The impact of parental expectations on the successor's willingness to take over the family business

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Abstract

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Title of the thesis in Polish: Wpływ oczekiwań rodzicielskich na chęć przejęcia rodzinnego biznesu przez sukcesora

This dissertation examines the influence of parental expectations on successors' willingness to assume control of the family business, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of psychological ownership. Previous research has recognized the significance of both parental influence and successors' intentions, but the psychological mechanisms linking these factors have received limited scholarly attention. The study utilized a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured interviews with potential successors. The findings indicate that parental expectations are conveyed through both explicit and implicit means, frequently embedded within long-term socialization processes. These expectations do not directly determine successors' willingness to assume control of the business. Instead, their influence is contingent upon the extent to which they are internalized via the development of psychological ownership, although the results show that psychological ownership alone does not fully account for succession intentions.

This paper contributes to family business research by providing a more integrated perspective on succession, highlighting the mediating role of psychological ownership, and introducing alignment as a critical mechanism that influences successors' willingness.

Keywords: succession, family business, successors' willingness, parental expectations, psychological ownership.

Title of the thesis in English: The impact of parental expectations on the successor's willingness to take over the family business

Abstract

Autor da tese: Jan Adam Pruszczyński

Título da tese em português: O impacto das expectativas parentais na disposição do sucessor para assumir o negócio familiar

Esta dissertação examina a influência das expectativas parentais na disposição dos sucessores para assumir o controlo do negócio familiar, com particular ênfase no papel mediador da apropriação psicológica. Investigações anteriores reconheceram a importância tanto da influência parental como das intenções dos sucessores, mas os mecanismos psicológicos que ligam estes fatores têm recebido atenção académica limitada. O estudo utilizou uma metodologia de investigação qualitativa, baseada em entrevistas semiestruturadas com potenciais sucessores. Os resultados indicam que as expectativas parentais são transmitidas tanto por meios explícitos como implícitos, frequentemente incorporadas em processos de socialização de longo prazo. Estas expectativas não determinam diretamente a disposição dos sucessores para assumir o controlo do negócio. Em vez disso, a sua influência depende da medida em que são internalizadas através do desenvolvimento da apropriação psicológica, embora os resultados mostrem que a apropriação psicológica por si só não explica totalmente as intenções de sucessão.

Este artigo contribui para a investigação sobre empresas familiares ao oferecer uma perspetiva mais integrada sobre a sucessão, destacando o papel mediador da apropriação psicológica e introduzindo o alinhamento como um mecanismo crítico que influencia a disposição dos sucessores.

Palavras-chave: sucessão, empresa familiar, disposição do sucessor, expectativas parentais, apropriação psicológica.

Title of the thesis in English: The impact of parental expectations on the successor's willingness to take over the family business

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1. Introduction

Family businesses are among the most dominant forms of organization worldwide, contributing an estimated 50% to 70% of global GDP (EY, 2023; PwC, 2024). Despite their economic significance, they face a persistent, well-documented challenge: ensuring successful succession from one generation to the next. Empirical evidence shows that only around 30% of family firms survive into the second generation and approximately 10–15% into the third (Stamm & Lubinski, 2011). This highlights succession not simply as a transitional event, but as an important determinant of long-term continuity.

While earlier research has primarily focused on formal mechanisms such as succession planning and governance structures, more recent studies have shifted attention to successors themselves. Successors are increasingly viewed as active agents whose perceptions, interpretations, and motivations shape succession outcomes. Among the various factors influencing their willingness to take over the business, parental expectations emerge as especially relevant. However, existing research offers mixed views on their effects, suggesting that the formation, communication, and interpretation of expectations remain insufficiently understood.

A key limitation in the literature is the relatively little attention paid to the underlying psychological processes by which parental expectations influence successors. In this context, the concept of psychological ownership—understood as the feeling that the business is "mine" or "ours"—provides a useful analytical viewpoint. Psychological ownership has been associated with commitment, responsibility, and engagement, yet its development and role in the succession process are still underexplored. At the same time, existing studies pay limited attention to how entrepreneurial socialization unfolds in practice, particularly regarding potential gaps such as ambiguous communication, perceived constraints on choice, or incomplete exposure to the realities of the business. Against this background, the main objective of this study is to analyze how parental expectations are formed, communicated, and interpreted in family businesses, and how these processes relate to the development of psychological ownership among successors. In addition, the study intends to discover potential shortcomings in the entrepreneurial socialization process that may shape successors' views and choices regarding succession.

To address this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions:

Research question 1: What forms do parental expectations take in family businesses?

Research question 2: How do successors interpret parental expectations?
Research question 3: How does psychological ownership develop among successors?
Research question 4: What are the missing or underdeveloped elements in the socialization process of potential successors?

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews with potential successors from family firms operating through different industries and national contexts. This approach enables an extensive exploration of successors' subjective experiences, with particular attention to how expectations are interpreted, how involvement shapes perceptions, and how psychological ownership develops over time.

The thesis structure reflects the research logic. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 presents the analysis of the literature on family business succession, parental expectations, psychological ownership, and entrepreneurial socialization. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, organized around the key themes identified in the data. Chapter 5 discusses these outcomes in relation to the existing literature, highlighting both consistencies and contributions. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main results and outlining implications regarding future research.

In preparing this thesis, artificial intelligence has been used in several ways. At the early stages of the research, AI helped me think through and improve my research questions. Throughout the writing process, it also helped me organize individual sections more logically and check the text for grammatical errors. Towards the end, I used AI to review the thesis's overall coherence and verify that it met the relevant formal requirements. At no point was AI used to generate the substantive content of the thesis, carry out the literature review, analyze the interview data, or produce the findings and conclusions, all of which were developed independently by me.

2. Family business and succession planning

Prior research provides evidence that family-owned firms generate between 50% and 70% of global GDP and provide significant employment across many sectors (Berrone et al., 2012; Zellweger et al., 2011; EY, 2023; PwC, 2024). Furthermore, these organizations are estimated to account for approximately 80% of all businesses globally, though some sources report a figure closer to 90% (Daspit et al., 2019; Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004). Nonetheless, their economic value is obvious; they are also characterized by a specific direction of their strategic decisions. Prior research shows that many family business owners intend to pass their companies to the next generation (Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; Zellweger et al., 2011). Some studies indicate that around 60% of family businesses view generational continuity as their primary objective (EY, 2023; PwC, 2024). This implies that family firms focus on long-term orientation, the preservation of family legacy, a set of skills and knowledge, and intergenerational control over the company (Farrington et al., 2020; Mussolino & Calabrò, 2014; Daspit et al., 2019; Zellweger et al., 2011). Subsequently, the long-term orientation makes succession planning a major objective throughout the life cycle of family firms. Even though many owners and businesses strive to execute the succession process successfully, many fail. It is more of an exception rather than a rule. Only about 30% of all family-owned businesses survive into the second generation, and fewer than 15% into the third (Miller et al., 2003; Sharma et al., 2003; Chrisman et al., 2005). These findings imply that succession and succession planning are key moments of vulnerability in the life cycles of family firms, as they directly impact family firm wealth and survival (Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012).

Still, several studies show that even the largest family firms are inadequately prepared for succession. Recent surveys indicate that fewer than half of family businesses have a formal, written succession plan, and many have not even identified or prepared a successor (PwC, 2024; EY, 2023; Chrisman et al., 2005). Often, succession planning discussions are postponed to the point where factors such as retirement, health issues, and exogenous shocks increase uncertainty about succession in the family business (Sharma et al., 2003; Miller et al., 2003; Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004).

2.1 Uniqueness of family businesses

Family businesses are considered distinct from other organizations in the market. They owe their uniqueness to operating at the intersection of business- or economics-oriented goals and family values, where management and emotional ties are often intertwined (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012; Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004). The result is that operational decisions are dictated not only by exogenous market factors but also by family dynamics, values, and beliefs, which indirectly affect the organization. Therefore, strategic choices extend beyond formal organization structures into the family itself (Chrisman et al., 2005; De Massis et al., 2014; Westhead, 2007). In such an organizational environment, roles are easily blurred (Chrisman et al., 2005; Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004). Members of the family may act as both owner and parent, or manager and child, making it difficult to separate business responsibilities from familial duties. This role multiplicity can generate both advantages and disadvantages (Berrone et al., 2012; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Advantages may include the development of trust or shared understanding, but challenges may include emotional conflicts or problems with objective decision-making (Sharma et al., 2003). This topic is especially important in succession planning and leadership takeover scenarios, since they require a shift in leadership within the company and in perceptions of family members' roles.

Succession is a vastly different process from leadership transition in a non-family company (Chrisman et al., 2005; Miller et al., 2003). Family succession is deeply rooted in family dynamics and values, and to fully understand this process, it is necessary to examine both organizational and family factors (De Massis et al., 2014; Chua et al., 1999; Astrachan et al., 2002; Chrisman et al., 2005).

2.1.1 Defining the family business

The main dilemma in defining a family business is that there is no single widely accepted or strictly accepted definition. This absence underscores the complexity of these organizations. They may take many forms across nations, and their dynamic nature makes them particularly difficult to define (Chua et al., 1999; Chrisman et al., 2005; Astrachan et al., 2002; Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; Westhead, 2007; De Massis et al., 2014). Family businesses may manifest as involvement in control, ownership, or management, or as a focus on the long-term preservation of familial influence over operational decisions within the organization (Astrachan, 2003; Astrachan et al., 2002; Westhead, 2007). Other studies focus on factors such as active family participation in top leadership roles or the extent of family ownership. Moreover, another view is that family organizations should be defined primarily by a clear intention to preserve intergenerational business ownership (Chua et al., 1999; Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; De Massis et al., 2014). Several definitions have been proposed in the literature, each emphasizing different dimensions of family involvement. For instance, Chua, Chrisman & Sharma (1999) define a family business as an organization governed and/or managed with the intention of shaping and pursuing a shared family vision, stressing the importance of transgenerational continuity and planned intent. In contrast, Astrachan, Klein, and Smyrnios (2002) conceptualize family businesses through the F-PEC scale, which measures family influence based on power, experience, and culture, thereby stressing the degree rather than the presence of family involvement. More recently, De Massis et al. (2014) define family firms as organizations in which a family exercises major influence over ownership and management, with the intention of maintaining this influence across successive generations.

Continuing, there is a notable body of literature that specifically examines the distinction between family essence and family involvement in the firm (Chrisman et al., 2005; De Massis et al., 2014). Top governance roles and ownership are two crucial factors that represent types of involvement in the family firm. Still, they do not provide sufficient insight into the family values, beliefs, and expectations that shape operational decision-making within the organization. Two family organizations with similar levels of family ownership may differ substantially in how family dynamics impact their strategic decisions. (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012). The aforementioned overlap of family dynamics and business structures in family organizations is yet another reason that complicates the definition of family businesses. Family is a system strongly influenced and defined by emotional load, embedded values and expectations, and explicit and informal discussions regarding topics such as succession planning (Chrisman et al., 2005). On the other hand, organizations are formal, standardized, and structured social systems that operate on leadership roles, performance-based evaluation, and economic success. (De Massis et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2003). The integration of these systems means that family organizations cannot be fully understood by examining economic and structural factors alone. Resolutions regarding intergenerational succession in family businesses are often influenced by subjective, implicit individual characteristics (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; De Massis et al., 2014). Nonetheless, it is important to take a stance and provide an appropriate definition for this study, as it will inform the following sections (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003). A family business is an organization in which a family exerts strong influence over ownership, decision-making, and management, while planning to preserve family leadership in the long term through an intergenerational succession process (De Massis et al., 2014).

Given the diversity of definitions, this study adopts the perspective of De Massis et al. (2014), as it captures both the family's structural influence and the intention toward intergenerational continuity. This definition is particularly appropriate for the present research, as it aligns with the study’s focus on succession processes and successors’ willingness to assume leadership roles. Importantly, this definition also informs the selection of cases for the empirical analysis. Only firms in which a family exerts significant influence over ownership and decision-making, and where there is a clear intention to transfer the business across generations, are considered within the scope of this study.

2.1.2 Key characteristics of family business

Family businesses exhibit a range of characteristics that distinguish them from non-family organizations (Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; Westhead, 2007). These characteristics stem from family members' close involvement and their intention to preserve intergenerational continuity. Prior literature identifies several important features of family firms, including long-term orientation, socioemotional wealth considerations, intergenerational succession intent, and the coexistence of economic and non-economic goals. In addition, family businesses are frequently characterized by high levels of trust, commitment, shared values, and a strong family-based organizational identity (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012). Among these characteristics, the following are particularly relevant to understanding succession processes and successors' willingness and are therefore discussed in more detail below.

Prior research shows that the characteristic most commonly explored in family business research is **long-term orientation**. Owners of family firms often prioritize sustainability and continuous survival (Lumpkin et al., 2010; Chrisman et al., 2012). These are often prioritized over short-term economic gains. Some financial decisions and growth opportunities are supported and evaluated through the lens of the argument that long-term continuity is the main goal for both the business and the family. This outlook implies that, from the owner's or a family member's perspective, the organization is not just a money-making machine but an asset intended to outlive them and their generation (Zellweger et al., 2012; Casson, 1999). As a result, succession is not perceived as an event that happens once in the organization's life cycle, but rather as a recurring milestone in the long-term preservation plan of the ownership of the business (Miller et al., 2003; Sharma et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2014; Venter et al., 2005).

The next characteristic that plays a crucial role is the **socioemotional mechanisms** present in every family organization (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Commonly, family firms are governed by non-financial priorities. Some of them may stem from a need to preserve family legacy, reputation, and identity. Strategic choices are often influenced by these factors, leading them to be deemed irrational or unreasonable (Dyer & Whetten, 2006). Nonetheless, they are highly meaningful in a family context. As stated in the previous paragraph, the family organization is often more than just a source of income to the family members. Strategic decisions regarding family firms are often emotionally charged, which can influence business effectiveness both positively and negatively (Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005).

