

Role Conflicts And Gender Dynamics In The Family Business

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Abstract

There is little academic research about how societally-constructed gender norms and occupational and professional norms shape gender dynamics in a family business. This results in insufficient knowledge about potential conflicts or synergies individuals in a family firm face between their familial and professional roles. This project seeks to understand how role dynamics affect decision making and positions in the family business, and how these impact and are impacted by family dynamics. We focus on professional versus familial roles and how these may be gendered within family firms. This research project explores the gap in the literature by investigating the lived experiences of women and men in family businesses. The research methodology is to conduct semi-structured interviews of family business owners, managers, employees and family members. The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the role dynamics among family members in the family business by investigating the intersection of the business side and the family side. We are interested in exploring how the experiences of women might be different from the experiences of men in their roles as both family members and as business executives, employees or owners. Our findings illuminate how gender and professional roles intersect in family businesses.

Keywords: gender, family business, role conflict

1. Introduction

A family business is any business where the majority ownership is controlled by the family, decisions about management are influenced by the family, and two or more family members are employed and actively participate in the management of the firm.¹Nowadays, more than 80% of U.S. companies are owned or controlled by families, of which about 35% are among the Fortune 500². Family firms normally have centralized control, and the rules governing the family are also applicable to the business.³These rules cover various issues such as money, loyalty, togetherness, image, conflict, and roles.⁴However, there is little academic research about how societally-constructed gender norms and occupational and professional norms shape gender dynamics in a family business. Through this research we explore the rules that govern the relationships between the family members that shape their roles inside and outside the business. This research project explores the gap in the literature by investigating the lived experiences of women and men in family businesses. This study presents the results and findings of a qualitative study on the role conflicts in family business and what family members have to say about the impact of the gender issues within the business.

2. Literature Review

Although in the recent years more women are becoming involved in family business, some traditional biases still exist.⁵ According to Salganicoff, even though many women work in family businesses, the media still presents them as cute or rare examples.⁶ Yet the presence of women in family businesses is important for the succession of the company. According to Salganicoff (1990), females offer unique contributions, especially in management, to their family businesses. Her conclusions are based on the study of Gilligan (1982) and Belenky (1986), who argue women are socialized in the behaviors of nurturing and peacekeeping.⁷ Further, Salganicoff believes that because of their unique gender characteristics, women in family business perform such behaviors as loyalty to the business, concern for family members, and a sensitivity to the needs of others.⁸

2.1 Reasons for entering the family business

Researchers note that when women are asked why they initially joined the family business, most of them report that they became involved with the company on a temporary basis to help with office work and end up staying permanently.⁹ In a study of 91 female participants by Salganicoff, only 27% expected to enter the family enterprise. Reasons for joining the family business included wanting to help the family, filling a position that no other family member wanted, and being dissatisfied with another job. Further, Dumas also concluded that, in general, women do not plan a career in their family business, do not aspire to ownership, and see their work as a job rather than a career. Salganicoff reports better positions, higher incomes, and more flexibility in work schedules for females who work with family. Research indicates that women in family business are rarely considered serious contenders for succession.¹⁰ Male members are more often expected to be part of the family business compared to female members. Moreover, research suggests that women in family businesses are better able to overcome both the glass ceiling and maternal wall bias relative to women in non-family businesses and most of them feel happy to be working for the family business.¹¹

2.2 Role conflict

Family businesses can be a source of tension and stress for the family members because of the family role expectations, and the demands of multiple role responsibilities. In research on family-business women, Lyman presents roles as reflecting “a number of social and cultural factors. Women’s roles within networks are influenced by traditional expectations of women’s family and work responsibilities”.¹² Indicators of the traditional sex-role characteristics are: Women are expected to be always available to listen and respond, but no legitimate authority to question or to challenge and to be nurturing, noncritical, and accepting of others.¹³ Challenges that women in the roles of family and business manager face are well documented.¹⁴ However, there is very little research about men who also play both familial and business roles. Researchers believe that women are particularly vulnerable to so-called role conflict, because they struggle with the expected family role versus the expected business role.¹⁵ One role that Hollander and Bukowitz (1990) warn against is that of “over nurturer.” Based on their research, women tend to fall into this “smothering kind of caretaking” (p. 142) in order to correct a situation that feels out of balance and believe that in a family business, the pull toward over nurturing can be increasingly seductive. Salganicoff (1990) and Patricia M. Cole also talk about the double messages that women get from their families such as: “Dedicate yourself fully to the business, but give the family children”; “Be independent and autonomous and behave like a businessman, but be dependent, take care of the family, and behave like a mother”; “Do not take business home, but let’s talk shop tonight”; “Don’t postpone your career and personal needs, but help the business now”. Furthermore, these double messages that they receive cause confusion in the way women perceive themselves. Women’s feelings of esteem and self-worth become confused over how they want to act and how they think they should act in a family business.¹⁶ Moreover, women in family business hold back on their business capabilities because of uncertainty of how they, as females, should behave.¹⁷ As more women are part of the family business, questions arise as to how they are able to balance the demands on their time and other human resources between the family and the business.

