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DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESSOR SELECTION: EVIDENCE FROM FAMILY-OWNED SMES IN MOROCCO

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ABSTRACT

The increasing mortality rate of family companies worldwide makes the investigation of the problems of succession one of the priorities that has fascinated the community of researchers recently. This study contributes to the analysis of the succession issue from the successor's point of view, through the investigation of the potential successor selection process and choice of determinants. This study's originality is in its attempt to scrutinize the phenomenon in question through the entrepreneurial and sociocultural lens. Also, this study aims to present some managerial implications that can support the founders of Moroccan family-owned SMEs (Small and Medium sized Enterprises) in setting up a succession process which will enable them to select their potential successors in an effective way. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was conducted with six managers of five Moroccan family-owned SMEs. The research will contribute towards the scholarly debate about the succession issue, which is considered a significant field that deserves a deeper analysis, especially in the context of Moroccan family-owned SMEs. The results of this study also revealed that there is a heterogeneity of issues in the selection of potential successors from one family business to another and from one business family to another. Indeed, the trust between the predecessor and the potential successor, as well as between the latter and the other stakeholders, the business families' subjective norms (i.e., nepotism, primogeniture, patriarchy), the successor's

involvement, the willingness, the motivation, the level of education, the knowledge and the accumulated experiences, are the main determining factors considered when selecting the potential successor of family SMEs.

Keywords: Family-owned SMEs, potential successor, predecessor, succession.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in the number of bankruptcies of family-owned companies worldwide makes the investigation of the problems of succession one of the priorities that has attracted the attention of the community of researchers and academicians recently. This has led to a remarkable increase in the number of scientific works that have been published on the issue of the intergenerational transfer of family businesses (FB). However, much of these researches have only addressed the formal aspects of succession, for example succession planning, and succession modalities (Schlömer-Laufen & Rauch, 2020; Magasi, 2016; Tanzwani, 2010) and many studies addressed this challenge from the founder's point of view (LeCounte, 2020; Honjo & Kato, 2022), with a remarkable lack of research dealing with the transition from the successors' point of view. Succession is a strategic issue in the life cycle of any family-owned business company (Bennedsenet et al., 2007; Nordqvist et al., 2013; Schell et al., 2020). Indeed, the selection and nurturing of a potential new successor who is able to take the founder-leader's place is one of the key success factors of the FB intergenerational succession process (Bathija & Priyadarshini, 2018; Mohamad et al., 2018; Agadusameso, 2015; Breton Miller et al., 2004; Yordanova, 2012; Cadieux & Lorrain, 2002). Previous studies have pointed out that the successor selection process is shaped by patriarch strategies and choices (Hillebrand & Teichert, 2020), as well as primogeniture and nepotism practices (Schell et al., 2020). The literature review on FB supported the personal characteristics of the successors as one of the important criteria of their selection (Blank et al., 2022 ; Block 2011; Shahzad et al., 2021).

According to Schell et al. (2020), the potential successor's integrity and commitment to the business are the key attributes in the choice of a successor, while factors related to gender, birth order, etc., are less important according to these authors. Besides that, the selection of internal successors is more favored in some situations as this will ensure the strategic stability of the family business, although the external successor may be able to perform better in the changed contexts (Wang, et al., 2017). Furthermore, male candidates are preferred as potential successors (Schell et al., 2020; Zerbet & Ouahi, 2020), consequently this gender bias decreases the likelihood of choosing women to be future FB leaders. This reality could be justified by the practices and stereotypes of a male society that tends to value the male and underestimate the female (Constantinidis, 2010; Zerbet & Ouahi, 2020). Indeed, choosing a suitable successor is a complex process that is affected by many heterogeneous factors, which are personal, familial and organizational (Stavrou, 1998).

Despite the progress of scientific studies on the subject of family business succession, a variety of theoretical and empirical gaps have been revealed. The bibliometric study carried out by the Cisneros et al. (2018) reviewed 661 papers that had been published between 1939 and 2017. It dealt mainly with the succession issues of FB, and discussed different research avenues by highlighting "that the literature in this field is in the preparadigmatic stage because the main author's network is characterized by multiple foci, there are a few specialized clusters focused only on one specific topic in the field, or only on one specific

theoretical framework or only on one specific methodology” (p.922). Also, these authors have stated that the family business succession literature is still in the preparadigmatic stage (Kuhn, 1962) and there is almost no specialized cluster that studies only one specific topic (e.g., succession process, post succession performance) or which uses a specific theoretical framework (e.g., stewardship theory, socio-emotional wealth) (pp.946-947). According to Cisneros et al. (2018), several clusters and dimensions of FB succession have already been covered by the literature. However, scientific research remains still open to question and is still in its embryonic phases.