Another core characteristic is the **explicit intergenerational intent towards potential successors**. Many family enterprises are managed with explicit expectations regarding succession (Sharma et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2014). Owners often communicate these expectations, both explicitly and implicitly, to their children from an early age, which, in turn, fosters an embedded sense of responsibility and an obligation to succeed in the business (Berrone et al., 2012). The successors or potential successors are commonly identified, chosen, or prepared well before the succession process. In contrast, leadership in non-family firms is identified shortly before the leadership transition. As a result, in family organizations, early successor identification will shape successors' career path decisions, motivations, and perceptions regarding their role in the family firm (Chrisman et al., 2005; Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004; Westhead, 2007).

One more central factor characterizing family businesses is **their non-economic goal orientation**. These may include a focus on ensuring employment for family members or on preserving the organization's independence (Venter et al., 2005). Non-economic goals coexist with economic goals and are commonly considered of higher priority than purely financial ones (Zellweger et al., 2012). Continuing, focusing on non-monetary achievements may foster a stronger sense of shared purpose or commitment among family members toward the business, which may or may not create problems with managerial decision-making. Circumstances that may lead to conflict include, for example, when familial interests diverge from the business's financial goals or when there is an internal conflict among top leadership (Chrisman et al., 2005; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). Subsequently, the simultaneous existence of economic and non-economic goals adds another layer of complexity to the succession process, as potential successors must satisfy both economic and familial expectations.

Family involvement and heterogeneity. Although prior research indicates that family businesses share key defining characteristics, it should not be assumed that they are homogeneous. The differences among family organizations stem from significant variations in strategic priorities, forms, and the extent of involvement or management structures. Their heterogeneity arises from a variety of factors, with major implications for further theory development and empirical findings (Westhead, 2007; Chrisman et al., 2005; Astrachan et al., 2002; De Massis et al., 2014; Short et al., 2009).

A major factor in identifying the source of heterogeneity is **generational phase** (Westhead, 2007). Naturally, family firms evolve, but these changes are especially prevalent after succession and a shift in leadership positions within the family organization. Different successors have different government styles, which directly influence how businesses operate (Sharma et al., 2003). For example, founder-controlled family organizations are often characterized by centralized decision-making and the founder's strong personal identification with the business. Continuing, subsequent generations may be exposed to more sophisticated ownership structures and a different set of familial interests in the firm (Venter et al., 2005; Chrisman et al., 2005).

Another main source of heterogeneity is the **extent and nature of family involvement**. In many family organizations, family members assume top governance and management roles, resulting in strong familial influence on strategic decisions within the family firm (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003; Joseph H. Astrachan, Sabine B. Klein, & Kosmas X. Smyrnios, 2002). In other cases, family members may be involved only in the organization's ownership, while operational decision-making is delegated to non-family-member managers. These variables influence the extent to which family dynamics, values, and expectations shape decision-making processes in family businesses (Stewart & Hitt, 2012).

Furthermore, differences among family businesses stem from **the intensity of familial influence on operational decisions and personal relationships**. Some parents/owners explicitly emphasize continuity by expressing their expectations for potential successors and their roles in the succession process, and by involving their heir in the business from an early age (Sharma et al., 2003; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In other families, this influence is milder, expressed through motivating or mentoring the potential successor in the succession process and by providing opportunities for early exposure to the family business throughout their children's lives. The variations in the intensity of influence will result in vastly different succession outcomes.

The empirical findings provide important insight into potential sources of differences in succession outcomes (Westhead, 2007). It also implies that one should not generalize about family firm behavior, as every family organization differs in terms of family involvement (Chrisman et al., 2005). The succession outcomes are influenced by the organization's generational stage and the structural complexity of family members' involvement in the operational decision-making process in family businesses. Furthermore, family involvement alone is not sufficient to determine its impact on potential successors' willingness or on the succession process itself. It is crucial not to overlook the intensity of familial involvement, which may shape successors' perceptions of obligation, for better or worse (Astrachan et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2013).

2.1.3 Advantages of the family business

Family firms are commonly identified as complex and heterogeneous organizations. The distinctive characteristics discussed in the previous section—such as long-term orientation, socioemotional wealth considerations, and strong family involvement—not only shape their structure but also create both advantages and challenges. Prior research shows that these characteristics can yield important benefits for family businesses, notably in continuity and succession (Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Zellweger et al., 2012).

One of the most prevalent strengths of family businesses is their **long-term focus and goal orientation**. Unlike some non-family organizations, they do not have to focus on short-term financial returns to public investors, like paying high dividends. Instead, family firms can focus on sustainable goal planning for the next decade, prioritize continuity, and foster multigenerational value creation (Lumpkin et al., 2010; Chrisman et al., 2012). This characteristic enables strategic decision-making, fostering stability over long periods rather than constant reinvestment of capital into new assets, which are supposed to drive immediate or quick growth in the company's value (Zellweger et al., 2012; Casson, 1999; Berrone et al., 2012). Furthermore, long-term orientation is closely tied to the succession process and a focus on continuity. Owners are more likely to consider family organization as a long-term asset that will provide the most value in the future, rather than one that will generate huge revenues this year, like a successful investment. Thus, strategic decision-making will be highly influenced by plans and expectations regarding the succession process, which, in turn, is a core part of the business life cycle and not an isolated event (Miller et al., 2003; Sharma et al., 2003). The expectation of heirs' future involvement in the business further promotes careful operational planning and investments, whose value will materialize over the long term.

A separate, yet widely recognized advantage of family businesses is their **social capital**, or, in other words, family ties. This benefit may significantly increase effectiveness within the organization, as it may reflect high levels of trust, shared values and beliefs, or an informal work ethic (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1988). It is widely observed that family members have a lot in common, so they do not need as many formal contracts and regulations to work together, which in turn reduces agency costs. Furthermore, the benefits of high levels of trust and shared values are greater in smaller family businesses because power distance is usually lower, leading to faster, more automated decision-making (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). However, another result of family ties is a strong alignment with business needs; the mutual obligation and loyalty are also significantly higher. Consequently, family members will be more willing to work for the good of the organization, even if it means making an individual sacrifice to achieve the expected result. These advantages may foster greater commitment among family members, particularly during times of change, such as succession. Regarding succession, however, social capital can both bolster leadership transition and make it easier through higher levels of trust and shared norms. (Sharma et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2014; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

The next set of benefits concerns the strong **organizational identity and reputational advantages**. The identity of a family organization is closely tied to the family name of the owner (s) (Dyer & Whetten, 2006). The family name often prompts associations and processes based on prior experiences with the brand or its products. Many well-known family businesses are associated with high quality, reliability, and reputation, creating a strong link between family and business values (Berrone et al., 2012). Organizational identity distinguishes family businesses from non-family businesses and confers a competitive advantage when associations with such firms are positive. Reputational advantages can also show in employees' career choices. If a strong, long-lasting reputation backs the family business's values and mission, it will be easier for potential job seekers to identify with the business and begin working there with greater commitment to the cause (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Thus, with enough time, a strong organizational identity and positive association will become invaluable assets embedded in customers' minds. Not only can they bolster the value of the family organization through continuous reputation-building and a stronger organizational identity, but they can also create another opportunity for parents to develop expectations regarding succession. Furthermore, these processes provide another reason to preserve the business's ownership. (Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004; De Massis et al., 2014; Farrington et al., 2020).

However, another aspect, partially connected to both long-term orientation and trust, is the **alignment of commitment and stewardship across generations**. Family members in high-ranking positions often see themselves as stewards of the company. Therefore, their focus is not on individual benefits but on goals and results that benefit groups over the long term. Owners are also committed to improving the family business's processes and systems for future generations. This logic can lead to higher commitment and lower uncertainty among stakeholders (Davis et al., 1997; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Chrisman et al., 2005). If the stewardship perspective and its logic are not passed on to the next generation of owners regarding the business's management, the entire succession process can be shrouded in uncertainty for key stakeholders, such as employees and investors (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Conversely, if the transfer of stewardship logic is successfully executed, the succession will most likely be viewed as a crucial and necessary step in the family business's lifecycle. Nonetheless, the presence of stewardship-related beliefs among potential successors does not guarantee their willingness to assume leadership (Sharma et al., 2003). Stewardship may foster the development of raised and more demanding parental expectations, which in turn may result in lower successors' willingness. (Zellweger et al., 2012).

2.1.4 Challenges of the family business

Similarly, the same characteristics that confer advantages in family firms may also create specific challenges, particularly when family dynamics, emotional factors, and business objectives intersect. Many studies of family businesses focus on challenges specific to family organizations. These threaten the long-term continuity of the family businesses. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the challenges faced by family firms to explain that the succession process is not automatic and that successors' willingness cannot be taken for granted. (Berrone et al., 2012; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; De Massis et al., 2014).

One of the most identified challenges is **role overlap**. This arises because family and business roles stand at the intersection of families and businesses (Ashforth et al., 2000). It is common to see dualities of roles, for example, parent and owner, sibling and colleague. Although these relationships can foster strong feelings of trust and connection among family members, they also blur professional and personal boundaries, making the hierarchy fuzzy and unclear (Le Breton–Miller et al., 2004). Consequently, decision-making processes that in non-family organizations would be purely economic are now affected by socioemotional family dynamics. The overlapping of roles can induce emotional overabundance, meaning that in situations of conflict in a business context, for example, some key decision-making, the divergence in opinions may be perceived as personal criticism. (Jehn, 1995; Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2004). Moreover, in the succession phase of the family business, role overlap and the emotional complexities it creates are strongly evident within the organization.

Sibling or parent-child rivalry is yet another central challenge in family organizations. Family businesses are prone to various conflicts that may, in turn, hinder their performance and continuity. Conflicts may arise between a variety of parties, such as family members, family and non-family employees, or between active and passive business owners. Sibling rivalry is a common source of conflict in such businesses worldwide. Even if only one child is considered a candidate for a successor, the other sibling might feel negative emotions stemming from perceived favoritism or unequal treatment in terms of authority or responsibility, in turn leading to a decrease in commitment and an increase in disengagement in the business's endeavors (Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2004; Lansberg, 1988). Succession topics often highlight these conflicts even more vividly, as questions about leadership, authority, and compensation are commonly raised in these conversations. Furthermore, impressions of fairness and favoritism play a crucial role in shaping successors' willingness (Sharma et al., 2003; Venter et al., 2005). Potential successors who perceive the selection process as unfair may experience reduced commitment to intergenerational continuity, even if they assume leadership. Moreover, unresolved conflicts may discourage successors from taking over the family business completely (Farrington et al., 2020; De Massis et al., 2014).

Continuing, the next challenge is the degree of **founder centrality**. This mechanism is especially relevant in first-generation family firms, as founders commonly develop emotional connections to the business through their personal involvement in its development. They usually sacrifice their time, capital, effort, and sometimes personal relationships to develop the firm, which renders the emotional nature of the connection between the owner and the business (Lansberg, 1988; Miller et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2014). Family business owners might feel reluctant to let go of their baby; succession planning may be delayed, and they may continue to interfere with operational decisions long after leadership roles have passed to the next generation. Analogous behaviors are likely to reduce successors' autonomy, feelings of ownership, and commitment by hindering the previous owner's ongoing engagement. Furthermore, the founder's central perspective is also tied to how the expectation might be expressed. A parent/owner who is highly committed to the business's development may set high expectations for the potential successor's future role. Conversely, an owner who is less driven to develop the family organization may express a less grounded opinion regarding the role of the potential successor. (Sharma et al., 2003; Chrisman et al., 2005; Venter et al., 2005; Pierce et al., 2001; Rau et al., 2019; Pittino et al., 2025).

When businesses are successful for extended periods and their capital expenditure increases, more innovations are developed, new products are released, and the organization's size grows. This precedent creates **a need for professionalization**. Introducing non-family members to the board, creating formalized systems, and standardized procedures can increase efficiency, scalability, and the autonomy of the family organizations (Chrisman et al., 2015). Nonetheless, these changes can also lead to unexpected tension between family members. The previous lack of formalization helped the family to communicate in a way that was comfortable for them, since they share values, norms, and beliefs. However, professionalization can be perceived as a threat to family control and their values; at the same time, non-family members may view family involvement as favoritism.

These tensions may create a problem for successors during the succession process (Berrone et al., 2012). Now they will have to maneuver through relationships with family and non-family members. They may face backlash over their ability to lead the business and serve as a true steward of the family organization. Continuing, their selection as the next successor may be attributed to family ties rather than merit or logic (Farrington et al., 2020; Venter et al., 2005; Reif et al., 2025).

The next challenge concerns the consequences of the lack of formalization in governance structures. Informality can obviously bring speed and flexibility to the strategic decision-making process, as well as to the degree of authority or role classification. However, it might also mean that these mechanisms are vague and ambiguous in many cases (Astrachan et al., 2002; Chrisman et al., 2005; De Massis et al., 2014). It is common for operational decision-making in family enterprises to be overseen by the founder, whose criteria for action, depending on the problem at hand, are subjective and unclear. This challenge is even more significant as the company becomes more successful and grows in size. Additionally, this governance problem can lead to a successor being unable to understand on what basis organizational decisions are made or what the family business's leader expects. A lack of a formal succession plan and standardized procedures can easily increase uncertainty during the succession period and create a roadblock to proper preparation for a successor to take over the family business. Ambiguity in governance can lead to power struggles within the company and increase the decision-making time (Sharma et al., 2003; Lansberg, 1988; Miller et al., 2003).

