of their family, and (3) in the eyes of the firm’s employees, board and external partners. When constructing their successor and family business leader identities, the daughters needed to navigate gendered expectations and practices and also expand the roles they are seen to fit. The daughters *concealed their identity as a family business leader* in order to take over the firm. This was most notable with Norah and Nina, who constructed secretarial identities. Additionally, Cathy hid her leadership identity, particularly with the Russian operations. For Bridget, this meant assuming the role of well-informed owner and not revealing her leadership identity before the opportune time. Interestingly, with experience and time, Norah and Nina were also able to construct stronger ownership identities, but from a dual ‘being here together’ position, rather than an individualised ownership identity. The daughters also renegotiated gender by accessing their family business networks through utilising a male partner (e.g. the chair Ollie for Cathy and the CEO in Nina and Norah’s case).

In Bridget's case, it was only after the unsuccessful experience with male CEOs and with support from an encouraging male consultant that she was able to assume leadership of the firm. Mary, however, was stigmatised and denied access owing to familial distrust of her husband. Nevertheless, in all cases, the male partners were the gate openers or gatekeepers.

Regardless, the participants also *adopted a masculinised ownership identity* by presenting straightforward claims for shares, as Cathy did, or by assuming the ultimate decision-making authority, as in the case of Norah and Nina. Their way of downplaying their mother's role in the business can also be seen as a way to emphasise the difference between them and their mother. The masculinised ownership identity was most apparent in the case of Mary who, despite her efforts, did not acquire a leadership role but continued to make her claims as an active member of the board. In Mary's case, it may be her inability to *temper the disruption* and her ability renegotiate her gender identity (and disconnect from her previous husband) that complicated her route into the firm. She was identified as the spouse of an untrustworthy husband. However, the other participants were able to temper disruptions in order to belong. For example, in Cathy's case, the divergence from the male norm of the manufacturing industry was tempered by adopting feminine leadership practices and making use of the firm's female clientele. Finally, in order to navigate gendered expectations, the participants also *switched identities in different contexts*; for example, switching between the identity of mother, employee, owner, and decision-maker, or by referring to the board member identity and representing the business in different networks when unable to assume the leadership (Stead, 2015). The core findings of the ways women navigate gendered expectations in family business successions are summarised in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

## **Discussion**

This study investigated how daughters navigate the route to leadership of the family business and construct their identities as family business leaders. It contributes to the emerging body of research focusing on gender in family firms and family business successions (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014, 2015). Previous studies have focused primarily on the challenges daughters face in this regard (Humphreys, 2013; Remery et al., 2014), and our contribution lies particularly in demonstrating how daughters construct identities as successors and family business leaders and thereby negotiate various gendered expectations and oppose or expand the gendered scripts available to them. The current research addresses its aims by outlining a methodological innovation that combines narrative and case study approaches. Following Dalpiez et al. (2014), we believe it is important to advance narrative research in the field of family business research as narratives are also, ‘...*processes of “practising gender”*’ (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007: 25), while the case studies investigated enabled us to frame and interpret those narratives in the context of the family firms and the families concerned (Henry et al., 2015).

Building on our findings, we suggest that the daughters needed to construct the family business leader identity in their interactions with different stakeholders. This process involves identity work and negotiating their gender to fit within the masculine (family) business life. Our findings corroborate previous studies, suggesting that daughters are not routinely socialised into the company (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014; Glover, 2014), and if they are, such socialisation tends to target becoming a good owner rather than assuming leadership (García-Álvarez et al., 2002). This represents a double hurdle for daughters: if they are not socialised into the firm, it is difficult for them to gain the experience that is later set as a criterion for entry (Martin, 2001) and necessary for constructing and self-confirming a legitimate identity in the family business (Hogg, 2006). Hence, daughters need to manage the shadow negotiations within the family to position themselves as family business successors.