Thus, the aim of our study is to contribute to the development of research on the issues of intergenerational business succession and fill the extant theoretical gap by exploring the determinants of successor selection and processes within five Moroccan family-owned SMEs. Moreover, the originality of this study is that it has begun to explore the problematic state of affairs in the Moroccan entrepreneurial and socio-cultural contexts. In addition, this study aims to present some managerial implications that can support the founders of Moroccan family-owned SMEs in their endeavor to select in an effective way their potential successors and address issues in the succession process.

This research aims to address succession decisions from the successor’s point of view within the Moroccan family-owned small medium enterprises. In this vein, the study seeks to explore and understand the key determinant factors affecting potential successors throughout the succession process. To reach these research objectives, it has adopted a qualitative approach based on the case study method. Interviews were carried out with predecessors and successors, as well as with other stakeholders, such as family members of family-owned SMEs who have experience in the intergenerational succession process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Concepts: Business Founder and Potential Successor

The Family Business Founder

In the social and behavioral sciences, defining concepts is half the battle. In this study, the definitions proposed for the concepts are far from being unanimous and universal (Hoy & Verser, 1994 cited by De Massis et al. 2008). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the founder, also named the predecessor, is a key concept that deserves to be defined. De Massis et al. (2008) defined the predecessor “as the person who holds the top management position in a family business and who must relinquish that position before another family member can take over (p.184).

The Potential Successor of a Family Business

The successor is also named the buyer (Cadieux & Brouard, 2008, p. 27). Researchers use the concept "successor" to approach the passage of the FB management or propriety from the predecessor manager to their relatives and heirs (internal succession) (Mouline, 2000; Wiklund et al., 2013). However, the concept of "buyer" concerns the taking over of the operation of the family firm by external members who do not have any direct family relationship with the founder (family business taken over by internal employees but who are not family members, or external intergenerational transferal) (Mouline, 2000; Cadieux & Brouard,

2008, p. 28). According to Deschamps, (2000) cited in Ouardi (2012) and Geraudel et al. (2010), the familial successor and external buyers acquire the status of entrepreneurs once they take over the family business activities and after the disengagement of the predecessors. According to Cadieux & Deschamps (2009), the business external buyer takes over the position of "the predecessor as a stakeholder who strongly influences the SME, this implies changing the work habits internally and with regard to the market" (p.9). The successor takes over the management of the company after the founder's withdrawal (Bourion, 2018, p. 18). In addition, Cadieux & Deschamps (2009) as well as Geraudelet al. (2010) have distinguished three types of buyers. The cautious buyers seek only to take over performing and effective companies. However, the adventurous buyers are risk-taking entrepreneurs who are interested in taking over companies in difficulties (i.e., managerial and financial difficulties), and then there are the indifferent buyers who prefer to take over all types of companies.

Furthermore, the potential successor is any person who presents himself as a possible buyer of the business. According to De Massiset al. (2008) "a potential successor is any family member who could assume managerial control of a family business when the incumbent steps down" (p.184). Agbim (2019) states that the potential successor is a family member who has the necessary requirements (in terms of skills), as well as the willingness to take over the FB's control and management.

Previous Studies on Family Business Succession and Determinants of Successor Choice

The FB succession is a dynamic process characterized by mutual role adjustments (Handler, 1994) between the successor and the predecessor. The process would end with the handing over of the management and/or ownership of the FB to the members of the new generation (Cadieux & Brouard, 2008). The literature review on FB succession distinguishes between ownership and the management transfer process (Cadieux & Lorrain, 2002). The ownership transfer process engenders the evolution of the family firm in general, while the management transfer process concerns just the transition of the managerial tasks from one generation to another (Fattoum & Byrne, 2017). In this study, the aim is to analyze the second process related to the transition of management from predecessor to successor. More precisely, the study is focused on identifying the determinants of a FB's choice of a potential successor. Previous studies have shown that many factors can explain the choice of a successor. These factors could be classified as organizational (related to the firm), familial, and personal (related to the person of the potential successor) (Stavrou, 1998; Wang & Si, 2011; Liu et al., 2013). These factors are derived from the three-circle theory of the family business (Ouhadi & Ouzaka, 2021).