Taken together, the succession process is a complex process influenced by many factors. Continuity is a desired goal in many family firms, but the road to it is not straightforward. The challenges mentioned in this section can have a significant socioemotional impact on potential successors and on how they internalize succession (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Zellweger et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the mere existence of these challenges does not necessarily mean that the succession will fail. They are a set of identified common obstacles along the way towards success. Even the most motivated families seeking to preserve intergenerational leadership may deem these obstacles insurmountable, thereby failing in the succession process. A clear understanding of these mechanisms is therefore crucial for succession research to better identify the varied succession outcomes in family businesses (Reif et al., 2025).

The preceding discussion makes clear that succession in family businesses is rarely a straightforward handover. It is better understood as a defining moment — one shaped by the intersection of business logic, family relationships, and values that have often been building for decades (Sharma et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2014). Unlike leadership changes in non-family firms, which tend to be driven by performance or strategic need, succession in family businesses is bound up with questions of legacy, identity, and long-held expectations — which is precisely what makes it so difficult to navigate, and so interesting to study (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Zellweger et al., 2012). The fact that family firms differ so widely — in how involved the family is, what generation the business is in, and how intensely family dynamics shape day-to-day decisions — also helps explain why succession plays out so differently across organizations that might look similar on paper (Chrisman et al., 2005; Venter et al., 2005). All of these points lead to the same conclusion: understanding succession requires looking beyond org charts and ownership structures. It requires paying attention to the people at the center of it — particularly the successors themselves, whose individual motivations, perceptions, and willingness to step into that role ultimately determine whether the succession succeeds or fails (Pierce et al., 2001; Miller et al., 2003).

2.2 Family Business Succession

The existing literature widely agrees that family succession is one of the most crucial and challenging steps in the development of the family enterprise. As it stands, this process has major implications for the long-term performance and continuity of a family firm (Reif et al., 2025; Farrington et al., 2020). Even though this subject has been extensively researched, many families and businesses struggle to execute this process successfully, often resulting in failure or a loss of family control within the firm. Empirical studies consistently indicate that a substantial number of family businesses fail to survive beyond generational transitions, often resulting in business discontinuity or a loss of family control (Farrington et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2008).

Early publications on succession primarily focused on managing succession at the organizational level. That research focused on the process's outcome-oriented aspects (Mussolino & Calabrò, 2014). Moreover, these studies accentuate that organizational succession planning, post-succession planning, and governance mechanisms are key indicators of successful succession. (Shi et al., 2019) However, while this viewpoint is important for understanding how a family firm can be managed at the organizational level, it overlooks an essential part of the successor's role as a decision-maker. As a result, succession was viewed as an event that happens to the family firm, rather than as a more intricate procedure that depends heavily on the intentions and motivations of the next generation (Farrington et al., 2020).

2.2.1 Successors' Willingness to Take Over a Family Business

In recent years, family business research has shifted from an outcome-focused perspective toward examining successors' willingness to take over the family firm. Willingness shows a successor's motivation and capability to assume leadership and has been identified as a principal determinant of successful succession. Prior studies show that a lack of willingness is still a major obstacle, even when formal succession plans are in place (Cisneros et al., 2022; Reif et al., 2025). This viewpoint emphasizes that succession decisions are shaped before formal transitions of ownership and control occur.

The literature identifies several groups of elements affecting successors' willingness. These can be widely categorized into individual-level factors, organizational and framework factors, and family-related factors. While each group contributes to the shaping of successors' intentions, their interaction ultimately determines whether successors perceive taking over the family business as a desirable career path. At the individual level, successors' willingness is affected by factors such as self-efficacy, occupational objectives, personal interests, and individual characteristics (Farrington et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2022). These factors shape how successors evaluate their fit with the business and their confidence in their ability to lead it. Consequently, successors who perceive alignment between their personal goals and the family business are more likely to develop a positive intention to assume leadership.

Organizational and structural elements likewise play an important function in shaping successors' perceptions. Elements such as governance structures, firm size, and business performance influence how attractive the family firm appears as a career option (Farrington et al., 2020). These factors affect both the perceived opportunities and constraints associated with taking over the business. However, structural conditions alone are insufficient to explain variations in successors' willingness across similar firms (Reif et al., 2025; Cherchem, 2017; Yu et al., 2023). Family-related factors represent a particularly important dimension in the context of family businesses. Successors' motivations are often deeply embedded in family relationships, communication behaviors, and expectations regarding continuity (Berrone et al., 2012; Nordqvist et al., 2013). The overlap between family and business systems means that successors' perceptions are formed not only by rational considerations but also by emotional and relational interactions. As a result, willingness appears as a product of both individual tendencies and family-driven influences. Among these factors, parental expectations play a central part in forming successors' willingness. As incumbents, role models, and decision-makers, parents strongly influence how successors perceive their role within the family business. However, the processes by which parental expectations influence willingness remain underexplored, particularly from a psychological perspective (Reif et al., 2025).

2.2.2 Parental Expectations in Family Business Succession

Parents play a significant role in family businesses and their succession, because they shape the environment in which potential successors form their intentions and motivations regarding succession and continuity. Parents are often both incumbents and founders in a family firm. Formal organizational meetings and decision-making, as well as everyday familial interactions, can significantly impact successors' intentions and motivations (Farrington et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Zachary, 2011; Ajzen, 1991). To better understand the influence of parental expectations, it is crucial to define what they genuinely are and what this statement entails. Parental expectations can be broadly understood as parents' beliefs, assumptions, predictions, and hopes regarding their heir's future involvement in the business matters, and, more specifically, in the succession process of the family firm (Ajzen, 1991; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Parents can communicate these and influence their children, explicitly or implicitly. They can provide guidance to their children, pressure potential successors to join the family business, and either imply that they need to become successors or encourage them to join the family firm. (Farrington et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2024; Irviana et al., 2025). Continuing, familial perceptions of the family firm and familial dynamics are examples of implicit communication of these expectations (Brown & Errington, 2024; Farrington et al., 2020). Parental expectations regarding successors are formed early in the potential successor's life, continue throughout it, and can be influenced by frequent interactions within the business and family.

The literature shows that parental expectations can have both positive and negative effects on successors' willingness and motivation to take over the family through the succession process (Reif et al., 2025; Ajzen, 1991). Encouragement, trust, and supportive expectations may improve successors' willingness, confidence, and motivation regarding family business succession (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Lyons et al., 2024; Nguyen & Truong, 2024). On the other hand, demanding expectations, high pressure put on the succession process within the family and the business can result in more stress, less confidence, lower willingness and motivation, and a feeling of obligation to the family in potential successors (Falola & Bello Sunday Ade, 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, it illustrates the dual influence that parental expectations can have on potential successors and their willingness and intention to take over the family firm, meaning empirical research indicates mixed outcomes (Istipliler et al., 2023; Monticelli et al., 2025; Zellweger et al., 2011).

Some studies find that high expectations and positive pressure during the succession process can increase successors' willingness and motivation to support the succession, especially when these expectations align with potential successors' career goals and individual values (Lyons et al., 2024; Zellweger et al., 2011). Further, other studies indicate that such pressure can have an adverse effect, leading to a successor's disengagement from the family business and a desire to pursue another career path. The results point to the shortcomings in explanations that focus mainly on the direct relation between parental expectations and successors' willingness (Falola & Bello Sunday Ade, 2025; Irviana et al., 2025; Istipliler et al., 2023). These inconclusive findings might stem from the fact that parental expectations do not directly influence the successor's willingness or intrinsic motivation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon et al., 2007). Familial assumptions, parental behavior, and expectations may influence successors' perception of their role in the family business (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Nonetheless, these psychological mechanisms have received little attention on their influence on changing perceptions of successors. However, family dynamics evolve over time, while parental expectations remain firmly established within them. These expectations may fluctuate and change over time as parents age, as the business grows or restructures, or as potential successors gain knowledge and experience within or outside the family business (Reif et al., 2025). The evolving nature of this process is exactly the reason why it is so difficult to measure the impact of parental expectations on successors' willingness and intention to take over the family firm, whilst solely focusing on these two factors without theoretical approaches that go beyond static-effect models (Bryman, 2016; Yu et al., 2023; Pierce et al., 2002; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). (Farrington et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Psychological Ownership of Successors

To better understand why individuals feel attached to and responsible for subjects such as organizations and projects, psychological ownership has emerged as an important concept in organizational research (Pierce et al., 2002). Through the lens of family business, psychological ownership offers an insightful perspective on successors' affective and cognitive connections to the family firm (Reif et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2023).

Psychological ownership refers to the state in which an individual perceives objects as theirs, commonly expressed through feelings such as "this is mine" or "it is ours" (Pierce et al., 2002). Psychological ownership does not depend on formalities, organizational rights or rules.

Instead, it is established in the minds of successors through experience, perception, or intention. Furthermore, psychological ownership may develop in a successor's mind well before the official family business succession process begins or is even formally planned (Cherchem, 2017; Chua et al., 2018). Individuals who experience psychological ownership are more likely to act in favor of the family business's long-term orientation and may develop the view that the family firm's success is their personal success (Pierce et al., 2002). Moreover, psychological ownership is associated with numerous outcomes, including increased commitment, motivation, and a sense of responsibility for the family business's success (Reif et al., 2025). When psychological ownership develops in an individual, it is often associated with feelings of control and personal investment. From a family enterprise perspective, successors are often exposed to the family firm early in life through informal family communication, working in or helping at the firm, or casual involvement in its affairs. Over time, these factors may foster a sense of familiarity or belonging, strengthening successors' psychological connection to the family business. Furthermore, successors' feelings of ownership may be influenced not only by direct involvement in the business but also by family dynamics, such as expectations regarding continuity and embedded familial values (Istipliler et al., 2023; Monticelli et al., 2025; Farrington et al., 2020). Thus, psychological ownership can act as a mediator between individual motivation and family-level influence. In this context, psychological ownership is not a static factor but a dynamic one, which evolves alongside perceptions of successors. Nonetheless, psychological ownership has often been examined as an outcome of the succession process rather than as a strong influence on how familial dynamics affect successors' attitudes (Brundin et al., 2023; Mahto et al., 2020; Rau et al., 2019). Previously, psychological ownership research has focused on examining the outcomes of this mechanism, such as changes in commitment or increases in feelings of control, but has paid less attention to the mechanisms that precede it (Rau et al., 2019; Mahto et al., 2020). This creates a research gap regarding the emergence of psychological ownership and its influence on successors' willingness to take over the family business (Brundin et al., 2023; Pittino et al., 2025).

In this study, psychological ownership is conceptualized as a key mediating mechanism explaining how successors internalize parental expectations and translate them into a willingness to assume leadership (Chen et al., 2022; Mahto et al., 2014; Rau et al., 2019). Thus, it is an important theoretical mechanism that helps explain why successors develop a desire to take over, while others remain concerned about their role in it, regardless of expectations (Brundin et al., 2023; Mahto et al., 2014; Rau et al., 2019).

2.3 Integrating the Literature: A Mediation Perspective

The three concepts explored in the preceding sections — parental expectations, psychological ownership, and successors' willingness — have largely been studied in isolation, making it difficult to see how they connect and reinforce one another (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Pittino et al., 2025). Research on successors' willingness tends to focus on individual traits or firm-level characteristics, while studies on parental expectations continue to yield mixed results — a sign that expectations probably don't shape willingness directly but rather operate through an intermediate process (Daspit et al., 2019; Zellweger et al., 2011). Psychological ownership is what fills that gap. It grows out of exactly the kinds of everyday experiences that define life in a family business — being around the firm from a young age, absorbing familial assumptions about its future, gradually taking on more responsibility — which is precisely why it helps explain something that other frameworks struggle with: why two successors facing very similar parental expectations can end up in completely different places (Pierce et al., 2002; Brundin et al., 2023; Rau et al., 2019). When expectations feel supportive and genuinely inclusive, they tend to deepen a successor's sense that the business is theirs; when they feel like pressure or a foregone conclusion, that sense of ownership tends to fade — and willingness along with it (Marques et al., 2022; Zellweger et al., 2011). This study therefore treats psychological ownership not as something that emerges after succession, but as a mechanism that shapes whether succession happens at all — and in doing so, it both repositions psychological ownership in the literature and offers a richer account of what drives successors' willingness in the first place (Pierce et al., 2002; Mahto et al., 2020; Umans et al., 2021).

Table 2.3 presents the conceptual framework underpinning this study, organizing its four central constructs — parental expectations, psychological ownership, successors' willingness, and alignment — into a structured analytical model. For each construct, the table offers a working definition, identifies its principal dimensions and mechanisms, specifies its role within the model, and situates it within the relevant literature. Parental expectations function as the model's point of departure, insofar as they shape how successors come to perceive and relate to the family business over time. Psychological ownership serves as the primary explanatory mechanism: through this process, parental expectations may be internalized and translated into a genuine motivation to assume leadership. Successors' willingness constitutes the focal outcome, capturing the degree to which a potential successor not only intends to take over the business but feels personally invested in doing so. Alignment, by contrast, functions as an emergent moderating mechanism — one that reflects the extent to which parental expectations resonate with the successor's own goals and sense of identity, and which consequently conditions the strength of the relationships between the preceding constructs.

Table 2.3 Conceptual framework of the study

Construct	Definition	Key dimensions / mechanisms	Expected role in the model	Key sources
Parental expectations	Perceived expectations communicated by parents regarding the successor's future involvement in the family business	Explicit expectations Implicit expectations Pressure vs support	Influencing successors' perceptions and attitudes	Sharma et al. (2003); Gagné & Deci (2005); De Massis et al. (2014)
Psychological ownership	The extent to which the successor feels that the family business is "mine" or "ours"	Sense of belonging - Identity with the firm - Responsibility and attachment - Internalization of expectations	Explaining how parental expectations are translated into willingness	Pierce et al. (2001); Zellweger et al. (2012)
Successor's willingness	The intention and motivation of the successor to take over and lead the family business	Career intentions - Perceived fit with the business – Autonomy vs obligation - Emotional readiness	The degree to which successor's want to take over the family business	Sharma et al. (2003); Venter et al. (2005)
Alignment (emerging mechanism)	The degree to which parental expectations match the successor's personal goals and identity	Value congruence - Perceived fairness - Voluntary vs imposed expectations	Strengthening or weakening the mediation effect	own elaboration

Source: own elaboration based on literature review

2.4 Summary

The main goal of this literature review is to provide an integrated understanding of how parental expectations influence successors' willingness to take over the family business, with particular attention to psychological ownership as a mediating mechanism. Given the socioemotional nature of these constructs, the literature review combines insights from family business research, organizational behavior, and psychology.