Nevertheless, this did not prevent some of the daughters from constructing a strong identity from the outset, thus highlighting the daughters' agency (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014). Agency is also reflected in the ways daughters challenge the gendered scripts available to them and construct new ones that allow them to combine motherhood and family business leadership, for example. The daughters were also clear that gender made a difference, although to varying extents. They had reflected the meaning of being a woman for the succession process, and actively challenged the gender norms but balanced this with aligning with the norm, for instance by accepting subordinate positions or disguising their preeminent role. Identity construction was particularly challenging in cases where a lack of experience and competence, youth, gender, and the male-dominated industry coincided (Constantinidis and Nelson, 2009). Applying a social constructivist view, identity is a constant state of becoming where identity *work* is important (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Watson, 2009), and gaining experience and renegotiating identities for other family members, employees, or customers allowed the daughters to construct a stronger family business leader identity over time.

The study also enabled us to identify several mechanisms that contribute to the construction of a family business leader identity and to perform belonging (Stead, 2015). First, the daughters made use of a male partner (a CEO, director, or consultant) to acquire the leadership of the firm (Cole, 1997). In contrast, the lack of a suitable male partner, such as a copreneurial spouse, or a failure of a male partner can disadvantage the daughter. Therefore, having a male spouse as manager in the family firm may be necessary, but also risky for the daughter. Problems between the husband and the other male family members may stigmatise the daughter, and her loyalty might be questioned (Wang, 2010). Thus, within the family business context, daughters' identities are constructed in relation to their male partners and other family members.

Second, invisibility has been suggested to be a factor limiting women's involvement in family business leadership, as women are not thought of as natural successors (Jimenez, 2009; Humphreys, 2013; Martin, 2001; Wang, 2010). However, our study suggests that accessing the family business leader identity sometimes requires concealing the leader identity until an opportune time. Operating through a male partner, identifying as a secretary, and portraying a lack of decision-making ability created room for agency. Women often have administrative or supporting roles in family businesses, and those roles are accepted by others. In playing this role without interfering with decision making or seeking recognition, women can continue to work from the shadows, exert considerable influence over the family business, and become powerful. Thus, invisibility is relative, and women may be invisible yet hold powerful positions (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Cole, 1997; Hamilton, 2006).

Third, the participants adopted a masculinised ownership identity while concealing a leadership identity. At certain points, they needed to become highly visible and demand the position by portraying it as something that was theirs by right and, if necessary, by issuing an ultimatum to obtain it. Access to a position of real power might necessitate action normally characterised as masculine behaviour (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014), such as abandoning the focus on employees' jobs or taking a stand to secure the future of the business. However, a woman adopting such behaviour in support of a strong claim to leadership may be characterised as interfering and difficult (Cole, 1997). In such circumstances, women go beyond their gendered script and attract opposition, which can block the outcomes they seek. This is also linked to the question of disruption between the male-dominated industry and the gendered identity of the female successor. Daughters become highly visible and necessary for the succession if there are no sons available, or if tragic events occur (Byrne and Fattoum, 2014, 2015; Curimbaba, 2002; Jimenez, 2009; Wang, 2010). Our cases offer support to previous research suggesting that family businesses can open paths to leadership that may not be open to women working

elsewhere (Jimenez, 2009; Wang, 2010). Yet our findings also echo the need to temper this disruption; for example, by working with stakeholders in symbolic ways and through feminine leadership (Fletcher, 2004), such as working together with others in a shared space. In addition, having a predominantly feminine clientele may contribute to tempered disruption. Industries are not stable, and many will probably feature more women in senior roles in the future, which should ease the passage of an aspiring female successor (Curimbaba, 2002).

Identities have been portrayed as emergent and fluid (Hytti, 2005; Watson, 2009), and our findings illustrate how the respondents switched between different identities in different contexts. In contrast with previous studies, the women in our cases did not perceive their roles as mothers and as business owners as presenting any particular conflicts (Jimenez, 2009). Instead, they can use of their gendered identities as mothers to negotiate the leadership and ownership of the firm and as a reason for claiming the firm. They could also exploit their role as owners to make the most of motherhood and benefit from the flexibility offered by working in the family business (Curimbaba, 2002). Constructing a successor identity starts early, long before succession is on the agenda. Our findings help explain some of the processes leading to gender differences in business life, and also address the claim that women are less willing than men to seek managerial positions. The narratives demonstrate how (lack of) involvement, socialisation into the business and the expectations conveyed in childhood and adolescence influence women's self-identity as potential successors.