2.3 Competency and Invisibility

Family Businesses are as exposed to gender discrimination as other business environments.¹⁸ Many women feel invisible in the family business because they are not viewed by others, whether within or outside the business, in the same way as male members.¹⁹ According to a research conducted by Patricia Cole, women tend to feel invisible in

their relationship to some customers, sales persons, or other non-family business members.²⁰In their research about the challenges that daughters face in family business succession, Vera and Dean note that all women that were interviewed reported having difficulties dealing with nonfamily members of the firm, most of whom doubted the daughters' ability to run the business.²¹Further, these women had to prove themselves to others that they were capable of working on the business.²²According to Barnes and Kaftan (1990), daughters in the family firm must face many challenges in exercising their authority and rising to power because of the skepticism from both parents and siblings, who see them as incompetent or ignorant about the business.

2.4 Age Asynchrony And Willingness To Relinquish Control

Another challenge that male and female family successors face when entering the family business is age asynchrony and owner's willingness to relinquish control. These challenges are usually present when the successor is part of a younger generation from the owner and the owner is very attached to the business, which makes it difficult for him/her to step aside.²³The entrepreneur creates a business because of the need for control. While growing, the company becomes an extension of the founder, perhaps shaping the owner's self-identity. For the owner, considering leaving the company is the same as giving up power.²⁴Researchers find differences in the way these challenges are present in the family firms. J. A. Davis and Tagiuri (1989) found that the father-son work relationship is more harmonious when the father is between the ages of 50–60 and the son is between ages 23–33.²⁵The reason behind it is because the father emphasizes family philosophies and becomes less controlling of the firm, while the son looks to the father as a role model.²⁶On the other hand, Dumas (1989) hypothesized that the synchrony might be different for father and daughter. Moreover, Salganicoff (1990) discussed that women between 22–30 years old have the need to define their own identity separate from their parents.

2.5 Summary

The literature review raises questions that aim to understand the dynamics of family businesses regarding the role conflicts that members of a family firm face. It also illustrates the gender biases in the firm structure. Some of the questions that were raised from the literature review are:

1. What is the role that men and women have in the family business? Do they experience role conflict? Is there any difference in how men and women handle role conflict? Do they struggle with child rearing, elder care, role expectations and trying to balance the demands of multiple role responsibilities?
2. What are some reasons for entering the family business? Do the successions struggle with age asynchrony between generations? Also, do they face problems in exercising their authority because of the unwillingness of the owner's to relinquish control of their business?
3. Do women in family firms face challenges to exercise their authority because of their gender? Do they feel invisible? Did they encountered problems in proving their competency?

3. Methodology

In order to better understand the lived experiences of women and men in family businesses, we adopted qualitative methods. We conducted, transcribed, analyzed and coded semi-structured interviews of both male and female family business owners, managers, employees and family members in a southeastern midsize town in U.S., and identified common patterns and emergent themes. The businesses span multiple industries, sizes and ages. The sample for this research consisted of 15 men and women that are part of a family business. The participants were contacted through the Family Business Forum at a public university. The participants were invited through personalized letters of invitation containing information on the nature of the research. Then they were asked to participate in an in-depth interview. The interviews were scheduled through phone calls and email. At the beginning of the interview, all participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. With their permission, the interview was audio recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later the transcription was looked for analysis. The data was examined without any initial expectation on whether this data would support or refute previous findings. The participants were all interviewed by the same interviewer. Some interviews took place at the participants' places of business, some

others at the University Advancement Offices. Two interviews were conducted through the phone. The average time it took for each interview was 40 minutes.