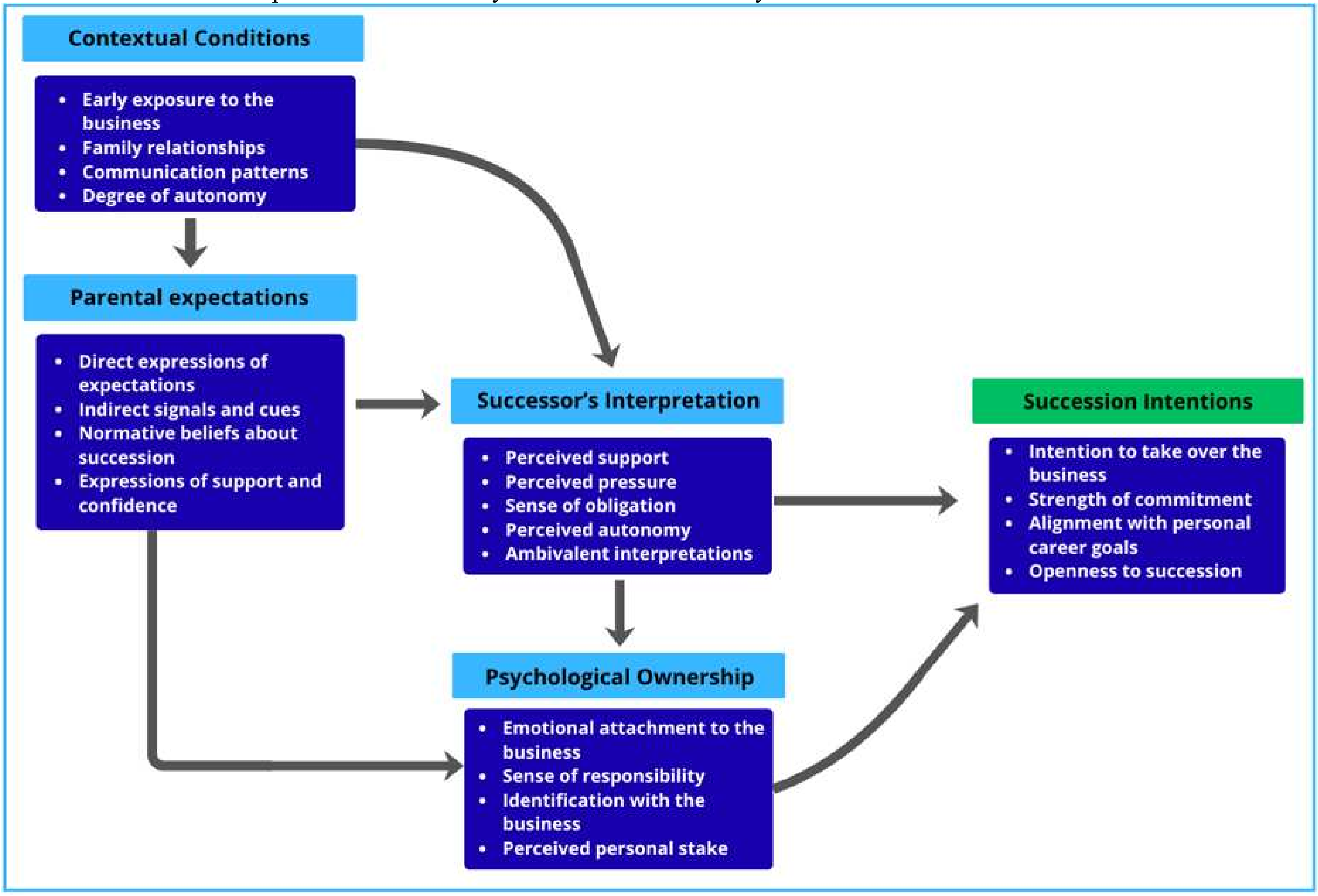
Firstly, it is essential to clarify the concept of the family business and its distinctive characteristics. Family firms are commonly defined based on ownership, control, and the intention of intergenerational succession. In this study, a family business is understood as an organization in which the family maintains major influence over ownership and management, with the intention of transferring leadership across family generations. This paired structure creates a unique context in which economic goals coexist with family values, emotions, and expectations. The literature identifies multiple key mechanisms that shape succession processes in family businesses. One of the central factors is parental expectations, which are an important influence on potential successors. These expectations may take different forms and can be communicated both directly, by explicit discussions about succession, and indirectly, through family narratives, behavioral cues, and implicit assumptions about the successor's future role. Importantly, parental expectations are not passively received but actively interpreted by successors based on their personal backgrounds and family context.

A second crucial element is the interpretation and internalization of parental expectations. The literature emphasizes that the same expectations may lead to different outcomes depending on how they are perceived. Expectations framed as supportive and autonomy-enhancing may strengthen successors' confidence and motivation, whereas those perceived as controlling or obligatory may generate pressure and resistance. Therefore, the interpretive process represents a key mechanism linking family influence to individual attitudes toward succession.

Another central concept identified in the literature is psychological ownership, defined as the extent to which individuals feel a sense of possession and emotional attachment toward the organization. Psychological ownership develops via mechanisms such as initial exposure to the family business, involvement in organizational activities, and the internalization of family values. When successors perceive the business as "their own," they are more likely to develop a feeling of responsibility, commitment, and a long-term orientation toward the firm. The interaction between parental expectations, their interpretation, and psychological ownership forms the core mechanism influencing successors' willingness to take over the family business. These factors jointly shape succession intentions, which may vary along a continuum from strong willingness to unwillingness or resistance, depending on the alignment between outside expectations and internal motivations.

Research Gap. Despite the expanding body of research on family business succession, some important gaps remain. Most studies have examined parental expectations, psychological ownership, and successors' willingness separately, making it difficult to understand how these processes connect and shape one another. At the same time, the field has leaned heavily on quantitative methods, which are less well suited to portraying the subjective, interpretive side of succession — how successors actually experience and make sense of the expectations placed on them. The role of psychological ownership as a driver of succession, rather than simply following from it, has also received relatively little attention. And while socialization is widely acknowledged as important, less is known about where it falls short — whether by ambiguous communication, a constrained sense of choice, or an incomplete picture of what running the business actually involves. This study seeks to handle these gaps by adopting a qualitative approach that remains close to the successor's perspective and explores how parental expectations, psychological ownership, and succession intentions come together in practice.

Table 2.4 Conceptual model of the key mechanisms of the study



Source: own elaboration based on literature review

Table 2.4 presents the conceptual model developed for this study, bringing together the key mechanisms that shape how potential successors think and feel about taking over a family business. At its foundation, the model recognizes that every successor grows up within a specific family context — one defined by how early they were exposed to the business, the nature of their family relationships, how communication typically flows, and how much independence they were given. These contextual conditions naturally give rise to parental Expectations, which are rarely communicated in a straightforward way — they come through direct conversations, as well as subtle signals, unspoken norms, and expressions of confidence or support. How the successor processes and makes sense of all these messages plays a central role in the model, captured through the Successor's Interpretation dimension. One person might feel genuinely encouraged and supported; another might experience the very same family dynamic as a source of pressure or obligation. Often, it is both at once. What the successor takes away from these interactions — consciously or not — matters enormously. At the same time, simply growing up around the family business tends to leave its own mark. Over time, many successors develop a strong sense of Psychological Ownership: a feeling of emotional attachment, personal responsibility, and identification with the business that goes beyond any formal role or title. When both of these processes are at play, they come together to shape what this study refers to as Succession Intentions — not just whether the successor plans to take over, but how committed they really are, and whether stepping into that role feels like a genuine fit with who they are and where they want to go in life. Despite the expanding body of research on family business succession, several gaps remain. In particular, prior studies have mainly relied on quantitative approaches, which may not fully capture the subjective and interpretive nature of socioemotional mechanisms. There is limited understanding of how successors themselves perceive parental expectations and how these perceptions shape their attitudes toward succession in practice.

3. Methodology

The empirical part of this study focuses on how parental expectations influence successors' willingness to take over the family business, with particular attention to the mediating role of psychological ownership. This chapter consists of several subchapters. The first presents the research aim and the research questions guiding the study. It is followed by a discussion of the research methods and the justification for adopting a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with potential successors.

The next subchapter outlines the research process and research methods, including the data collection procedure and the ethical aspects taken into account during the study. Subsequently, the chapter presents the research participants, the inclusion criteria, the recruitment process, and a brief description of each interviewee. The final subchapter explains the data analysis procedure, with a particular focus on thematic analysis as the primary method for identifying and interpreting patterns in participants' accounts.

Aim of the research. The aim of this study is to examine how parental expectations influence successors' willingness to take over the family business, with a particular focus on psychological ownership as a mediating mechanism. The study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of how these processes are perceived and experienced by potential successors in family firms.

Research questions. Formulating clear, well-defined research questions amounts to a fundamental step in conducting a rigorous study, as they guide both data collection and analysis. Research questions should be precise, researchable, and sufficiently complex to capture the core dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, they should reflect both the researcher's interest in the topic and the identification of gaps within the existing literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2023). A well-developed understanding of the research area further supports the formulation of meaningful and analytically relevant questions.

Based on the research objectives, the identified literature gap, and the structure of the empirical analysis, four research questions are proposed:

Research question 1: What forms do parental expectations take in family businesses?

Research Question 2: How do successors interpret parental expectations?

Research Question 3: How does psychological ownership develop among successors?

Research Question 4: What are the missing or underdeveloped elements in the socialization process of potential successors?

3.1 Research methods

This study examined how parental expectations influence successors' willingness to take over the family business and how psychological ownership develops in this process. To understand these relations, it was essential to conduct in-depth research on potential successors' subjective perspectives. It stemmed from the fact that the mechanisms comprise individual perceptions, motivations, interpretations, and experiences that emerge through contact with family and business environments.

This study adopted a **qualitative research design**, given the paper's exploratory nature. For an in-depth examination of the socioemotional concepts in this study, this approach was especially useful. It allowed the researcher to examine how successors interpret and internalize their experiences within the specific context of their family and family business (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). Regarding family business succession, aspects of successors' perceived parental expectations and their degree of psychological ownership cannot be fully captured by numerical measures alone, as they are deeply embedded in the owning family's norms, values, social interactions, and beliefs (Bryman, 2016). Although quantitative research is a suitable alternative for family succession and organizational research focused on socioemotional factors, it lacks the capacity to provide a truly in-depth understanding of how successors interpret parental expectations and how their internal motives drive their decision-making in succession-related contexts (Saunders et al., 2023; Bryman, 2016). Therefore, a qualitative research design allows exploration of how underlying socioemotional mechanisms link parental expectations, successors' willingness, and psychological ownership. (De Massis et al., 2014; Berrone et al., 2012).

Furthermore, this study takes a qualitative approach, and for good reason. The three constructs at its core — parental expectations, psychological ownership, and successors' willingness — are deeply personal. They are shaped by how individuals interpret their relationships, make sense of their family environment, and gradually form a view of their own future. That kind of inner experience cannot be meaningfully captured through a survey or a set of numerical scores (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative design allows the research to get closer to what actually happens — how successors experience and process the expectations placed on them, and how this shapes how they feel about taking over the business. This choice also aligns with prior studies of psychological ownership, in which subjective meaning, lived experience, and context have consistently been treated as central rather than peripheral (Pierce et al., 2002; Mahto et al., 2020; Rau et al., 2019). Given that the field has relied heavily on quantitative approaches, a qualitative study could also offer something genuinely different (Saunders et al., 2023).

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews — a format that works particularly well here because it gives participants space to speak in their own words while still anchoring the conversation to the research themes (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview guide was prepared in advance to ensure that key topics were covered in every conversation, but the semi-structured format left room to follow unexpected threads or let certain topics breathe if a participant had something important to say (Saunders et al., 2023). Before each interview, participants were briefed on the study's purpose, reminded of their right to withdraw at any time, and asked for consent to be recorded. All recordings were later transcribed in full (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews took place either in person or online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and ranged in length from 25 to 70 minutes.

Only potential successors were interviewed for this study, a deliberate choice. Since both successors' willingness and their perceptions of parental expectations are inherently subjective, it made most sense to go directly to the people experiencing them — rather than trying to reconstruct those perceptions from the outside (Spector, 1994; Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Additionally, the study focused solely on **potential successors as interviewees**. It was a crucial methodological decision, which is supported theoretically and empirically. Successors’ willingness to take over the family business is inherently subjective (Spector, 1994). Thus, to interpret it successfully, it is important to analyze it from the perspective of potential successors. Furthermore, prior chapters of this study conceptualized parental expectations as perceived parental expectations, a concept that is highly influential on successors’ decisions to take over the family business in the succession process. Conversely, these are not in any way objective or a set of stated parental intentions (Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, collecting data directly from potential successors is the most suitable approach to align the theoretical framework of this paper with the measurement approach.

3.2 Research process

The participants in this study were individuals who were either already involved in their family businesses or considered likely to take over in the future. In other words, they were current or potential successors. This group was selected because the purpose of this study is to understand how parental expectations shape successors’ willingness to take over the family business and how psychological ownership develops through this process (Creswell, 2008).