At the organizational level, researchers have emphasized two factors, namely firm performance (Blank et al., 2022) and size, as the main determinants of the succession choice (Wang & Si, 2011). Therefore, a firm's performance is a factor seen as affecting the process of choosing an internal or external successor, although there has been no consensus within the research community about this hypothesis (Wang & Si, 2011). Boeker & Goodstein (1993) and Cannella & Lubatkin (1993) quoted by Wang & Si (2011) and Ansari et al. (2014) confirmed that with poor organizational performance, the firms tend to select an external buyer. Conversely, when firms perform well, passing the torch of the business to family members will be more favored (Ansari et al., 2014). The company's size is another organizational determinant of the choice of a potential successor. Wang and Si (2011) pointed out that the large firms often look for potential successors who were competent. Hidayati et al. (2020) added that the size, stakeholder composition, ownership structure of the firm impacts the way the firm would initiate and realize the succession process.

Liu et al. (2013) pointed out that the larger the firm size is, the more likely it will be that family relatives and descendants are motivated to take over the management of the firm.

In addition, the literature review has pointed out there could be other cluster of determinant factors which are focused on the person who has been selected to become the successor. Researchers have identified the following factors: motivation to take over (Stavrou, 1998), personality traits (Liu et al., 2013), the successor's predecessor relationship (Hidayati et al., 2020; Chrisman et al., 1998), as well as the successor's relationship with family members, the successor's skills and capabilities (Bathija & Priyadarshini, 2018) and the successor's commitment to the family business (Chrisman et al., 1998). Hidayati et al. (2020) has highlighted the push and pull motivating factors in choosing a successor. The push factors are the extrinsic motivations that come from the family, in order to push the successor to take over and to carry on the family project. Additionally, the push factors (intrinsic motivation) are directly related to the potential successor's desire, willingness and motivation to take over the business control after the disengagement of the predecessor. Moreover, Chrisman et al. (1998) has argued that the collaboration between the predecessor and successor, as well as with other family stakeholders, contribute to a smooth intergenerational transferal of the FB.

In addition, the heterogeneous personal relationship between the relevant stakeholders (Grusky, 1959; Friedman, 1986; Lansberg, 1988) will contribute to the successors' training and development (Fiegener et al., 1994). Consequently, the social capital has been recognized as the key to the FB intergenerational success (Barnes & Hershon, 1976; Davis & Tagiuri, 1989; Handler, 1992; Stempler, 1988; Chrisman, et al., 1998p.19). The literature has also highlighted the importance of the desirable personality traits of the successor (Schlepphorst & Moog, 2014). These traits include the person having integrity, independence, creativity, intelligence, self-confidence, and the willingness to take risks (Chrisman et al., 1998). In addition, the traits of openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness are also important for the succession process to be successful and this has been confirmed in a study by Murad et al. (2017). On the other hand, Hidayati et al. (2020) have found that there were three personality traits of the successor that would determine his or her success, namely personal traits (related to integrity, perseverance, self-confidence, intelligence, etc.), interpersonal relationship (motivation, communication, ability to influence others, autonomy, etc.), and situational traits (creativity, acceptance of criticism, enthusiasm, willingness to take risks, perseverance, determination, etc.). Furthermore, previous studies have also shed light on other successor skills, capabilities and commitment as criteria in the selection of a potential successor. Studies by Moulai & Boukrif (2018), Yordanova (2012), and Afghan & Wiqar (2007) have shown support that a successor's skills are an objective determinant of his or her selection process. According to McCall et al. (1988), "the successor must have two complementary competencies: technical competences (in-depth knowledge of the sector, experiences and diversity of tasks performed) and relational competences (ability to work in a group with a spirit of cooperation and collaboration within the company)" (cited in Colot, 2009, p.502). These competencies will help the potential successor to gain credibility (acquiring the skills required to take responsibility and control of the company and to be credible in the eyes of the company's various stakeholders) and gain legitimacy (i.e., gaining self-confidence) (Kandade et al., 2021; Colot, 2009; Culliere et al., 2019).

Family factors are supported as well in previous studies as the main determinants of the selection of a potential successor. Early interactions between parents and their children create the need for the latter to take control of the business and economic activities (Choudhury, 2011). Indeed, numerous researches have

pointed out that family businesses are often taken over by men rather than women (Christina & Sarah, 2008). These cultural and gender stereotypes draw on patriarchal strategies based on primogeniture factors (Aldamiz-Echevarría et al., 2017; Fattoum & Byrne, 2017; Stavrou, 1998). For Christina and Sarah (2008) and Zerbet and Ouahi (2020) gender constitutes a determining criterion in the selection of a successor by the family business predecessor. When it comes to passing corporate control to the following generation, the primogeniture phenomenon favors the oldest son to be selected as the successor manager (Fattoum & Byrne, 2017, p. 232). This point confirms the importance of the children's birth order criterion in the family-owned business succession process (García-Álvarez, et al., 2002; Aldamiz-Echevarría, et al., 2017). The latter researchers have concluded through a survey of 60 predecessors and successors that the gender factor was no longer a constraint to gain access to the corporate control position, but in some cases, women in general do not show a willingness to take over the reins of the company. A recent development has been observed, for example in the study by García-Álvarez et al. (2002) it was found that families have tended lately to pass on the businesses control to siblings, i.e., successors who were brothers and sisters.