3.1 Business characteristics

There was a diversity in the type of businesses included in the study. The family businesses were part of different industries including: Jewelry, manufacturing, construction, real estate, finance, nursery and more. The age of the companies ranged from 3 years old to 90 years old. The latter included four generations. The size of the companies also varied. The largest family business was in the manufacturing industry and had employed around 300 employees. The smallest one had around 8 employees working for the business.

Table 1. Business Characteristics

	Family members in the business	Industry	Age of the company	Number of employees
Mike	2	Manufacturing	20	85-89
John B. ,Sarah B. ,Kyle B.	3	Oil Company	86	18-19
Andy	4	Manufacturing	74	300
Robert	3	Financial advisory	66	15
Carol A.	1-5	Finance	3	10
Jim A	1-5	Real Estate	47	30
Anna	2	Jewelry	90	14
Mary	3	Staffing and appointing	18	8
Patricia	3	Auto-Dealership	39	90
Emma	3	Nursery	37	15-40 (seasonal)
Luke	3	Information technology service industry	45	34
Harry	3	Advertising/Magazine	5	20
Lauren	2	Construction	12	35

The table above shows the business characteristic, including the number of members that are part of the business, industry, age of the company and number of employees. The names of the participants are student names. The letter after their first name shows that the members who have the same letter are related and part of the same company.

3.2 Participants' Characteristics

There were 15 participants interviewed, 8 women, and 7 men. Seven of the participants were part of Generation X, 4 of them were Baby Boomers, and 4 of them were Millennials. Most of the participants were married and had children. Only 4 of them were single and did not have children.

3.3 Types Of Relationships Discussed During The Interviews

The relationships that the participants discussed during the interviews were diverse. Most of them talked about more than one relationship type with other family members in the family business. Six of the interviewees talked about father-daughter dynamics in the business and 4 of them talked about father-son relationships. Most of the married men that participated in the research were asked to talk about husband-wife relationships and more specifically the role that the wife played in the business. Very few interviewees discussed brother-sister and mother-son relationships.

Table 2. Participants' Characteristics

	Generation of the Interviewer	Family Relationships discussed in the interview	Marital Status	# of Children
Mike	Generation X	Husband-Wife; Mother-Son	Married	2
John B.	Baby Boomer,	Brother-Sister	Married	4
Sarah B.	Generation X	Brother-Sister, Mother-Son	Divorced	2
Kyle B.	Millennial	Mother-Son	Single	0
Andy	Generation X	Father in law-Son in law, Husband-Wife, Father-Son	Married	2
Robert	Baby Boomer	Husband-Wife, Father-son	Married	2
Carol A.	Generation X	Father-Daughter	Single	0
Jim A	Baby Boomer	Father Daughter; Husband-Wife	Remarried	2
Anna	Millennial	Father-Daughter; Husband-Wife	Married	0
Mary	Millennial	Father-Daughter	Married	2
Patricia	Generation X	Father-Daughter	Single	0
Emma	Generation X	Father-Daughter, Brother-Sister	Married	2
Luke	Baby Boomer	Father-Son; Husband-Wife	Married	3
Harry	Millennial	Father-Son	Single	0
Lauren	Generation X	Brother-Sister; Husband-Wife	Married	2

The table above shows some of the characteristics of the participants including their generation, marital status, number of children and the types of relationships discussed during the interview.

4. Results And Implications

The findings of this research were grouped into four categories based on the questions raised by the literature review. The results illuminate how gender and professional roles intersect in family businesses. The following categories represent the themes and patterns that were seen throughout the research.

4.1 Reasons for entering the family business

Most of the participants become involved with the company at a very young age to help with office work. The participants reported working for the family business during the holidays or during the summer. However, male participants aspired to work for the family business more than female participants did. Four out of seven female participants reported that initially they did not want to work for the family business. They admitted to wanting to have a career outside of the family firm and most of them tried to do that. The reasons why they started working for the family business support the findings of the literature review that women start working on a temporary basis but end up staying. Another interesting finding was the fact that men were encouraged to join the business more than female

participants were. In one of the interviews with a female participant, Patricia, she mentions the fact that her parents had expectations on her father joining the business, but not on her. Further, she was never asked to be part of the business as her parents assumed she had other interests. The same case is supported by four other interviewees who report that they were not asked to be part of the family business.