Finally, our findings related only to daughters, but might equally be applicable to anyone seeking to take over a family business. Constructing an identity as a family business leader is a necessary step for both male and female successors. Nevertheless, we claim that women need to engage more strongly in identity work as they must navigate the gendered expectations resulting from practices that are predominantly linked to women. For example, in all of our case studies, men were preferred for leadership roles, as hired CEOs, fathers,



husbands or brothers, and this is supported by other research stating that men may be considered particularly suited for leading even female-dominated companies (McAdam and Marlow, 2013).

## **Conclusions**

The current research has investigated how daughters navigate family businesses and construct identities as family business leaders (Watson, 2009). Using narrative analysis and case study research, our findings highlight that daughters construct and negotiate their gender and leadership identities in their interactions with others by opposing, expanding, and making use of the gendered scripts available to them. They move between concealing their leader identity and producing a masculinised identity as a strong owner. This necessitates tempered disruption and switching between different identities in different contexts. Doing gender and family business calls for managing the shadow negotiations in dealing with the unspoken attitudes, hidden assumptions, stereotypes, power relations, and expectations both from within the family (business) and from external stakeholders (Nelson et al, 2009). Identity switching in different contexts contributes to feelings of belonging. Thus, we highlight moving in and out of visibility by relying on different identities, but tempering the disruptions as required to navigate the route to family business leadership and to renegotiate gender in the family business.

While this study has emphasised the construction of gender during the succession process, we would encourage future studies to investigate how gender is negotiated and renegotiated in the daily operations of a family firm. It is a context well-suited to studying how various influences absorbed throughout life contribute to gendering in the family business. Hence, we would welcome studies taking a life story perspective on family business from a gender perspective. Future studies on succession could benefit from understanding it as a process of becoming where the construction of a successor identity is a central element. This

would complement the literature that views succession in terms of rational choices made by the incumbents and the potential successor. Succession as a process of becoming offers an alternative perspective on the literature on hurdles and facilitators of generational succession (e.g. De Massis et al., 2008). Empirically the study was conducted in Finland, a country often portrayed as at the forefront of gender equality and opportunities for women. Future research should investigate other contexts and include comparative studies between family businesses in different cultural settings.

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## Appendix 1

### **Context of the empirical study**

The study was conducted in South and West Finland in two SMEs and two large firms. Finland generally ranks high in gender equality compared to many other countries (Gender Equality Index, 2012). In 2012, the average employment rate of Finnish women was 68.2% (the EU-27 average was 58.6%) against 70.5% for Finnish men, which was the smallest difference in the EU-27. Therefore, there might be an expectation that gender is no longer an issue and that daughters will have the same opportunities and face the same challenges in taking over Finnish family firms in the twenty-first century as sons. This is partly true, as exemplified by the fact that the proportion of women on corporate boards has increased in recent years and is above the EU-27 average. Nevertheless, only about 30% of board members are female in Finland (Finland Chamber of Commerce, 2015; The Current Situation, 2013), and the proportion of women in management positions (18.0%) is substantially below the EU-27 average (The Current Situation, 2013). Finally, women account for one-third of all entrepreneurs in Finland, despite their equal participation in the labour market (Business Review, 2015).

In all four of our cases, the daughters were able to assume leadership or other powerful positions within the family business. However, all the participants identified examples of having been treated differently than their male counterparts and, therefore, gender clearly remains an issue. Although we did not directly compare the experiences of daughters and sons in our cases, there are several examples that highlight the ways the sons were more readily invited to join the firm, or the ways in which the absence of sons presented a problem that lead us to think that gendering and the need for these women to navigate the gendered expectations are interesting. On the other hand, men must also construct gender, but the expectations of them are different than the expectations of daughters (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007).