Other previous studies have also indicated that daughters were ignored as candidates in succession programs, especially when there were potential male successors and buyers (Constantinidis, 2010). Moreover, previous studies have shown that girls or women in general join the family businesses to accomplish simple jobs and not in it to make a career (Constantinidis, 2010; Cole, 1997; Salganicoff, 1990). This reality could be explained from many perspectives. The religious perspective emphasizes that women's role is limited to the domestic sphere, while men have more responsibilities to support the family. In this perspective, the head of the family (father) and the eldest son have more decision-making power than others (Afghan & Wiqar, 2007). From the family perspective, the parents and founders of the family project do not accept the idea of a daughter as a potential successor because they do not see girls capable of taking over due to their lack of abilities and experiences (Aldamiz-Echevarría et al., 2017). Another observation that stands out in the literature is the matter of family hierarchy (Byrne et al., 2019). The choice of the eldest son as the family business successor is not a criterion of inequality, but it is a symbol of respect of the family hierarchy (Afghan & Wiqar, 2007). Constantinidis (2010) has commented that "it appears from Barnes' (1988) study that tensions arise particularly in cases where a daughter occupies a higher position in the business than the son, this not being consistent with the family hierarchy" (p.146). Primogeniture dominates the value system of the family business, with the older sons inheriting the position of the family head (father) as the natural successors. However, daughters are invisible and only intervene when there is no other alternative (successor son) to keep the project within the family (Béginet al., 2010; Constantinidis, 2010; Wang, 2010; Aldamiz-Echevarría et al., 2017). The study carried out by Cesaroni & Sentuti (2015) cited in Zerbet & Ouahi (2020) has pointed out that female family members may be chosen as successors when male members are not interested in taking over the business, or when the family business is going through a crisis situation, such as the sudden illness or death of the predecessor (Aldamiz-Echevarría et al., 2017), or the risk of business failure. In these special cases, girls are supported by their parents to join the businesses as successors, by assisting them in pursuing education and skills acquisition in the business (Zerbet & Ouahi, 2020).

However, the family system impacts negatively on the successor selection procedure. According to Schell et al. (2020) and Ansari et al. (2014), family values and norms (nepotism, selection of successor based on subjective norms, stereotypes, etc.) were the negative effects on successor selection procedure. "Family firms too often favor family ties in selecting the successor rather than relying on merit" (Bughin et al., 2010, p.18). Conversely, successors should be selected objectively (based on their abilities, leadership,

experiences, technical knowledge), rather than on the basis of gender and subjective factors (Alayo et al., 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives set for this study and to answer its research questions, the study uses the qualitative method based on case strategy (Eisenhardt, 1989). Yin (1990, p.17) quoted in Rispal, (2002, p. 33) approaches the case study as a scientific inquiry that uses several sources of data and aims at exploring the contemporary phenomenon in its real context. In the sense of Yin's researches, the case study strategy has been widely adopted in scientific research in psychology, sociology, political science, and social science, before being transposed to the fields of economics and management (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002; cited in Yin, 2002). This methodological approach is very useful in research that seeks to understand and clarify deeply the "how" and "why" of social phenomena. Similarly, the use of the case study strategy is a legitimate choice when the researcher does not master the reality covered (Yin, 2002).

The explanatory and comprehensive aims of the present study justify the use of the case study methodology as the research strategy. The literature supports the importance of this approach to study the organizational phenomena in general and those of family businesses particularly (De Massis et al., 2008; De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Cesaroni & Sentuti, 2017). "This method is particularly suited to the study of Family Businesses, as it was deemed appropriate to "penetrate the veil of the family and to avoid collecting surface data that offered little depth in understanding the complex nature of FBs" (Litz, 1997) cited in (Cesaroni & Sentuti, 2017, p.172). The problem of the determinants of the choice of a FB potential successor will be analyzed via a multi-case approach. This strategy is considered effective for the present study's purpose, in so far as it will serve to better interpret and understand the complex reality in the selection of a potential successor in its natural context. The analysis involved the use of statements and opinions of the various stakeholders, such as the potential successors and predecessors involved in the strategic FB succession process (Cesaroni & Sentuti, 2017).

