THE LENSES OF GENDER: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF SUCCESSION IN FAMILY BUSINESS (SUMMARY)

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SUMMARY

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Principal Topics

Extant research relies on stereotypical role based views of men and women in family business and begins from assumed essentialist sex differences (Hamilton, 2006; 2013; Ahl, 2006). In order to advance the field, family business researchers need to engage in more contemporary debates in gender and feminist theorizing (Hughes et al., 2012). Here, we take a social constructionist view of family business succession, investigating often taken-for-granted norms of or notions about gender. We look at how gendered talk and practice in family businesses contributes to who can be the successor and how succession unfolds. We engage with Bem’s classification of masculine and feminine (1983), Collinson and Hearn’s work (1994) on multiple masculinities as well as Hamilton’s work on gender in family business (2006; 2013) to guide our interpretation.

Method

We draw on ten narrative accounts in five family businesses to explore the discursive construction of succession. We first compiled a succession narrative for each individual, before identifying prevailing themes across the narratives. To do so, we proceeded in a manner similar to grounded theory, remaining responsive to emergent themes and keeping the story intact while using prior theoretical concepts (Reissman, 2003). We compared and contrasted the themes and subthemes.

Results and Implications

Talk of male control and dominance, business as a ‘man’s world’ and women’s alignment with support and domestic roles prevailed, pointing to the continued presence of patriarchal relations in family business. Gendered discourses shape who can be the potential successor. The head of the family business is described in strongly masculine terms: rational, competitive, and decisive (Bem, 1993). The successors’ integration is also patterned by gender. Successors prove their ‘manliness’ to gain legitimacy. Whether it be by ‘cleaning up’ and firing staff upon arrival (FB#1; FB#4), by ‘making a name for yourself’ or demonstrating you are more than ‘just the boss’s son’ (FB#2). Family business members privilege certain forms of managerial masculinity over others. We contribute to understanding the complexity of family business succession by exploring the role of gendered discourses, thus far largely ignored.

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