Gender Socialization in Family Businesses

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Abstract. Social science literature documents that gender socialization plays a critical role in the choices adults make throughout their lifetime. The focus of this study is on the unexplored aspect of gender socialization in relation to leadership of family business. The central questions guiding the research ask in what way gender socialization affected: a) the leadership roles available to children in the family business and b) how the children actually functioned in those roles. The results provide a descriptive framework of gender differences found in the socialization process resulting in a new paradigm for women in relation of their development as leaders in business.

Keywords: Family business, entrepreneurship, gender, socialization.

1. Introduction

The family business setting dates back centuries but only recently has been studied by researchers as an important component of current world economy[4,5]. Family businesses have been described by Davis and Stern[6] as exceptional entities due to their concern for the long run over generations, a commitment to quality which stands behind the family name and their humanity in the workplace where there is more care and concern for employees. The aim of this research is to expose the similarities and differences between men and women as they undergo a socialization process of both family and work at the same time. Family businesses provide the only setting where this unique social phenomenon can be studied.

This study identifies the patterns of socialization and related outcomes regarding the leadership characteristics of children who have been raised in a family business. By looking at patterns in their stories and directly comparing brothers and sisters in the same household, similarities and differences about influence of the home environment on their lives was uncovered. This is the first study investigate the effect of exposing children, for several decades, to a business their father owns and runs. The main question addressed is: In what ways does gender socialization affect decisions as to the work role and leadership options children have available to them within the family business?

Socialization in a family business is a lifelong process which encompasses a number of issues such as: early experiences at home and with the business; the development of career interests; perceived opportunities; given/taken responsibilities; learning styles; life stages; and relationships with the extended family members. Included in the early homes experiences are: identity formation; school participation; media exposure and family roles. Included in early work experiences are: socialization with business people; career choices; mentoring; leadership and management styles. Family businesses provide the ideal environment for an inside look at the effects of lifelong socialization where the work realm and family realm are intertwined.

2. Literature Review

Most social science literature on gender indicates that gender socialization plays a critical role in the choices adults make throughout their lifetimes. Gender gives a definition to life; influences perceptions,

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available resources and life course. The issues of gender have applications in the numerous cultures around the world. Varying degrees of cultural resistance are based solely on gender. For example, Americans are more likely to segregate family and work roles[7]. In Italian families, the mother is the family's emotional bond and these families are most likely to have problems of enmeshment. Jewish families may have cutoffs and deep resentments from one generation to the next as a result of competitiveness among family members[8]. Individual personalities are shaped by cultures which the family reproduces through its ethnic norms, social rules and the formation of habits[9].

Gender socialization has been described as the lifelong process of developing attitudes, skills, expectations, behaviors and values[10]. The study of gender focuses on peoples' perceptions of how males and females differ within a social construction rather than biologically. Females are taught to be sensitive and tactful; they learn to be "helpless" and dependent on their fathers, rather than to be self-assertive and self-reliant[11]. Parents are also reluctant to give females much freedom to take risks[12]. Females learn to collaborate and work towards the good of the group and they nurture and serve as the peacemakers[13, 14]. In contrast, males are socialized to learn such traits as: aggressiveness, competitiveness and dominance[15].

A father's expectations of the career choices for his children often follow traditional gender lines – the male pursuing a serious business career and the female pursuing a family. This was strikingly evident in research conducted in The Netherlands[16] with one exception. When all of the children were female, the father was more open and encouraging about including them in the family business. Fathers with both sons and daughters focused their attention on the sons and did not recognize their daughters' interest and ability for business. They expected their main role in life to be wives and mothers. Fathers define work as a means of fulfilling their family responsibilities (for males). Going to work discharges family responsibilities (for females).

According to Kantor[17], the struggle that women have managing a career and a family is not in their ability to handle each role but in their lack of support and poor attitude of men, in particular their mates. When a woman wants to seek a career, she must face the authority of a father, a husband and/or a brother[18]. With pressure from the workplace and at home, women often give up or give in and follow traditional norms.

Involvement in the family business can start with very early childhood experiences. They may include playing in the warehouse, at a desk or with merchandise at a retail store. This early socialization is the first of ten stages of developing a career as defined by Schein[19]. This socialization is one of growth, fantasy and exploration, thus proving the child with real learning opportunities. During this time, there may be emotional and symbolic bonds formed and the child may begin to feel a commitment to the business and identify a connection to it. These exposures lead to early teen experiences that were reported to be more common for sons than for daughters[20]. Equal opportunities in the family business appear to be not so for sons and daughters. Roe[21] hypothesizes that parent-child interactions also play a role in career choice. These interactions include: stress; closeness; the amount of early social time with each parent: the interests and energy of the parent; parental dominance at home; and identification with each parent.

On the job training is an important bridge to adolescent development. The children learn skills, develop self confidence, acquire knowledge and absorb values. With varied experiences working in the business and meaningful feedback on the jobs performed, a self-concept develops more quickly[22]. The world of work and education are merged during this time with basic training and socialization taking place.