According to Cesaroni and Sentuti(2017), quantitative researches involve actual numbers, counts, accumulations, averages, variances, etc., and consequently were ineffective in examining the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, motivations, and the viewpoints of business owners, managers, advisers, successors and other family and business members. The multi-case analysis used in the present study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with the one predecessor founder and five successors of five Moroccan Small and Medium Family-owned businesses that have gone through the experience of generational change (transfer of FB to second generations). Two main reasons could be advanced to support this methodological choice. One predecessor has been interviewed, since three out of the five predecessors had already passed away. Nonetheless, one predecessor refused to participate in the study and would not take part in the research. Besides that, all the successor-managers of the five targeted family-owned SMEs were contacted, and five of them accepted the invitation to participate and being interviewed. Indeed, the interview is a very interesting method for collecting qualitative data (motivations, history, beliefs, opinions and statements of the interviewees). These interviews are structured using the thematic axis identified in the literature (research objectives), enriched by debates, discussions, and follow-up questions during the conduct of the interviews. All respondents' statements were recorded and transcribed for use in the data analysis.

Table 1

Presentation of Interviewees

| FB | Activity sector of the business | Person Interviewed | Generations in the FB | Successorgender | Length of the interviews |
|----|---|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| A | Building, Roadwork, and Sanitation Sector | Successor | Second generation | Male | 45 min28 |
| B | Building, Horticulture, and Security Services Sectors | Successor | Second generation | Male | 40 min 09 |
| C | Commerce | Founder Successor | Second generation | Male Female | 35 min 23 min 27 |
| D | Private school | Successor | First and second generations | Female | 38 min 05 |
| E | Ironwork and Building Materials Industry | Successor | First and second generations | Female | 1 h 30 min |

Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the family-owned businesses (FB) used as samples in the study, as well as the FB managers who had been interviewed. Thus, the three FB (A, B, C) have already accomplished the succession process and their control of the FB and its management were ensured actually by the second generation. However, Family Businesses, for example “Company D” and “Company E” were still experiencing the succession process and the preceding (founders) and succeeding (successors) generations were still actively engaged in the business activities. In this regard, the terms "successor" and "potential successor" were used. The first term defined the members of the second generation who had officially taken over the family firm. The second term outlined the typology of successors currently undergoing the training and socialization phases and who would potentially take over the control of the company after the disengagement of the family business founder.

The choice to adopt the interviews as a data collection tool is justified by our focus on family business. The study used convenience sampling as the FB selected were the ones which had agreed to answer the study questions. Since the database of FBs which have been transferred to the next generations were not available, the researchers had directly contacted those FB which fit the research target criteria (FBs that meet the following conditions: Family-owned SMEs, SMEs transmitted from one generation to another). In fact, the first FB that was interviewed recommended other leads and companies to contact. It can be said that the convenience sampling and snowball methods had allowed us to obtain the research sample.

The study being exploratory has avoided generalizing the findings. It is based on interviews conducted within five Moroccan family-owned Small and Medium-sized Businesses. Besides, the sample of respondents all had a heterogeneous entrepreneurial background. In addition, the in-depth analysis of the heterogeneous entrepreneurial processes will serve to help the researchers better understand and clarify the reality of the social phenomenon studied. In this sense, Rachidi (2016) highlighted that the scholars of the "embedded entrepreneur" currents proclaim that the entrepreneur’s actions, acts, decisions and behaviors are deeply impacted either positively or negatively by his, or surrounding environment and ecosystem.

The interviewees' answers and statements were recorded. Thereafter, the data was transcribed, codified and categorized as qualitative data following different thematic axes. Two key points have further clarified better the classification and definition of the study's thematic axes. The research objectives were taken into consideration when codifying the empirical data. For more consistency, the study has used the "inter-coder" method (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). It allows one to define and validate the main themes and sub-themes to be developed throughout the empirical analysis. This will in turn, assist in answering the research questions.