This research disagreed with the findings regarding the ease of female family members working for the family business rather than for any other company. Most of the female participants admit that they like working for the family business, but it is not necessarily easier than having a career outside of the family firm.

4.2 Role Conflict

The research shows that female family members are more likely than male members to be equity owners who are removed from oversight of operations. Females are granted limited decision making roles relative to males.

John B.: “My mother is still in the business but did not work in the business before and now we are letting her get the money and keeping her busy. So she is not actively working in the business. She still comes around.”

Further, women are tasked with the role of nurturer and supporter of their husbands and brothers. In addition I observed a pattern of women being tasked as the primary caregivers in the family, even in situations when they held executive positions in the family business. During the interviews, men described women as being more comfortable playing the nurturing and peacekeeping role, and they are expected to follow traditional, societally constructed gender roles, often modeled by their mothers and grandmothers.

Andy: “My wife hasn't worked since she graduated. So since we moved here she stopped working. And she still doesn't work outside the home. So yeah. Her career was being a stay home mom. She is very supportive. I did a lot of travelling. Her being a stay at home mom was more than that. It also allowed me...She pays all the bills. She runs the house. She is in charge of the kids and the house. So. I'm... I can travel at any moment to one of our factories or our customers and not worry about having clean clothes, is there food? Who is going to watch the dogs? Her decisions to stay at home, in our opinion, allowed me to do the job better...Her mom was a stay home mom, so her role model was a stay home mom. Her degree from college was not specifically enough for a career. She wasn't going to be a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer. So she got a basic liberal arts degree and she didn't necessarily know what she wanted to do. So we decided to have a family fairly early. So as I said, her role model was her mom.”

Both male and female participants reported that they experienced role overload because of the long hours they worked in the business.

Lauren: “One of the biggest issues I have experienced is not having enough time for myself. I do not know if my husband can say that, or my brother. I just have too much to do all the time.”

Male participants mention that their wives play a very important role in supporting them and usually taking care of the house and the children. All male participants reported that their wives or their mothers were the primary caregivers in the family. Most of these women did not have any career outside of home.

Robert: “My wife was the main care-taker for our children. She stayed home. She worked part time positions that she enjoyed and that helped her stay connected with the community, but yes she was the primary caretaker and help maker since our oldest son was 12. She was half home for the past 16 years.”

When another male John B. was asked if his wife was part of the business he answers: “No and either would I want her to be. It is not her forte. And she and I are somewhat opposite. I am a realist, pragmatic she is kind of “how do you feel about something, what do you think about something?” And that is another reason that I don't know that I need to take any work home. Her strengths are only raising up the family and volunteering and getting involved in the schools and those things. So I can be focused in the business.”

Male and female participants also report that women were tasked with the familial roles of peacekeeper and conflict resolution manager. When a conflict between the father-son or father-daughter would arise, the mother was the one

who intervened to resolve the conflict. Another interesting finding was the fact that men tend to be more willing to help their wives at home when they have a career outside of the family business.

4.3 Competency and Invisibility

Gender does not seem to be the main reason of why male and female members have different managerial roles. Even though some of the male participants reported that women's managerial role in the firm is more mentoring and coaching, some of the female participants disagreed with it by admitting having difficulties in managing the employees without coming out as bossy or controlling. However, something that all the female participants admitted was the fact that the employees view them as the bosses' daughter/wife or "just a woman". This causes them to have problems in exercising their authority and their ideas be taken seriously. Some of the female participants report to doubt themselves because everyone else in the company doubted their decisions. They report on having difficulties to prove themselves that they were competent and deserved their positions in the company.

Carol A.: "Nobody wanted to follow me and I was doubting myself. You get at this point where you know they are saying: She is the boss's daughter. That is why she got this job. She is not qualified, but because he has put her in there."

Most of women in this research agreed that they were not viewed the same as male members. They also reported to be having difficulties in gaining employees' or other members' trust. However, for those female members that had another career prior to entering the family business, gaining acceptance from the other employees was easier. In these cases, the employees assumed that they knew more and were capable of doing their job because of their previous experiences outside of the family business. This gave them the perception that being a family member was not the only reason these women joined the company.

4.4 Age Asynchrony And Willingness To Relinquish Control

Age asynchrony had a great influence in the management styles between the owner and the succession. Most of the participants reported to be doing things differently in the business because of the age asynchrony that caused differences in their management styles. Some of the conflicts between father-daughter and father-son relationships were caused because they did not like each other's ways of managing and solving situations. When business owners were asked about some problems they are facing in the company

Luke mentioned: "I have plenty of authority, however my methods may be getting outdated. So I kind of have to figure it out how to help the young guys and girls to do a better job... The only conflict me and my son have is about him being more mature."