To identify suitable participants, purposive sampling was used. This approach is widely used in qualitative research when the goal is to interview people with direct experience of the phenomenon being studied, who can therefore provide relevant and insightful information (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because access to potential successors can be challenging, snowball sampling was also employed, allowing some interviewees and professional contacts to recommend other individuals who met the study criteria (Atkinson, 2001; Bryman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2023). Participants were recruited through several channels, including LinkedIn, personal contacts within family businesses, university alumni networks, and colleagues' professional networks. Using multiple recruitment channels helped reduce dependence on a single source and increased the likelihood of reaching participants with different backgrounds and experiences. Several inclusion criteria were established to ensure that all interviewees were pertinent to the study. First, participants had to be members of families that both owned and actively managed a business. This ensured that they had direct exposure to the family firm and its day-to-day realities. Second, succession had to be a meaningful issue for them, either because they were already involved in the company or because the family viewed them as likely future successors. This included both individuals who had already entered the business and those still considering whether to do so (Sharma et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2014).

To verify that the inclusion criteria outlined above were met, potential participants were asked three screening questions during the recruitment process: (1) whether they belonged to the business-owning family, (2) whether the family retained ownership and managerial control of the business, and (3) whether succession was currently relevant or likely to become relevant in the foreseeable future.

No age limit was imposed. This decision was intentional, as succession readiness and involvement in the family business can emerge at very different stages of life. Some individuals begin participating in the business from an early age, while others become interested only after gaining education or work experience elsewhere. Imposing a specific age threshold could therefore have excluded participants whose experiences were highly relevant to the research questions (Sharma et al., 2003; De Massis et al., 2014). This study focused exclusively on the perspectives of successors. Incumbents and other family members were deliberately excluded because the aim was not to compare viewpoints but to understand how successors themselves interpret parental expectations. This focus was particularly important given the study's interest in subjective experiences and their influence on psychological ownership and willingness to take over the business (Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Mahto et al., 2020).

In total, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. In qualitative research, the goal is not statistical generalization but obtaining rich, detailed accounts that allow for a greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Saunders et al., 2023). Although the sample is relatively small, it was sufficient to detect recurring patterns while preserving the depth needed to explore each participant's individual experience.

3.2.1 Data collection process

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews with potential successors** for this study. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative data collection method in which the researcher prepares a set of guiding questions in advance, while retaining the flexibility to explore emerging topics and follow the interviewee's reasoning in depth (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allows researchers to collect rich descriptions of subjective experiences and interpretations through interviewees' own words, while still maintaining a degree of consistency across interviews.

In advance of the interviews, a script containing questions on key topics was prepared to ensure to ensure each topic was covered in every interview (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The full interview guide is provided in **Appendix 1.** It is related to the main socioemotional mechanisms of this study: perceived parental expectation, psychological ownership, and successors' willingness. The order of questions or topics addressed in each interview may vary due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews. Furthermore, new questions and areas of interest may emerge during the process, thereby expanding the script (Saunders et al., 2023). Before the official start of the interview, participants received an explanation of the interview procedure and an overview of the study (Bryman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2023). Additionally, the interviewees were informed that their responses would remain confidential and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason. Moreover, participants' consent was required to record the interviews, as all interviews were later transcribed for ease of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). The interviews were conducted either in person or via online platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, at the convenience of both parties. The interviews lasted **between 25 and 70 minutes**. This allowed for sufficient elaboration on the key concerns, while also creating opportunities to gather unexpected data (Bryman, 2016).

3.3 Data analysis

A suitable method for the data analysis in this research is **thematic analysis**. This is a commonly used approach in qualitative research that enables accurate identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns in texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2016). This form of data evaluation is especially useful for studies that aim to better understand participants' perceptions, experiences, and other individual socioemotional characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For comparison, quantitative research heavily relies on statistical analysis as the standard method for data evaluation. This approach focuses on identifying strengths and directions of patterns available in the dataset (Saunders et al., 2023). However, thematic analysis focuses on understanding meanings, patterns of interpretation, and shared experiences amongst the target population (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In relation to this paper, assuming thematic analysis as the primary data analysis method will enable a detailed examination of how potential successors interpret parental expectations, develop psychological ownership of the family business, and form their willingness to assume leadership within the family organization. For the three main constructs of this study, which are socioemotional in nature, adopting a qualitative research design enables an in-depth examination of how these phenomena affect potential successors' succession-related decisions (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After all interviews were closed, the recordings were **transcribed verbatim**. This is done to establish an accurate representation of participants' responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, this transcription method captures both the content of the interviews and the nuances of explanations regarding the central topics. As a result, researchers can further refine their evaluation of the interview's material. After transcription was completed, the data were reviewed multiple times to ensure clear familiarity with the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consequently, this stage of the research will provide an initial understanding of the gathered material and the classification of patterns emerging from participants' answers (Bryman, 2016).

The next step of the study involved **a combination of both inductive and deductive approaches**. One option is to identify new and unexpected codes from data collected through the interviews. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). Conversely, the coding process was guided by the study's theoretical framework, specifically its central constructs: perceived parental expectations, psychological ownership, and successors' willingness. Consequently, the adoption of both inductive and deductive approaches allows for this study to be grounded in the participants' subjective experiences and perceptions of the subject, whilst allowing for a high level of coherence with the conceptual framework of the research (Bryman, 2016; Ridder, 2014; Saunders et al., 2023). After the initial themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the meanings conveyed in the interview material. This involved comparing themes across interviews and verifying whether they were supported by multiple participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, codes or themes that overlap with other themes or, conversely, lack sufficient support in the dataset, may be merged into larger groups, completely removed, or modified to reflect the phenomena better (Bryman, 2016; Ridder, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, the findings (i.e., themes) were interpreted in relation to the study's research questions and the theoretical framework discussed in the literature review. This in-depth analysis has focused on drawing appropriate conclusions and explaining how perceived parental expectations affect potential successors' attitudes towards succession and how psychological ownership emerges within the family business environment. Furthermore, distinct attention has been given to identifying patterns across all participants while acknowledging differences in individuals' interpretations and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4 Description of the interviewees

This section provides an overview of the seven participants in the study. Each participant is a potential successor connected to a family business, selected in line with the inclusion criteria described in the previous section. The descriptions below summarise each participant's background, their relationship to the family firm, and their level of involvement at the time of the interview. To protect confidentiality, participants are referred to by codes P1-P7 throughout the study.

1. **P1** – A potential successor from Poland linked to a family business in the construction and hospitality industries. The company began as a construction firm, taken over by her grandfather in the 1990s, and later expanded into a resort business. It is now run by the second generation (her parents), with about 20–30 years of operational experience. The participant is not involved in daily activities but feels a strong emotional connection to the business, having been exposed to it from a young age. The parents have not actively promoted succession.

2. **P2** – A Polish potential successor actively participates in a family business operating in the construction and IT infrastructure sectors. His father founded the company, which has been in operation for about 20 years. It currently employs a small number of staff—roughly 2 to 8 employees, depending on the period. The participant has been involved in the business since his teenage years and is being gradually prepared for succession, although the process remains informal.

3. **P3** – A Polish potential successor connected to a family business operating in the packaging and distribution industry. The company was originally founded around 35 years ago and has

undergone structural changes over time. It is currently a small enterprise employing up to 10 people and is managed by the first generation (parents). The participant has been involved in selected activities, particularly international communication, and shows a growing willingness to take over the company.

4. P4 – A Polish potential successor connected to a family business operating in the specialized construction and laboratory infrastructure sector. The company is relatively new, having been founded about six years ago, and employs around 20 people. The participant has had sporadic involvement in the company and was previously seen as a potential successor, though his current willingness to take over has decreased over time.

5. P5 – A Polish potential successor connected to a family-run cosmetics manufacturing business. The company has been in operation for over 30 years and is currently managed by the second generation (mother and aunt), while the first generation (grandmother) remains involved. The participant occasionally provides technical support but is not officially employed. Succession has been informally discussed within the family, with different expectations across generations.

6. P6 – An Indian potential successor involved in a family business operating in the film and music production industry. The business was established by her father approximately 15–16 years ago and mainly serves the Indian entertainment market. The participant actively manages marketing and administrative tasks and is regarded as the primary successor among her siblings. Succession is explicitly discussed and is strongly influenced by parental expectations.

7. P7 – A potential Chilean successor associated with a family business in the agricultural sector, specializing in seed production and vegetable farming. The company was founded in 1998 and has expanded into a diversified enterprise with international operations. It employs both full-time and seasonal workers. The participant is partly involved in the business, mainly in marketing and strategic activities, and is widely seen as the natural successor. However, the succession process faces moderate expectations and pressure

Table 3.6. Summary of the interviewees' characteristics

Participant	Country	Market / Industry	Year established	Family generation	Number of employees	Level of involvement
P1	**Poland**	**Construction / Hospitality**	**1990s / 2008**	**2nd**	**~20–30**	**Low involvement**
P2	**Poland**	**Construction / IT infrastructure**	**2000s**	**1st (transition to 2nd)**	**2–8**	**High involvement**
P3	**Poland**	**Packaging / Distribution**	**1997**	**1st (transition to 2nd)**	**≤10**	**Medium involvement**
P4	**Poland**	**Laboratory infrastructure / Construction**	**2019**	**1st**	**~20**	**Low–Medium involvement**
P5	**Poland**	**Cosmetics manufacturing**	**1990s**	**2nd (transition to 3rd)**	**~30**	**Low involvement**
P6	**India**	**Film & Music production**	**2010s**	**1st (transition to 2nd)**	**~10 (project-based)**	**High involvement**
P7	**Chile**	**Agriculture / Seed production**	**1998**	**1st (transition to 2nd)**	**30–200 (seasonal variation)**	**Medium involvement**

Source: own elaboration based on interview data

Table 3.6 provides an overview of the seven participants interviewed for this study. The sample spans three countries, Poland (P1–P5), India (P6), and Chile (P7), and covers a diverse range of industries, from cosmetics manufacturing and agriculture to film production and construction. The businesses were established between the 1990s and 2019, reflecting different levels of organizational maturity at the time of the interviews. The family generation column indicates the business's generational position — whether the company is currently run by the generation that founded it (1st generation) or by a subsequent generation (2nd or 3rd). Where a transition is noted, it indicates that the business is moving from one generation to the next, which is precisely the succession context this study intends to explore. In terms of size, the companies range from very small family operations of 2–8 employees to larger seasonal businesses employing up to 200 people. Finally, the level of involvement of the interviewed successor in the business at the time of the interview varied considerably — from low to high — adding an important layer of variation to the study by capturing successors at different stages of their engagement with the family firm.

4. Research Findings: How Successors Experience and Internalize Family Business Succession

The analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with potential successors from Poland, India, and Chile showed that parental expectations play a complex, multidimensional role in shaping successors' willingness to take over the family business. The findings reveal that these expectations are inconsistent, ranging from clear communication to more subtle, socially embedded signals. Additionally, the results emphasize that parental expectations alone do not directly determine successors' willingness. Instead, their impact is mediated by the development of psychological ownership, which affects how successors interpret and internalize these expectations. Moreover, the findings suggest that differences in personal experiences, levels of involvement, and individual goals lead to varied attitudes toward succession, even among those in similar family business settings. This illustrates that, at least among the cases examined in this study, succession decisions appear to be driven not solely by family influence but also by the degree of alignment among parental expectations, psychological ownership, and the successor's individual career goals.

4.1 Forms of parental expectations

The analysis begins by examining how parental expectations regarding succession are constructed and communicated within the family business. These expectations form a critical foundation for successors' later interpretations and engagement with the firm, shaping early perceptions of potential future roles. The results show that expectations are not only conveyed through different modes of transmission but are also embedded in distinct normative frames and subject to change over time. Accordingly, this section investigates how expectations are communicated, how they are framed in terms of meaning and obligation, and how they evolve throughout the successors' developmental trajectory.

Forms of expectations: Explicit vs. Implicit. Parental expectations regarding succession were conveyed through both explicit communication and more subtle, implicit forms of socialization. However, rather than being clearly articulated and formally discussed, expectations were most often embedded in everyday interactions and experiences, making them less apparent but no less influential in shaping successors' perceptions of their future roles. When expectations were expressed explicitly, they rarely took the form of structured or deliberate conversations. Instead, they appeared in informal, situational exchanges that lacked clarity about long-term intentions. As one participant explained:

"We didn't have a direct conversation, just a straightforward discussion. However, we're aware that I want to take over the company, […]" (P2)

Rather than functioning as firm directives, such statements operated as loosely shared understandings. Their ambiguity left room for interpretation, meaning that successors were not confronted with clearly defined expectations, yet were instead required to infer their meaning over time. In this sense, explicit communication did not eliminate uncertainty yet often reproduced it in a more subtle form. More decisive, however, in forming expectations were implicit mechanisms rooted in ongoing exposure and participation. Through repeated involvement in business-related activities, successors were gradually positioned for a future role without that role being formally assigned. One participant described how learning specific tasks was already framed in relation to future responsibility:

"This is exactly what happens when I'm learning a new activity or a new process in the company that I haven't encountered before. It's a reminder, so I remember it, so I learn it. It will be useful in the future when I undertake such things myself." (P2)

Here, expectation is not communicated as a statement but enacted through practice. The future role is embedded in present activities, linking skill acquisition with anticipated succession. This process gradually aligns the successor with the business, reducing the need for explicit communication while still building a future-focused mindset. The influence of implicit expectations was additionally reinforced by the normalization of the business within the family environment. Continuous exposure contributed to the development of taken-for-granted assumptions about future involvement, as reflected in the following account:

"There's an assumption that I'll take over." (P3)

Such statements point to a shift from possibility to apparent inevitability. The business is no longer considered one option among many but becomes integrated into the successor's default understanding of their future. Importantly, this perception of inevitability does not necessarily arise from direct pressure, but from the absence of alternative narratives within the family context. At the same time, implicit expectations did not uniformly translate into experienced constraint. In some cases, successors described the succession pathway as continuously available but not enforced:

"I could always return to the conversation where I was the potential successor, and the door was always open." (P4)

This highlights a key tension within implicit expectation structures. While the business remains a persistent and highly salient option, it is simultaneously framed as voluntary. As a result, successors manage a context in which succession is both normalized and open-ended—present as an anticipated future yet not formally imposed. This split allows expectations to shape behavior and orientation without demanding explicit enforcement, rendering them especially enduring and difficult to contest.