Regarding the empirical analysis approach, the data collected via the semi-structured interviews will be analyzed through the intra and inter-case method (Eisenhardt, 1989). To gain a deeper understanding of the specificities of each analyzed structure and to align them with findings from previous studies, a comprehensive analysis of the current research results is relevant for better exploring the social phenomenon under investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Intra-case Analysis

The Case of "Company A"

"Company A" is a family business that operates in the construction industry and was established by the father who was the head of the family in 2008. The company was into road works, particularly in sanitation and road construction. The creator of "company A" was already a stakeholder in the parent FB, which was founded with his siblings since 1990s and in which they had made significant investments to enable the launch of each shareholder's individual initiative and project. Additionally, the founders' sibling integration into the parent family business as a result of the expansion of the family compelled the partners (siblings who started the business) to start other projects, because working in a family company with a large number of family members can be challenging on various levels. It was challenging to exert control over the decision-making process and leadership in a family structure that comprised six shareholder brothers and their off spring, particularly at the management level. Such a circumstance could cause significant arguments and conflicts that might damage both the family and the corporate systems.

The business family's philosophy was to expand the parent FB by establishing new subsidiary businesses which would collaborate and contract work with the parent family company. To do this, the family members anticipated and set the ground for this strategic choice by integrating their children with them into the parent FB so as to socialize and train them and thus become familiar with the FB and the challenges of entrepreneurship from an early age. As a result, the descendant generations could develop an entrepreneurial spirit and culture. The family head (father) and his eldest son started their own subsidiary business, which became "Company A" in 2008, after a protracted period of perseverance, learning, and teamwork within the parent FB. The FB's eldest son (the potential successor) has joined the firm since 2000. Throughout this period, the eldest son developed skills by holding various positions in the hierarchical level within the business (employee, technical manager, project manager). The owner of "Company A" effectively handed over control of the business to his siblings in 2012. Indeed, the task of managing and monitoring the construction sites and projects was still the responsibility of the oldest son. The top management (human resources management, managing a portfolio of suppliers and banks, etc.), however,

was performed by the founder's younger son, who had joined the company in 2011 after getting his master's degree in corporate finance.

Although "Company A" since its inception came into being only a few years ago, it was due to the commitment and perseverance of the predecessors, the capabilities and skills of the successors, as well as the involvement and innovation of the team which was made up of engineers, technicians in the building and civil engineering field, and experienced employees, "Company A" has been able to maintain a strong position in the construction industry, which now has become extremely competitive and dynamic.

The Case of "Company B"

It is a family-owned SME engaged in construction and civil engineering. "Company B" was founded by the head of the family in 1993. The FB founder went to France to study business management in 1970. After graduation, he joined the parent family business whose legal status then was regarded as an "individual company" which was initiated by his brothers in the 70's. It was during this time that he acquired managerial and technical experiences and skills. The founder of "Company B" took on the position of manager for an extended length of time to restructure the business, since his siblings had lacked the necessary expertise and background in business management and entrepreneurship. As a matter of fact, after joining the company, who was also the founder, had recommended to his brothers to change the "legal status" of the poorly managed individual family business to become a "limited liability company". This strategic change was the result of serious issues with its management and governance. Therefore, in order to safeguard the family's private fortunes and assets, this choice was made. The predecessor creator of "Company B" cum manager of the parent company was dissatisfied with the company's management as it even ran the risk of going bankrupt and experiencing financial issues.

Meanwhile, the sibling shareholders had experienced mistrust, disputes, rivalry and conflicts about the parent family firm's management and strategic orientations. Consequently, the manager of the parent family business quit as the business counsel. In 1993, when he left the parent company, he started its own building and construction company. Concerning the strategy of intergenerational transferal and continuity of "Company B", it was initially started by the founder, who set the objective of quitting the business in his sixtieth year. For this purpose, he integrated his eldest son and potential successor in 1997, on to the business board, to socialize him with the business industries and inculcate him with entrepreneurship capabilities. Moreover, the transition of the company's legal structure from an "individual company" to a "limited liability company" in 2009 was associated with a change in the management committee, i.e., the withdrawal of the predecessor, and the formal appointment of the eldest son as the new manager of the business.

The company's founder had explained his intergenerational transferal strategy that the choice of the family business successor was made based on the criterion of age. The eldest son was the oldest of the siblings and the closest to him (i.e. founder), as they had worked together for more than 12 years. During this period, others siblings were still young and were still finishing their studies. The second reason that justified this choice of the eldest son according to the founder of "Company B" was trust, the confidence and the positive attitude toward the successor's abilities and managerial skills to carry on the FB. According to the founder, the eldest son had gained credibility and legitimacy when the latter took over control of the company. The eldest son had achieved excellent performances which exceeded those attained by the founder during his

time as the head of the FB. It is noteworthy that the eldest son held the position of manager of this FB from 2009 until 2015, before passing the torch on to his younger brothers who have been helping out with the management of the FB. The eldest sibling disengaged from the management position of “Company B” not because there were family or professional problems, but he started his own projects and other entrepreneurial endeavors, assuming that it was a suitable time to leverage on his accomplishments and entrepreneurial capabilities.