Further, the female participants do admit in having different management style from their fathers because of the age difference.

Anna states: "I think it was just a different era. Everything was in his mind. He never put anything into the computer, everything was in his mind. He did not email it to somebody, it was all in his brain. But we cannot read his mind. If I need something done, I email it to somebody I do not expect them to know that I need it done, which how my dad was. So that is very different."

An interesting pattern that was portrayed in the study was the presence of a dominant, controlling male leader. Two of the female participants described their fathers as being dictators.

Emma: "My dad is one that would say "Follow me" and I would say "Let's go". He has a very dominant personality being an autocratic leader and dictating what needs to be done."

Table 3. Findings

	Literature Review	Participants	New Findings
Reasons for entering the business family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Women do not aspire being part of the family business -Working for the family business is easier for women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Agree 5 /7 did not aspire having a career in the family business <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Neither agree or disagree Most of them like working for the family business, but it is not necessarily easier 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Men are more often expected to be part of the family business than women are. -Women are not asked to build their future careers in the family business
Role Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traditional expectations of women’s family and work responsibilities -Experiencing role conflict and difficulty in balancing personal and business life -Women are the main care taker at home - Women are tasked with the role of nurturer and supporter of their husbands and brothers - Confusion on how they should behave because of the double messages that they were getting from their family members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Agree 5/7 women agreed on the traditional expectations from other family members ✓ Agree All the participants agreed on experiencing difficulty in balancing their work life and personal life ✓ Agree Most of the interviewers agreed that women are the managers at home ✓ Agree Most of the participants agreed that women’s role is more “supporting” than “leading” * Disagree One of the participants reported on being confused on how she was supposed to act in the company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Men describe women as being more comfortable playing the nurturing and peacekeeping role, and they are expected to follow traditional, societally constructed gender roles, often modeled by their mothers and grandmothers. - Women were tasked with the familial roles of peacekeeper and conflict resolution manager -Both men and women work long hours and experience overlap between their business and familial role
Competency and Invisibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Women feel invisible in the relation to other employees, family members and customers compared to men in a family business -Women have to prove themselves that they are capable of doing the job -Competency compared to their mother or father 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Agree Most of women reported that they were not viewed the same as male members ✓ Agree Most of women reported difficulties in gaining employees’ or other members’ trust * Disagree Participants did not report situations when other employees or family members compared their managerial style with their parents’. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women express challenges with exercising authority over other employees as well as over other family members, men do not. -Most of the participants reported having different managerial roles from other family members - Women face gender discrimination from both the employees and family members regarding their competence
Age asynchrony and owner’s willingness to relinquish control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Owner’s unwillingness to step aside -Age asynchrony- Incompatibility because of age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Agree The owners, who were also the founders of the businesses refused to retire and give up control ✓ Agree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Age asynchrony is one of the reasons members have different managerial styles -Most differences where between Baby Boomers and Millennials -Male patriarchs portrayed as “Dictators”

Carol A.: “My dad wants to make every decision in the business, not only the final decision. And he does not see that about himself at all, but he is a dictator. This business is his baby and he does not want to give away his ownership. Getting the founder out of the business is always the most difficult one. They are too attached, and you cannot run it the same way they will.”

The last comment of the participant Carol A. reflects on another theme that was present during the study: owner’s unwillingness to relinquish control. Those family members that founded the business or have been part of the business for a long time refused to retire and give up control. This was more obvious for men participants than women even because more men owners were interviewed compared to women business owners, particularly for the older generation of males, the Patriarchs.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this research challenge other previous findings that suggest women in family businesses are better able to overcome both the glass ceiling and maternal wall bias relative to women in non-family businesses. It also highlights the substantive and wide-spread unequal treatment of women in the family business compared to men. The new findings of this research reflect on how biased the family business environment still is against women. Furthermore, it gives an insight on how women are expected to follow traditional, socially constructed gender roles and the need they have to prove themselves that they are capable of working in the business, and worth of respect and power. We would end this research by recommending interventions at both the firm and public policy levels for addressing what we find to be an entrenched gendered leadership gap in family businesses.

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