Normative framing of expectations. Beyond how expectations were communicated, the way they were framed played a key role in molding how succession was understood. These normative frames did not simply define whether succession was expected but influenced how it was perceived—whether as an obligation, an opportunity, or a legitimate option among alternatives. In several cases, succession was framed in terms of openness and individual choice. Rather than being imposed, it was presented as a viable pathway that successors could pursue if it aligned with their personal preferences. This is reflected in the following account:

"It was just a matter of my personal desires, which were influenced by personal reasons, not by the pressures imposed on my parents." (P4)

At first glance, such statements suggest a high degree of autonomy, as the decision to participate in the business is positioned as self-determined. However, this framing also performs an important legitimizing function: by stressing the absence of pressure, it allows expectations to remain present without being perceived as imposed. In this sense, autonomy is not necessarily independent of family influence but is shaped within a context in which the business is already established as a meaningful and available option. A similar dynamic is visible in cases where parents encouraged successors to gain experience outside the family firm before considering long-term involvement. Here, succession was not framed as an immediate expectation, but as a possibility to be revisited at a later stage:

"And my parents are more like saying that it's not the right time yet, but that they definitely want me to do it, just in a few more years, so that I'm more familiar with life." (P5)

This time-based framing shifts succession from a present obligation to a future-oriented expectation. While this delays commitment and supports personal development, it does not remove the expectation itself. Instead, it repositions succession as something to grow into, connecting it with notions of readiness and competence. As a result, the expectation is maintained, but in a form that appears reasonable and developmentally appropriate. Even in the absence of direct pressure, the business often remained a constant reference point within the family context. Its continued presence in conversations and long-term thinking sustained its relevance as a potential future path. Over time, this persistence leads to a situation in which succession is neither explicitly required nor easily disregarded. The business is therefore not imposed as an obligation but continuously reinforced as a meaningful and legitimate trajectory.

Evolution of parental expectations over time. Parental expectations did not emerge as fixed or clearly defined from the outset but developed gradually in relation to both the successor's involvement in the business and the wider personal trajectory. Rather than being imposed at a single point in time, expectations unfolded progressively, determined by how successors were perceived in terms of maturity, competence, and capability. In the early stages, expectations were typically diffuse and embedded in general exposure to the business rather than explicitly articulated. Initial contact was often unofficial and exploratory, with the firm forming part of the family environment without being clearly positioned as a future career path. At this point, succession remained a latent possibility rather than a defined expectation. A significant change occurred as successors approached key educational and professional decisions. At this stage, expectations became more visible, not necessarily because they were newly introduced, but because they were activated by changing perceptions of the successor's capabilities. One interviewee described this change as follows:

> *"[…] because my dad talks to me differently, too. You know, when I study, let's say I have some things to offer that he doesn't." (P3)*

This account points to a relational change in how the successor is engaged. The shift isn't limited to more frequent or explicit communication; it expresses a redefinition of the successor's role—from an inactive observer to someone whose knowledge and input are increasingly acknowledged. Expectations, therefore, are not simply communicated more clearly, but are adjusted in line with the successor's perceived capability to contribute. The development of expectations was not strictly linear, however. In some cases, increased involvement was accompanied by greater openness and clarity about business, suggesting a dual inclusion of the successor in the firm's central aspects. As one interviewee noted:

> *"Well, it seems to me that the only thing that could have changed is that when I actually went back to my grandmother, she told me a little more, and I learned the scale of what it was like, for example, the turnover, etc. And I didn't know that, for example.." (P5)*

> *Interviewer: "So your grandmother is not only more open and straightforward about wanting you to take over the company, but she is also more open to sharing details about the company with you than your parents."*
> *P5: "That's exactly how it is." (P5)*

Here, the evolution of expectations is reflected not only in what is communicated but also in the level of access the successor is granted to the business. Increased transparency signals greater trust and a shift toward preparing the successor for potential responsibility. Rather than becoming more rigid, expectations in this context become more elaborated and grounded in concrete knowledge.

4.2 Successors' Interpretation of Parental Expectations

While the previous section focused on the forms through which parental expectations are communicated, this section analyzes how successors interpret these expectations. In the cases examined, expectations were not passively received but, were actively constructed through a process formed by individual experiences, identity considerations, and involvement in the family business. Consequently, similar expectations may be interpreted differently, depending on how successors perceive their meaning and implications. This section, therefore, explores the interpretive processes through which expectations are experienced as supportive or constraining, aligned or conflicting, and clear or ambiguous.

Perceived support vs. pressure. Successors did not interpret parental expectations uniformly. A central distinction emerging from the interviews concerns whether these expectations were experienced as supportive or as a source of pressure. Importantly, these interpretations did not arise from fundamentally different types of expectations, but from how similar basic dynamics were perceived and negotiated by successors. In several accounts, parental expectations were experienced as supportive, particularly when they were communicated without direct enforcement and accompanied by opportunities for gradual engagement. In such cases, the nonexistence of explicit pressure allowed successors to approach the business on their own terms. At the same time, expectations remained present within the family context, often reappearing in informal interactions. One interviewee described this dynamic as follows:

> *"I'll tell you, I didn't really notice any such pressure; it wasn't like they were telling me directly. My topic was always there, and my grandmother would initiate the family conversation, and my grandmother would initiate it, saying, "When will Wojtek come over, you'll work for us?"" (P5)*

This illustrates how expectations can be experienced as non-coercive yet continuously reinforced. No direct imposition does not mean that expectations are absent; rather, they are embedded in recurring interactions that keep succession present without portraying it as obligatory. In this way, expectations may function as a support, preserving a sense of choice while simultaneously guiding attention toward the business as a relevant future pathway. A similar dynamic may be observed in cases where successors were encouraged to gain experience outside the family firm before making long-term decisions. This emphasis on external development was frequently interpreted as a form of support, as it legitimized alternative trajectories and delayed the need for commitment:

> *"Absolutely. I think, for example, first of all, I definitely think that I need that experience. I don't think. If I come back after one year of studies, you know, I will have enough knowledge to assist the company and lead the company. Absolutely not. I think so, I have a whole different plan of what I am interested in and what companies I would like to work for, what in the market I would like to learn, okay?" (P6)*

Here, the expectation of succession is not removed but temporarily backgrounded, allowing successors to frame their engagement with the business as contingent on readiness. This reinforces a sense of autonomy, as involvement appears to stem from personal development rather than external demand. At the same time, the business is a latent point of return, indicating that support and direction can coexist within the same framing. Not all interpretations, however, were experienced in such positive terms. For some successors, expectations took the form of a subtle but persistent pressure, particularly when they remained implicit yet continuously present over time. As one interviewee explained:

“It's been, like, different stages. I think when I was young, for me, it was, like, very difficult to face it because I think without, like, saying it explicitly, there was big, big, big expectations of what I was going to do. So I didn't have, like, much freedom of what to choose, for example, in a in degree to pursue.” (P7)

In this case, pressure does not stem from explicit demands, but from the continuing presence of an anticipated future role that limits the perceived range of viable alternatives. The expectation becomes difficult to ignore precisely because it is never directly imposed; instead, it shapes decisions through its persistence within the family context. This sense of pressure was further confirmed by the perceived consequences of opting out of succession. For some successors, the decision extended past individual preference and was tied to the continuity of the business itself. Under such conditions, expectations acquired a moral dimension, as the possible impact on the family and the firm constrained the extent to which succession could be treated as a fully open choice.

Perceived autonomy and identity alignment. Successors’ interpretations of parental expectations were closely linked to their sense of autonomy and the extent to which succession aligned with their personal identity and vocational ambitions. While some interviewees experienced a strong alignment between their interests and the family business, others described a more complex process of aligning their individual goals with externally imposed expectations. For several successors, involvement in the family business was perceived as consistent with their existing interests and competencies. In these cases, expectations were not experienced as external impositions but rather as reinforcing an already developing orientation toward the business. A successor from the IT sector explained:

“Personally, I believe that hard work builds character. Besides, we work in an industry where the results are tangible and visible. It's also incredibly rewarding to see how the work is created, how it's done, and then to truly be proud of it when it's finished and you see the results.” (P2)

Here, expectations function as validation rather than constraint, supporting the successor’s self-concept and rendering the transition into the business a coherent, self-directed choice. In other cases, alignment was not immediate but developed over time through continued exposure and engagement. Rather than arising from a predefined career intention, interest in the business gradually emerged as successors became more familiar with its activities and demands. As one participant noted:

> *"The topic came up, and I decided I wanted to work there. I told my parents about it two or three years ago because I knew I wanted to pursue it, that I was interested in it, I wanted to develop it, I felt it was mine, that I would work for myself. And it's like, even five years ago, there wasn't even a question of a father saying, 'This will be yours,' or something, 'You'll take it over,' but now there's a feeling among everyone that I'm simply coming back." (P3)*

This suggests that identity alignment can be constructed through experience, as ongoing involvement enables successors to reinterpret the business as personally meaningful rather than externally prescribed. However, alignment was not universal. In some instances, successors described a clear divergence between their personal aspirations and the expectations linked with the family business, particularly when alternative career paths were initially prioritized. As one successor explained:

> *"So I remember, like, maybe, like, being 14, and I wanted to study architecture. And there was no, like, room for that. But not big not explicit. You know? But I know that it was big expectations for me to study something related to business." (P7)*

In such cases, succession is not experienced as an extension of identity but as a competing trajectory, requiring successors to actively resolve conflicting orientations. Even when successors ultimately chose to engage with the business, this did not necessarily result in full alignment. Instead, decisions were often placed between personal preference and a sense of responsibility toward the family. This indicates that autonomy operates within relational constraints. While successors exercise agency, the range and perceived legitimacy of available options are determined by family expectations, resulting in decisions that are simultaneously self-directed and socially conditioned.

Experienced ambiguity and uncertainty. The results show that parental expectations were not always clearly defined or consistently interpreted by successors. In several cases, interviewees described uncertainty about what was expected of them, particularly when expectations were communicated indirectly or deliberately left open-ended. This vagueness was most evident in situations where overt discussions about succession were limited or absent.

While parents signaled the business as a potential future option, they did not always clarify whether succession was expected, encouraged, or entirely voluntary. As one interviewee noted:

> *"So, they're just saying, like, I'm seeing signs that they want me to take over, right? Well, that's the one, but these are such literal signs that, oh, I've never heard that, oh, 'You're literally taking over this company', right?" (P5)*

In such cases, successors were required to interpret parental expectations from incomplete and indirect cues, leading to uncertainty about both the strength and the aim of these expectations. This vagueness was additionally reinforced by the coexistence of seemingly contradictory signals. On the one hand, parents encouraged independence and exploration outside the family business; on the other, the business remained a persistent reference point within the family context. A successor from the hospitality sector described this tension:

> *"[…] as for my parents, they thought that since my brother and I were younger, as I said, they kind of avoided the topic or simply said they didn't want us to take over the business—but that was until I finished high school and had to choose my future path, meaning going to college, that's when those conversations also began, where I wasn't supposed to assume I'd pursue a degree in tourism or hospitality (P7)*

Rather than resolving expectations, this combination of openness and continuity tended to blur their meaning, making it difficult for successors to determine whether succession represented a genuine choice or an implicitly preferred outcome. Importantly, this ambiguity had concrete consequences. The absence of clear expectations forced successors to construct their own interpretations, frequently leading to hesitation and prolonged decision-making. In response, some adopted a careful approach to career planning, attempting to preserve multiple options while circumventing potential conflict with perceived family expectations.

Interpretation shaped by prior experience. The results show that successors' interpretations of parental expectations are shaped not solely by communication but also by their direct engagement with the family business. Practical involvement provides a context in which expectations are not only observed but also tested against the realities of everyday operations and responsibilities. For some interviewees, early assumptions about succession were reconsidered after gaining direct experience in the business. Exposure to tasks, decision-making processes, and organizational dynamics enabled them to move beyond abstract notions and develop a more concrete understanding of what taking over would entail. A successor from the service sector described this shift:

> *"He was complete he was one man who was involved in everything. Right? And I at the time, I was pretty young. I didn't know. But now when I'm in when I was involved with, you know, repositioning of this film, I came to know how much how deeply he was involved in every aspect." (P6)*

In this sense, experience functions as a mechanism of clarification, translating loosely defined expectations into concrete responsibilities that can be more critically evaluated. In other cases, involvement resulted in a more positive reinterpretation of expectations. As successors became more familiar with the business and their potential role within it, initial uncertainty gave way to a growing sense of fit. A Polish successor reflected:

> *"For example, when I worked, the higher margin I made, he'd give it back to me because he wanted me to see, feel the money, as he put it, to see, to feel it more. But it was never like I didn't want to, and they wanted to." (P3)*

Here, repeated engagement appears to foster identification with the business, allowing expectations to shift from externally associated possibilities to internally endorsed aspirations. However, increased involvement did not uniformly lead to stronger alignment. For some participants, direct exposure to the demands and responsibilities associated with running the business prompted new doubts or reinforced existing reservations. As one Polish potential successor noted:

> *"The fact that I have a vague understanding of it, more about managing such a company than actually running it, because it's impossible to run it without specialist knowledge, I would need to educate myself extensively to be able to run it at all, to make it profitable." (P4)*

4.3 Development of Psychological Ownership

Building on successors' interpretations of parental expectations, this section analyzes how these experiences contribute to the development of psychological ownership toward the family business. The analysis of the data suggests that, in the cases studied, psychological ownership emerges through an ongoing process in which successors move from familiarity to deeper involvement and, in several instances, to a sense of personal responsibility for the business. Through this progression, the business is gradually internalized as "one's own," reflected in growing attachment, identification, and commitment. This section, therefore, explores how psychological ownership develops over time and is shaped by successors' experiences within the family and the firm.