The Case of “Company C”

It was a family business, specializing in the sale of building materials, generation of electricity, plumbing, painting, etc. Two brothers founded this business in 2000, and each one has a 50% share of the company's ownership. Furthermore, to ensure the company's growth and continuation of its business achievement and results, family members of the business have occupied key positions within the company structure, for instance: the management and commercial services, the storekeepers and stock management, control of the sale channels, and the monitoring of the FB turnover. However, the accountant responsible of the accounting department was spared. As a matter of fact, the team of this commercial company was composed of both family members and hired non-family members.

In reality, the effective running and management the company were made possible because of the involvement of the two initiator shareholders of the family enterprise. It is worth noting that the passing away of one of the shareholders in 2014 had called into question the company's unfaltering good management and thus, its life span. The demise of this shareholder had given rise to disagreements, conflicts and concomitant issues regarding inheritance between the deceased's heirs and the other family members.

To solve these issues on FB legacy, the family counsel had proposed the following settlements: the takeover of “Company C” by the deceased's heirs, while the second shareholder's heirs would retain 50% of the inheritance in cash and in-kind, i.e., in the form of the FB property. However, the deceased had no sons, only girls and they were compelled to accept their inheritance, namely "Company C". According to the female successor interviewed, the daughters were unprepared and uninterested in inheriting a company in a field that caters only to men. This unanticipated circumstance posed a serious challenge to the continuity of the management in this family-owned business. Additionally, it was reported that when the female successors took over the company's management, they had encountered some difficulties regarding socialization and acceptance amongst the FB employees, who persistently put up barriers in their path.

The Case of “Company D”

In the case of “Company D”, which was involved in a private education, it was a family SME providing services at different levels, ranging from kindergarten, primary, secondary and high school education. It was founded in 1998 by a woman, who had the desire and intention of establishing schools that would meet the standards and norms of the Moroccan education system. The founder-manager, the role of pedagogical responsibility, and the bursar position were the three key positions and responsibilities held by her family members. The FB school had offered during its startup phases, only kindergarten and elementary education services. Since the 2006–2007 academic years and to date, the institution has been able to make great development and growth, consequently it could provide additional services.

"Company D" employed over 56 employees, comprising teachers and administrative staff dispersed across the FB's kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high schools. Family members this FB held important managerial posts, such as the bursar, the founder manager and pedagogical manager.

However, other positions were filled by the employees of non-family members. Indeed, the legal status of this institution was initially an "individual person", before being transformed into a "limited liability company" in 2005. In 2015, the management committee of "Company D" had decided to integrate a fourth family member to the management team, to occupy the position tasked with the responsibility of digital communication and communication with the students' parents. This fourth member who was the FB founder's daughter had joined the company during the period 2014-2015, and as it turned out was to become the potential successor of "Company D".

Due to incidences of misunderstandings and family disputes in 2015, it was impossible to develop the school's strategic plans. To deal with this situation and assist the family members to find a common ground, the founder's daughter and potential successor was encouraged to join the business. Since the family problems and disagreements persist, the potential successor decided to stop working with her uncle who was in charge of the pedagogical aspects of the schools in the FB. Both of them could not agree on the objective and strategies of the FB, and as was highlighted by the successor: "*my uncle frequently put the brakes and blocks on the new plans we intended to implement to safeguard the school, which was going through challenging circumstances*" [sic]. The latter finally learned that her uncle had wanted to be selected to take over the management of the company because he had worked with the founder for a great many years. The uncle was unable to accept that a young girl who was a student at the FB school and who had recently joined the organization would be in a position to prescribe policies and exercise authority over the FB. For this reason, he kept creating problems for the company's managers.

The FB had in place plans to hand over its schools to its future generations, it had set a vision of doing so once the school had completed its first 25 years (i.e., covering the period 1998 until 2023). In spite of the many unforeseen family issues that occurred during this period, its succession process was nevertheless accomplished in 2015, much earlier than the anticipated deadline (2023). The siblings, i.e., the eldest son and youngest daughter had earlier shown a lack of interest in the company's FB, and in identifying a potential successor. Nonetheless, the daughter who took over the FB had openly accepted the idea and was deeply involved and strongly motivated to join the FB initiated by her mother. She was, once she was trained and had been prepared to assume responsibility of the FB, ready to assure its continuity. Noteworthy is the fact that the successor's daughter, who had planned to move to Canada in either 2014 or 2015 to undertake a two-year program in educational sciences had to cancel her education abroad. The FB had to announce her being hired as a manager eight years before its scheduled date. It would seem that special circumstances and family disagreements pushed the FB to undergo significant changes.