## Appendix 2

### **Overview of case companies and their histories**

**CASE A: ‘Textile’** refers to a small textile manufacturing firm started in the 1980s by Matt and his wife, Hanna, who continued working together in the firm even after they divorced. Matt was in charge of marketing and opening up new markets, while Hanna was in charge of human resources and operations. Matt made all the important decisions independently. Hanna insisted that the door between their offices was kept open to so that she could listen to his dealings and thus remain informed. Matt has an important aide in Ollie, the long-term chair of the board. Although Hanna is a joint owner of the company, she has remained the ‘assistant spouse’ owing to her background in nursing when the company was established. At first, she did some of the administrative work when there were no other employees; later, she took a more prominent role in the company. Her daughter, Cathy, regards her contributions as extremely important, even if they have not been fully recognised by her ex-husband, or perhaps even by Hanna herself. Cathy wants to take over the firm, but both parents are reluctant. Because the parents have been in the business together, Hanna believes it will be hard for Cathy on her own. Cathy’s brother is not a potential successor because he has his own business and other interests. Matt and Hanna were prepared to liquidate the firm or to sell it to an external party, viewing that course of action as a way to help their daughter to have an easier life. Matt would rather see her become a homemaker, something made possible by family wealth and Cathy’s husband’s promising position. The business has a production unit in Russia, which is managed by Matt and Ollie. Both parents warned of the unpredictability of doing business in Russia.

**CASE B: ‘Engineering’** refers to an engineering firm acquired in 2001 by the late husband/father John. When he died suddenly in 2007, John’s daughters, Norah and Nina, who were in their 20s, and his wife, Beth, decided to continue the business despite receiving offers to buy it. Their reasons were both practical (avoiding a large tax bill) but also emotional (to

keep it as a legacy) and to secure the employees' jobs. Norah was still at school at the time, and Nina, who is four years older, was happy working in a shoe shop. She had no plans to work for the company, but after her father's death, she started there immediately. The remaining family hired a male CEO who was put in charge of all the company's operations. The mother Beth owns 50% of the firm, but the daughters plan to buy her share because Beth has never been involved in the company. However, Beth explains that her late husband and the new CEO have always kept her informed. Currently, she is ready to sell the firm to her daughters, provided that the ownership is kept within the family for her grandsons. Although Norah and Nina now profess to love their jobs, they do not identify strongly with the engineering firm. During their ownership, both sisters have become mothers and this has shaped their work in the family business.

**CASE C: 'Media'** refers to a large media company group under third-generation family management. In the succession from the first to the second generation, the company was transferred to the only son, while the only daughter inherited other assets. In the subsequent succession process, the father divided the company shares into A and B types, with the A shares (with decision-making power) going to the two sons and B shares to the three daughters. Both sons, Henry and Eddie, work in the company, and the older one, Henry, is the current CEO. The three daughters, one of whom is Mary, along with Eddie, Henry, and their aunt, Lisa (who is the same age as the siblings), form the board. Although official decisions about the next generation are yet to be made, Henry's eldest son is already working and being coached in the leadership of the firm. In the interview with Henry, he expresses outright that he does not see his daughter or his second son working in the firm, as he sees the company as too tough an environment for them.

When Mary graduated from business school, she and her then husband were both invited to join the firm, but only the husband started working there. During the recession of the

1990s, the firm nearly went bankrupt and was the subject of a hostile takeover attempt. Henry believes that Mary's husband was involved in conspiring with other financiers against the family. There was a breakup in the family, and Mary's husband resigned and left the company. Later, Mary and her husband divorced, and Mary applied for a position in the firm but was denied. She feels the row between her father and ex-husband influenced her situation. Her brother said it directly: *'This ended the career path of Mary, although that has not been spoken out loud'*. Therefore, Mary was not given access to the operational side of the business, although she remains an engaged owner. She plays an active role on the board and represents the family business in the Family Firm Association.

**CASE D: 'Conglomerate'** refers to a large conglomerate in technical material sales. In the past, the firm has been owned by women. The ownership has secured the role of women as keepers of the family legacy, but their husbands have run the business. Currently, Bridget owns the firm with her half-sister and is the first female member of the family to have worked in the firm. Her father encouraged her to study business, although he did not see her as a real successor. She was never coached to take over the firm, nor socialised into the firm as a future leader, but only as an owner. Nevertheless, she worked in different units of the firm and gradually acquired a comprehensive knowledge of its operations. After the father died in 2000, she fought for her position in the company. Bridget's path to becoming CEO was to take over after a couple of (male) managers had been hired but proved unsuccessful. In order to be able to take the CEO position and run the family firm, she needed to persuade her mother to allow her to participate in board meetings as an insider to administer the ownership for her mother. Eventually, after Bridget's mother died, Bridget's husband was able to join the firm, too, and he is now part of her management team. When thinking about the future, Bridget wonders whether Conglomerate is the right place for her children.