Early exposure to the business. In several of the cases studied, early involvement appeared to play a key role by shaping successors' cognitive and emotional relationships with the firm from an early stage. Rather than being introduced later as a potential career option, the business is often present throughout childhood, forming part of the successor's everyday environment. This early contact was typically unofficial and unstructured, involving presence rather than deliberate preparation. A successor from the construction sector described this experience:

> *"[…] the family business somehow influenced my childhood and, in fact, who I am now, who I've become, because it has always been a part of my life, and it still accompanies my parents, so I know how much effort and time they put into this company." (P1)*

Such exposure allows successors to gradually become familiar with the business, not only its activities but also its routines, social relationships, and significance within the family. Importantly, this reduces the perception of the business as something external, placing it instead as an integral and recognizable part of the successor's environment. By repeated exposure, the business becomes normalized within the successor's frame of reference. As one potential successor stated:

> *"This company and its activities were always around, even for trivial things like trips, which were treated partly as recreational trips. However, there was always something to do during such trips." (P2)*

This process of normalization reduces the psychological distance between the individual and the organization, making later involvement appear less like a distinct career decision and more like a progression in an already familiar context. At the same time, initial exposure does not produce a conscious intention to assume ownership. Rather, it establishes a foundation of acquaintance and comfort upon which later experiences can build. In this sense, early involvement serves as a precondition for psychological ownership by creating the conditions for the business to be perceived later as personally relevant. In some cases, this early familiarity was accompanied by a stronger feeling of belonging even before formal roles were assumed. Being present in the business environment and observing family members in their roles fostered an implicit sense of closeness that extended beyond mere exposure. As one successor explained:

> *"I talked about my childhood, so yes, I'd like to elaborate a bit more on that—that I'm very, very emotionally connected to my parents' workplace and the fact that, really, my childhood and my brother's childhood were spent under the care of our grandparents, because they looked after us our whole lives, they raised us, they fed us, and so on, so we didn't see our parents very often." (P1)*

This indicates that early involvement may promote not only familiarity with the business but also an emotional attachment that later supports a stronger sense of personal responsibility toward the firm.

Active involvement. Among the cases investigated, active involvement appeared to be an important stage, as it transforms the successor's role from an observer to a contributor. Through direct engagement in tasks and responsibilities, successors begin to establish a more concrete relationship with the business, grounded in their own actions and decisions. For several interviewees, this transition involved taking on defined roles within the organization, allowing them to add to its functioning and experience the consequences of their work. A successor from the laboratory infrastructure sector described this shift:

> *Interviewer: "Okay. But but you do feel some kind of connection to the family business, right?"*
> *P6: "Absolutely. Okay. I think, but I don't know if it's because it's family business or it's because of the project that we're doing. But maybe that's related because, obviously, what you are working on is how you connect." (P6)*

This illustrates how involvement in concrete tasks can foster a sense of belonging, as meaningful work links individual effort to the broader organizational context. As successors begin to see the effects stemming from their contributions, their relationship with the business becomes more immediate and personally relevant. Such experiences foster a growing sense of influence and responsibility, both of which are central to the emergence of psychological ownership. Increased involvement also facilitated a greater understanding of the business, strengthening both ability and confidence. As successors became more engaged during daily operations, they developed a clearer sense of how different organizational elements are interconnected and how their own roles fit within this structure. One study participant reflected:

> *"To be part of the company, it was more that I could study, for example, business or industrial engineering, and I could be part of this. And when that happened, it was more explicit because there was a way that I could join, like, the managerial side without getting involved, like, with my hands, like, in the soil." (P7)*

Here, involvement contributes not only to knowledge acquisition but also to an increasing sense of integration, as understanding the business enables successors to position themselves within it more meaningfully. At the same time, active participation required sustained investment of time, effort, and accountability, further deepening the successor's relationship with the business. However, this increased responsibility also exposed them to the pressures and difficulties associated with running the firm. As a Polish successor noted:

> *"I'm very actively involved in the company's operations. In fact, I'm doing everything I can to truly learn every process so I can do what my dad does now. I need to know every detail of the entire business, from the physical aspects to project management, completing documentation, participating in training, and even client contact." (P1)*

In this sense, involvement also acts as a form of reality exposure, making the demands and stakes of participation more visible and personally consequential. Depending on how these

Emotional attachment and identification. In several cases, continued involvement appeared to foster emotional attachment and identification, representing a more advanced stage in the development of psychological ownership. At this stage, the successor's relationship with the business goes beyond mere participation and begins to take on personal and symbolic meaning.

For some successors, this shift emerged gradually through sustained engagement with the business and its social environment. As they spent more time working within the firm, interacting with employees, and participating in its activities, the business was no longer perceived as an external organization but as a context in which they themselves were embedded. A successor from the service sector described this transition:

"I helped out when there weren't any production staff,[...]. I also felt a connection with the employees. Generally, many of our employees have been with us for a very long time." (P5)

This illustrates how ongoing interaction and social integration add to a sense of attachment, as relationships within the firm become personally meaningful. The business is no longer approached as an external entity but as a social environment to which the successor feels connected. In other cases, identification was reinforced by the symbolic and family-related meaning attached to the business. The overlap between family and firm contributed towards a perception of the business as an extension of family history and effort rather than a purely economic entity. As an Indian participant stated in relation to her father:

"[...], he never imagined himself having the business [...]. I came to know how much how deeply he (father) was involved in every aspect. So, I think his ambition on or, you know, that he made the firm and that it was made for this film, you know, for him to produce. (P6)

Here, attachment is formed not only through personal experience but also through the business's symbolic significance, which embodies legacy, continuity, and shared family identity. Identification was further strengthened through the successor's own contributions. As individuals became more involved in decision-making and guiding outcomes, their relationship with the business became increasingly tied to their own actions and impact. This indicates that emotional attachment is reinforced through a combination of affective connection and personal investment. However, the development of attachment and identification was not uniform across all cases. Some participants maintained a degree of distance, particularly when their personal values, competencies, or ambitions did not correspond to the nature or demands of the business. As one successor noted:

"I believe it would definitely not make a profit, although I believe I would be able to maintain it at the same level, but in terms of development, I don't see it happening well, hence my overall move to the 'I'll sell it rather than develop it' side, because I don't have the knowledge to develop it, and I would have to acquire it for that to happen." (P4)

In such instances, continued involvement does not necessarily translate into identification. Instead, a more instrumental or detached orientation toward the business may persist, suggesting that psychological ownership depends on perceived compatibility between the individual and the organization.

Internalization of responsibility and stewardship. The development of psychological ownership culminates in the internalization of responsibility for the family business. At this stage, successors begin to perceive the business's continuity and functioning as dependent, at least in part, on their own actions, denoting a shift from engagement to accountability. This sense of responsibility does not emerge suddenly but develops gradually alongside increased involvement and a rising awareness of the firm's reliance on family members. For some interviewees, responsibility became particularly salient when alternative career opportunities conflicted with anticipated involvement in the family business. One successor explained:

> *"I was selected to join, like, this a big management program in L'Oreal, but it was really hard for me to accept that role instead of, for example, going in this startup food industry company because I think it was going to it was meaning that I was, like, following a totally different path of what my dad was expecting that I was doing. And I think at one point, I felt responsible." (P7)*

This illustrates how responsibility is not experienced solely as a personal inclination but as an answer to perceived expectations and the absence of alternative successors. Under such conditions, the business is no longer approached purely as an optional career path, but as an entity whose future may depend on the successor's involvement. Responsibility was also closely connected to the symbolic and emotional meaning attributed to the business. The perception of the firm as the outcome of long-term family effort gave rise to a sense of obligation to preserve and sustain it across the generations. As one interviewee reflected:

> *Interviewer: "Do you have a vision or dream that this company will remain in the family for future generations, for your children or your children's children?"*
> *P1: "Yes, yes, absolutely. I think it would be the best thing for that to happen. But then again, I think I'll probably have the same approach as my parents, without pressure". (P1)*

In this case, responsibility is internally justified through the perceived value of continuity, linking personal devotion to ideas of legacy and intergenerational transfer. Rather than being externally imposed, it is grounded in the successor's own evaluation of the business. At this stage, responsibility operates as self-regulation. Successors may perceive themselves as free to choose, yet their decisions are shaped by an awareness determined by the potential consequences for the business and the family. In this sense, the internalization of responsibility reinforces psychological ownership, as the business is no longer only something the successor is involved in, but something for which they feel accountable.

4.4 Missing Elements in Entrepreneurial Socialization

While the previous sections highlighted how socialization processes shape successors' interpretations and encourage psychological ownership, the findings also point to important limitations about how these processes unfold. Rather than being comprehensive and fully adaptive, socialization was frequently characterized by partial exposure, implicit communication, and limited coordination with individual trajectories. These gaps influence how successors understand and evaluate succession, forming both their sense of autonomy and their relationship with the business. This section, therefore, explores three key categories of missing or underdeveloped elements identified in the socialization process among the cases investigated: lack of freedom of choice, limited reflexive dialogue, and limited exposure to the full realities of the business.

Lack of freedom of choice. A pattern observed across several cases concerns succession. Even in the nonexistence of direct coercion, the structure of the decision-making context often positions succession as the default trajectory rather than one option among many. The business's continued presence in the future reduces the likelihood of diligent investigation into alternative career paths. Rather than being evaluated alongside other options, succession is commonly perceived as the most immediate and readily available option. As one interviewee explained:

> *"That's the mindset, his mindset. How the conversation goes is very, it's just very casual. Like, you're going to take the family business. It's not a question. It's almost like it is declared." (P6)*

This illustrates a form of path dependency, in which the prominence of the family business determines not only which options are available but also how they are interpreted and prioritized. As a result, alternatives may remain formally accessible while being implicitly deemphasized. The sense of constrained choice is additionally reinforced by an imbalance in how different career paths are framed. Although alternatives are theoretically possible, they are not always experienced as equally legitimate or encouraged. One interviewee described this asymmetry:

> *"And I was in already on my fourth year, and I was like, okay. It's too late to change. And, also, it would mean too much, and I didn't have the strength to face it, to face this disappointment of my dad, I think, if I took architecture because I think there was no way that I could, connect architecture with the family business. So, I didn't take it." (P7)*

In this case, constraint operates less by explicit restriction and more through anticipated relational consequences. The perceived risk of disappointing parents or departing from expected pathways limits the extent to which alternatives are seriously considered. A further narrowing of perceived choice is linked to the internalization of responsibility. As successors become more aware of the business's dependence on family members, decisions regarding succession extend past individual preference. Opting out is no longer evaluated solely as a personal career decision but also as one with possible implications for the firm's and the family's continuity. This expands the scope of the decision and further constrains the experience of autonomy.

> *"Parents shouldn't plan their children's lives for them; they should let them live their lives on their own terms. And of course, this can go both ways. It might be that the child decides, "Great, I'll study law or architecture, for example, and I won't want to work in the family business." (P1)*

This examination highlights the tension between the ideal of individual autonomy and the relational context in which succession decisions are made. Although alternative paths are acknowledged in principle, their functional feasibility is determined by embedded expectations and perceived consequences, limiting the extent to which choice is experienced as fully open.

Limited reflexive dialogue. Another pattern emerging from the data concerns the dialogue between parents and successors. Rather than participating in open, two-way discussions that would enable clarification and mutual understanding, conversations about succession often remained implicit and fragmented. Expectations were frequently conveyed indirectly, embedded in routine interactions rather than explicitly articulated and jointly examined. This reduced successors' opportunities to express their own perspectives or to question underlying assumptions. As one interviewee described:

> *"Really, the only factor is that I don't have such an open request and I'm not that needed. Because everything is going well, now. I've been growing a bit, so it's also a matter of time, or maybe not now, but I don't know whether there's such a factor. The only factor I can think of would be the willingness, that someone actually said: "We need you right now.". "(P6)*

In such situations, understanding is constructed individually rather than collectively, raising the chance of divergent interpretations. In an asbence of explicit discussion; successors must infer expectations from indirect signals, which may not accurately reflect parental intentions. The absence of structured dialogue also means that key aspects of succession—such as personal fit, long-term commitment, and possible challenges—are rarely systematically examined. Instead, successors are left to make sense of these issues independently over time. As one participant reflected:

> *Interviewer: "Has the topic of succession been discussed yet? In the sense that there have been any formal or at-home conversations about it?"*
>
> *P3: "Not formally, that's for sure. There were no such conversations, no documents. It was more of an informal process." (P3)*

This reliance in self-interpretation places greater responsibility on successors, often prolonging uncertainty and delaying clarity regarding their future role. At the same time, the lack of open exchange allows assumptions on both sides to remain largely unexamined.