To date, research specifically about the struggles women face in family business has been pioneered by females and is still gestating[23, 24, 25]. Studies describe struggles women have with their fathers, with their brothers, with their mates and particularly with themselves. These struggles center on their roles and identity within the family business. Females face a major obstacle right from the start in family business because fathers typically consider sons and not daughters to be the successors and the process of preparing daughters has been largely ignored[26, 27]. Salganicoff[28] reports that of nearly one hundred women who attended family business workshops at The Wharton School of Business over a three year period, only twenty-seven percent planned to enter the family business and only twenty-two percent studied business in college.

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach was selected for this study in order to uncover the rich details and in-depth descriptions of the children's experiences[29]. While the central focus was to make a contribution to the general theory, the immediate goal as described by Geetz[30] is to provide rich, empirically-based descriptions. This description of a way of life or a culture is an ethnography which identifies "the behaviors and the beliefs, understandings, attitudes and values they imply"[31].

The fifteen families interviewed operated business within one hour driving time from downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their businesses could be considered small and medium sized with an estimated average sales of $3.9 million annually; 48 employees and 3.7 family members working in the firm.

Seven service firms, two manufacturers and six distribution/retailers made up the sample. They were from a portion of the diverse ethnic backgrounds represented in the Pittsburgh region – Eastern European, Irish, Italian, German and Jewish. Family size ranged from six families with four children, six families with three children and three families with two children.

An in-depth interview process was selected as the means of gathering relevant information and developing conceptual categories about their life courses. Prior to beginning the interviewing, an interview guide was created consisting of 25 questions in the area of: early experiences; career choices; roles; leadership; relationships; and gender. The interview guide was pretested on four people to refine the questions and the flow of information. Each interview was tape-recorded and then transcribed prior to coding and analyzing. This process consisted of two thousand pages of text.

4. Results and Conclusions

Results of this study provide a descriptive framework of the various combinations in a socialization process which develops leaders in a family business. Socialization, where the two realms of family and business meet was found to be a process consisting of a combination of steps beginning in the toddler years and lasting into the thirties for these second generation businesses. The combination and degree of the experiences the child receives in the business is found to be based on gender. The following experiences in children surfaced as relevant in the socialization process: Time spent with the father in the business, exposure to various aspects of the business, development of skills in the business, encouragement and positive attitude from the parents about the business, stressing individual contribution to the team, and presenting an opportunity to join the business.

An analysis of this socialization process illustrates the special needs in developing women as leaders in family businesses. Findings suggest that family businesses may actually be less conducive than other business organizations for developing women as leaders. Daughters spent less time, developed fewer skills and were encouraged less than their brothers. Parents unknowingly shortchanged themselves and their families by not recognizing what their daughters could bring to the business. Family businesses can be a disadvantage to women because while there is not a formal training and development program for either sex, early experiences lead females away from the business. None of the females selected the family business as their career choice. Females who married entered the business due to the flexibility it offered; and males entered due to the opportunity they saw. Mothers working in the business limited the aspirations of their daughters. Daughters followed in related jobs which were all of the "invisible" nature[32] rather than assuming a more leadership position.

Some women become empowered in the family business and their interest developed into leadership positions. The styles and strategies women used in the business were different from those of their fathers or brothers. These strategies encompassed for their fathers, brothers, customers and suppliers to get what they wanted accomplished. The more they recognized their power, and then used it, the more effective they were in the business. They measured their goals in accomplishments rather than in money as their brothers did. For those women with an interest in the business, the following additional factors were found to influence their leadership development:

When women demonstrated leadership interest: their brothers were not strong leaders, they had no family (spouse/children) responsibilities, and they were asked by their father to join the business. Women with underdeveloped leadership interest: lacked skills and knowledge, were experiencing family constraints, and had no strong encouragement from father or husband. Women with a lack of leadership interest: had no

identity in the business, found better opportunities elsewhere, and were dependent on their spouse to satisfy financial needs.

This study also found that the training and development phase for children in the first generation business starts in the pre-teen years. This result does not agree with those of Handler[33] and Churchill[34] who found this phase to start during the teen years. Males in general demonstrate leadership interest but are constrained by other factors from achieving their leadership potential. These constraints appear in the transitioning stage of the succession process. The stages that follow are not defined by age but by the control the son has in leading the business.

This research exposed the similarities and differences between sons and daughters of first generation business owners as they underwent the socialization process of both family and work. Particular challenges face each gender in the leadership development process. Women's interests lag behind their brothers during the early age experiences. Brothers and sisters, while being raised in the same household, develop with vary different skills, interests and perceptions of opportunities within the family business. Males use their early experiences to develop leadership interests in the business but are often constrained during the transition period of succession by the actions of their fathers.

For the daughters with underdeveloped leadership interests, there are two considerations. For those who lack the skill and knowledge, they can spend more time with the business while attending workshops and seminars. They need to get empowered either through their own means or through their male family members. For the others, where balancing work and home is the issue, they should first assess their own standards. Perhaps they have set them too high? Parents could include their daughters more in the business and spend additional time with them. They will gain a better understanding of the place in which they work and how their career fits into their overall life picture.

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