*Table 1. Interview participants*

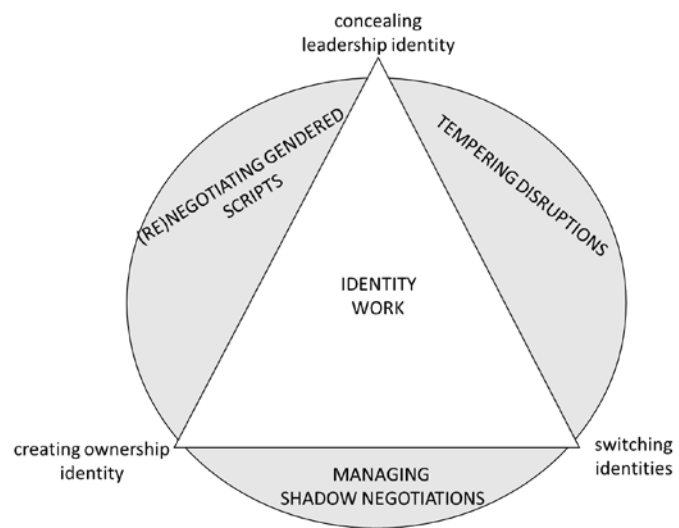
Case A (4 participants)	Founder and incumbents (father Matt and mother Hanna, now divorced; current CEO / daughter Cathy; son with his own business)
Case B (3 participants)	Two successors/owners (daughters Nina and Norah) working in the company and owner (mother and widow of the deceased owner, Beth) not working in the company
Case C (4 participant)	Current CEO (brother Henry), two other members of the board (daughter Mary and aunt Lisa), son Johan of the current CEO working in the company
Case D (1 participant)	Current CEO (daughter Bridget) <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Other interviewees were sought for the case but were not available for this research. Both the parents were dead, and the half-sister is not involved with or on speaking terms with family. The CEO's children were too young to be interviewed.

Table 2. An overview of the studied cases

Case	A: Textile	B: Engineering	C: Media	D: Conglomerate
Industry	Textile industry	Engineering works	Media	Wholesale trade, technical and construction services
Size	Small firm	Small firm	Large firm / group consists of six individual business units	Large firm / conglomerate
Founded	1982	An older firm which was acquired in 2001	1925/1945 (later acquired a firm established in 1905)	1905
Current generation	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> generation	4 <sup>th</sup> generation
Important members and ownership	Copreneur couple (25% + 25% ownership; now divorced); both work at the firm (officially retired) Daughter, current CEO (50% ownership) Son, not involved in the case firm, has his own business	Father, CEO Mother, co-owner (50%), not working in the firm Two daughters in their 20s, co-owners (25% + 25%), working in the firm An external CEO	Father (2nd gen) † Two brothers (3rd gen), both working in the firm, one is the current CEO (A shares) Two sisters (3rd gen) and their aunt of same age, active board members (B shares); one sister's ex-husband worked previously in the firm Son (4th gen), working in the firm and other fourth generation siblings not yet decided	Mother, owner, not working in the firm Father, not an owner but working in the firm Daughter, current CEO (70% ownership with her children, 80% of power) Husband, currently working in the firm Half-sister, owner but not working in the firm (30% ownership)
Important event	Both parents willing to sell the firm and consider the business too tough a life for the daughter. Daughter determined to take over.	After the death of the father, the mother and daughters continued the business. A CEO was hired. The daughters plan to buy their mother out.	Second generation father divides the shares into A and B, and decision-making power is passed onto the sons with A shares. Daughters can be owners and are currently active on the board. Son of the current CEO works in the firm and is being guided into the CEO role.	The firm has been owned by the daughters but managed by their husbands. The current CEO was only able to take over after her father's death. Complicated family history with mother and half-sister.



**Figure 1.** Navigating gendered expectations in family business succession.