Limited Exposure to the Full Realities of the Business. The socialization process frequently provided an incomplete picture of what involvement in the family business entails. Early experiences were commonly formed by selective exposure, emphasizing visible and stable aspects of the business while limiting insight into its more demanding dimensions. Initial contact typically occurred through observation of day-to-day operations, without direct exposure to risk, uncertainty, or responsibility. This form of visibility contributed to a favorable yet partial understanding of the business. As one interviewee noted:

"To really involve them in the business, but to show them how we used to work, like, also, like, to work in different levels, like, to really understand what is, like, giving and contributing to society. So I think that showing them and educating them via through this, like, business as my parents did." (P7)

Such early impressions foreground observable and positive elements, while more complex and demanding aspects remain less accessible. A more complete understanding tends to emerge only with increased involvement. As successors assume responsibilities, they become exposed to pressures, operational complexity, and the possibility of failure—elements which were previously less visible. One participant described this shift:

"But as you said, it's also about being transparent about what it really looks like—meaning it's not just positive, that we're making money and it's great and you can do whatever you want because it's your company, but also not negative, that there's a lot to do and it's hard and so on and you won't be able to handle it, but to find some kind of middle ground, describe the situation in a way that's appropriate for the successor's age,." (P1)

In this sense, experience functions as a corrective mechanism, exposing discrepancies between early perceptions and the actual demands of managing the business. The timing of this exposure has important implications. When challenges and risks are not integrated into early experiences, critical evaluation of succession is often delayed until successors are already more involved or emotionally invested. As a result, decisions regarding succession may be formed without a fully informed understanding at the outset, limiting the extent to which alternatives are considered under comparable conditions.

5. Discussion

The main objective of this research was to analyze how successors' willingness to take over the family business is shaped by interpretations of parental expectations and the development of psychological ownership. In addition, the study intended to identify possible gaps in the entrepreneurial socialization process. The interviewed successors come from family firms that differ in terms of industry, size, and national context. Despite these differences, similar patterns can be seen across cases. All firms reflect core characteristics of family businesses, particularly the overlap between family and firm, intergenerational involvement, and the central role of succession. This makes it possible to identify common dynamics while still recognizing contextual variation.

Forms of parental expectations. In the cases examined, parental expectations appeared to be communicated primarily through implicit mechanisms rather than through direct, clearly articulated discussions. Instead of formal conversations about succession, expectations tend to emerge through everyday exposure to the business and gradual involvement in its activities. This is in line with earlier research highlighting the importance of informal socialization in family firms. At the same time, when expectations are expressed explicitly, they are rarely structured or clearly defined. This supports previous findings that communication around succession is often ambiguous and informal (Sharma et al., 2003). What appears especially visible in this study, however, is that implicit mechanisms do not simply support explicit communication—they often replace it altogether. Expectations are not clearly stated but instead become taken for granted over time. As a result, they may be less visible, yet more deeply embedded in how successors understand their future role.

Successors' interpretation of parental expectations. Among the participants, parental expectations were not interpreted uniformly. Some experience them as supportive, while others perceive them as constraining. This shows the broader discussion in the literature on autonomy and control in family businesses (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sieger et al., 2011). In several cases, expectations were seen as enabling, particularly when parents encouraged external experience and did not impose immediate commitment. At the same time, the findings show that a sense of pressure can develop even without direct demands. This supports the idea of more subtle forms of control described in previous research (Ntari & Deliwe, 2024). What stands out, however, is that this pressure is often not linked to what parents explicitly say or do, but rather to how successors interpret the situation. In particular, the perceived consequences of not continuing the business—such as its possible discontinuity—introduce a feeling of responsibility that limits how “free” the decision feels.

Development of psychological ownership. The findings largely support existing theories of psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001). Initial exposure to the business contributes to familiarity, while more active involvement strengthens a sense of competence and influence. Over time, this can develop into affective attachment and identification with the firm. At the same time, the process appears more complex than a straightforward progression. Increased involvement does not automatically lead to stronger identification. In some cases, it also exposes successors to the demands and risks associated with running the business, which can lead to hesitation or doubt. Another important aspect is the role of family-related meaning. The business is perceived not only as an economic entity but also as something connected to family history, effort, and continuity. This reinforces attachment and is consistent with the idea of family firms as socio-emotional systems (Berrone et al., 2012).

Missing elements in entrepreneurial socialization. The findings also point to several shortcomings in how successors are socialized into the business. These include limited frank dialogue, a constrained sense of choice, and incomplete exposure to the realities of running the firm.

First, conversations about succession are often indirect and fragmented. As a result, successors are left to interpret expectations on their own, which can lead to uncertainty and delayed decision-making. This is consistent with previous research highlighting communication lapses in family firms (Sharma et al., 2003), but the findings here show more clearly how this vagueness plays out in practice.

Second, even when alternative career paths are technically available, succession is often experienced as the default option. This shows a form of path dependency, in which one trajectory becomes dominant not because it is explicitly enforced but because it is continuously present.

Finally, initial exposure to the business tends to bring out its more visible and positive aspects, while the more demanding elements become apparent only later. This means that critical evaluation of succession often happens at a stage when successors are already involved or emotionally connected, which may affect how they assess their options. The findings of this study suggest that, among the cases investigated, succession in family businesses appears to be driven not solely by clearly defined expectations but by a combination of implicit socialization, individual interpretation, and lived experience. A key tension emerges from this: while successors are often told that the decision is theirs, the context in which it is made is already structured in ways that make certain choices more likely than others. In this sense, autonomy is present, but not absolute. It is formed by family dynamics, ongoing exposure to the business, and an increasing sense of responsibility for its future.

Research Gap. Beyond their theoretical contributions, the findings of this study have real-world implications for families navigating the succession process. The simplest and perhaps most important one is this: talk to each other. In many of the cases examined, expectations were never actually put into words; they just existed, felt by everyone but rarely discussed. Successors spent years reading the signals and trying to figure out what was expected of them, when, in many cases, a single honest conversation could have cleared things up. Parents do not need to have a fully worked-out plan before they open that conversation. What matters is creating an environment where a successor can say, "I'm not sure this is what I want" or "I have other ambitions too" without it feeling like a betrayal. That kind of openness does not push successors away from the business; if anything, the cases in this study suggest it tends to bring them closer.

It is also worth thinking carefully about how and when successors are introduced to the realities of the business. Several participants in this study described growing up with a largely positive, surface-level picture of what the family firm involved, only to encounter its more demanding side once they were already deeply invested. Gradually exposing successors to the full picture, the pressures and uncertainties alongside the rewards, gives them a fairer basis on which to make their decision, and reduces the risk of choices being made without a fully informed understanding of what they entail.

Finally, the findings suggest that preserving a genuine sense of choice may be one of the most effective ways a family can encourage succession. Successors who felt that the door was truly open, that pursuing a different path would be understood and accepted, often described a stronger, more self-directed connection to the business than those who felt the decision had already been made for them. Framing succession as an invitation rather than an expectation, and meaning it, appears to foster exactly the kind of psychological ownership that makes successors want to take over rather than feel they have to.

Limitations. Regardless of the degree of methodological strictness of any given research article, limitations are an inevitable part of empirical research. Direct recognition of these limitations is a key part of any study, since it enables proper interpretation of its findings and implications (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2008; Saunders et al., 2023). Therefore, the following section will examine the limitations of this research to outline paths for improvement in future succession research.

This paper builds on self-reported data collected exclusively from successors. This form of data collection is prone to a common methodological bias. Although successors' subjective viewpoints regarding parental expectations, willingness, and psychological ownership are crucial for analyzing the dataset and are theoretically justified for accurate analysis, they may still be influenced by a plethora of factors (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Spector, 2006; Spector, 2019). Some of them could reflect retrospective interpretations of family dynamics or social desirability. However, this study employs measures to mitigate these risks, including multi-scale items, attention checks, and confirmation of total anonymity. Nonetheless, it is still possible to encounter common method bias or perceptual bias, since no countermeasures are perfect (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Spector, 2019). Proposal for this aspect of the study for future researchers could include the inclusion of parents, other family members, and non-family members with strong ties to the owning family; data to bolster the reliability of the sample and improve its significance (Podsakoff et al., 2003); and a focus on the family business ownership context.

However, another limitation of this study is the sheer complexity of the family business succession process. While this study focuses on the relationship between perceived parental expectations, psychological ownership, and successors' willingness to take over the family business, other factors not examined in this paper are probably of high significance for impacting the succession-related results (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023; Patton, 2015). Some exemplar characteristics, such as family relationship quality, cultural context, organizational structure, or individual career aspirations, may play an important role in shaping successors' decisions. The factors were not the main focus of this study, which could hinder its ability to draw appropriate conclusions (De Massis et al., 2014; Berrone et al., 2012). Future research could adopt an approach that analyzes other factors not introduced or not centrally focused on in this study. This would allow for a fuller picture of the factors influencing the family business succession process (Saunders et al., 2023; Patton, 2015).

Finally, the very nature of the qualitative research design dictates a degree of subjective interpretive judgment on the part of the researcher. However, systematic coding procedures were introduced alongside the thematic analysis to enhance the analytical rigor; it is impossible to eliminate all potential bias when formulating interpretations and analytical conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ridder, 2014). The same study, with the same participant group size and population, will draw different conclusions based on the researcher's perspective, prior assumptions, and understanding of the topic (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). To mitigate this limitation, the analysis followed transparent coding procedures and relied on established qualitative research frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One way to partially address this challenge is to adopt a multi-researcher approach. While such limitations cannot be fully eliminated given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, involving additional researchers could help reduce their impact by enabling the aggregation of results into more robust, merged conclusions. Various researchers could be involved in each phase of the dataset analysis, such as the coding process, or through employing additional validation techniques, such as participant feedback or triangulation (Nowell et al., 2017; Patton, 2015; Ridder, 2014).

6. Conclusions

Succession in family businesses is often treated as a formal decision-making process, yet this study shows that it is equally shaped by subtle, ongoing family dynamics. While current research has concentrated heavily on governance structures or succession planning, the function of parental expectations—especially in their implicit form—has received less direct attention. By studying how these expectations are formed, interpreted, and internalized, this study provides a more subtle understanding of how successors come to relate to the family business. The results show that parental expectations are rarely communicated by explicit or organized discussions. Instead, they are embedded during everyday interactions, initial exposure, and gradual involvement in the business. Over time, this creates a situation in which succession is not necessarily presented as a choice but rather appears as a taken-for-granted trajectory. At the same time, successors do not respond to these expectations uniformly. While some interpret them as supportive, others experience them as constraining. What is especially important is that perceived pressure does not mainly stem from direct parental influence, but from the anticipated consequences of not continuing the business. This shifts the source of constraint from external control to internal responsibility, making the decision more complex than a simple matter of personal preference.

The study also shows that psychological ownership develops through a combination of early familiarity and active involvement. As successors interact more intensively with the business, they frequently develop a sense of attachment and identification. However, this process is not linear. Greater involvement may just as easily expose the demands and risks of running the business, leading to hesitation or ambivalence. This highlights that psychological ownership is not inherently stabilizing but can also introduce tension into the succession process. In addition, the findings point to several shortcomings in the socialization process. The absence of open and reflexive dialogue leaves successors to interpret expectations independently, frequently resulting in ambiguity and delayed decision-making. Furthermore, although alternative career routes may formally exist, succession is frequently experienced as the default option. Combined with a limited early understanding of the challenges of running the business, this can lead to decisions made without a fully informed perspective. Taken together, these results suggest that succession in family businesses is not only a strategic or economic process, but also a deeply social and interpretive one. While successors are often formally granted autonomy, their choices are shaped within a context that subtly directs them toward continuity. In this sense, autonomy in family business succession is not absolute but relational, emerging from the interplay among individual agency, family dynamics, and perceived responsibility. At the same time, this study is not without limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small and context-dependent sample, which limits the extent to which they can be generalized. In addition, the analysis focuses primarily on the successors' perspective, leaving the parental viewpoint unexplored. Subsequent research could address these limitations by including multiple family members and examining how expectations are negotiated over time across different cultural or institutional settings.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to a more detailed understanding of succession by showing that successors inherit not only a business but also a set of expectations, meanings, and responsibilities that shape their perception of their role. Recognizing this process is key to understanding why succession decisions are often more complex and less freely chosen than they may appear at first.

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List of tables

Appendixes

Appendix 1.

Interview guide

1. **Background Questions**

Can you briefly describe your family business?

- What industry is it in?
- How long has it been operating?

What is your current role in relation to the family business?

- Are you currently involved in the business?
- If yes, in what capacity?

At what stage of succession is the family business currently?

- Has succession already been discussed?

Growing up, how present was the family business in your daily life?

2. **Parental Expectations**

How have your parents talked about the future of the family business with you?

- Did they ever mention the possibility of you taking over the business?
- When did these conversations start?

How would you describe your parents' expectations regarding your potential involvement in the business?

- Were these expectations explicit or implicit?
- Were they discussed openly or assumed?
- Can you recall specific moments or situations where you felt your parents expected you to take over the business?
- For example during childhood, adolescence, education, or career decisions.
- How did you personally interpret these expectations?
- Did they feel like encouragement, opportunity, obligation, or pressure?

3. **Psychological Ownership**

When did you first start feeling connected to the family business?

- To what extent do you feel that the family business is "yours" or part of your identity?
- What experiences contributed most to your connection with the family business?

- For example early involvement, responsibilities, trust from parents, or participation in decisions.
- How would you describe the relationship between your family and the business while you were growing up?

Have your parents' expectations influenced how you feel about the business?
- If yes, in what way?

4. Successors' Willingness

How do you currently feel about the possibility of taking over the family business?
- What factors influence your willingness or reluctance to take over the business?
- For example personal career goals, family expectations, responsibility, or emotional connection.

Do you think your feelings about succession have changed over time?
- What influenced those changes?
- Have you ever considered pursuing a career outside the family business? Why or why not?

5. Interaction Between Expectations and Ownership

- In your opinion, how do your parents' expectations influence your personal motivation to take over the business?
- Do you think your sense of connection to the business affects how you respond to these expectations?

6. Reflection Questions

- What do you think would make you more willing to take over the family business?
- What do you think parents in family businesses should do to encourage the next generation to take over?
- If you were completely free to choose, what role would the family business play in your future?

7. Closing Question

- Is there anything else about your experience with the family business or succession that you think is important but we have not discussed?