The Case of "Company E"

"Company E" is a family SME created by the father, the head of the family in 1990. It was mainly involved in the ironwork sector. The entrepreneurial family had also been engaged in other subsidiary activities, for example the manufacture and distribution of construction equipment as an additional endeavor. Initially, two brothers were in charge of all the key responsibilities within the FB, including client prospection, order fulfillment, etc. In order to support the company's growth, the FB managers reinforced their work teams by

hiring a sale manager (to control the department of marketing and company products), an accountant (to supervise the company's finance and its accounting department), as well as additional staff to help with the manufacturing of building materials (brick, beam, etc.).

In order to assist him with the technical duties and business control, the founder got his eldest son into the business. Yet, due to their lack of management, know-how and business expertise, the organization went through a management crisis and reached an impasse in its development. The FB began to suffer from issues of cash management and negative financial performance. According to the female successor interviewed, “we went through difficult moments, the suppliers owed us money and we even had unpaid invoices”. This period of crisis coincides with the induction of the founder's youngest daughter (female successor interviewed) into the business in 2001 to assist his older brother who was in charge of workshops and her father founder manager of the FB. Moreover, she had a technician diploma which was awarded by the OFPPT, and her specialization was in ironwork. Notwithstanding, her father disagreed to her participation in the FB and never accepted the fact that his daughter would work and enter the workforce, which was seen as a man's responsibility. However, the daughter disagreed and persevered, “*I have insisted on entering the business and taking my father's position by starting with the fulfillment of easy assignments while attempting to grasp the firm's activity and sector through the frequentation [sic] of consumers, suppliers, as well as the various company stakeholders.*”

In 2003, the founder's youngest daughter was able to take over the management of the FB, she had even implemented various new measures to reorganize and restructure the enterprise with the primary goal of ensuring an effective management strategy to help overcome the FB's financial difficulties and looming threat of bankruptcy. Nevertheless, her father who never recognized her competence and her ability to manage the FB, chose to favor his son who had never been to school and who had no diploma. The founder's daughter was strongly criticized when she took over the FB. Her own brother had also felt hatred and jealousy on his part when he realized that his sister was better than him. He could not accept the fact that she was able to get a diploma, and even worse she was running the FB, in a position to command the workforce and give orders.

Multi-site Analysis of the Determinants of Potential Successor Selection in the Moroccan Family-owned SME

The Intergenerational Transferal Decision of the Moroccan Family SME

The decision-making reality in the context of the family business appeared to be not conducted in order to create value and meet immediate financial targets or to achieve short-term economic goals. The decision-making processes were rather to attain other objectives of continuity in projects across generations and the continued identity of the entrepreneurial family in the FB (Calus & Van Huylenbroeck, 2008). Consequently, this has implications for both the family and the firm's systems.

According to previous studies, the FB intergenerational transferal has always been considered a strategic choice resulting from the strategic orientations of the company. It was not a simple event that had emerged all of a sudden, but through long discussions, debates and preparations within the FB (Bjuggren & Sund, 2004). Moreover, family members involved in firm's management and governance would adopt the practice of formal governance, for example informal meetings, such as family assemblies and family councils; or

informal ones, for example, in discussions during family meals and trips. These were used as occasions to share family values and socio-emotional wealth, and in the process FB identity was being forged. They became opportunities to discuss the business and family preoccupations, to solve problems and perhaps to propose possible solutions (Birgachet al., 2020).

These conclusions were largely supported by the statements of the actors interviewed (predecessor, successor) in the study's sample of family businesses:

"In our case, it's purely confidential, is that my father decided to stop working. We estimated the value of the company and assessed the firm assets, how much it is worth, where it is, what it has in terms of receivables, debts, markets, operations, equipment. We have evaluated a value of the company with its equipment; my father did what he wanted. We set the value of the company and he gave us payment facilities [...]" (Male successor of "Company A").

"My father decided to retire definitively from the company and the professional world when he reached the age of 60, while still remaining a partner" (Male successor of "Company B").

"The family set up a vision of passing on the business to the next generation, but it was planned for the first 25 years of the establishment. So, it was planned for the year 2023" (Female successor of "Company D").

These statements of the entrepreneurs interviewed show the predecessors' awareness of the importance of intergenerational transfer of the FB and its effect on the FB's longevity and development. The verbatim remarks above underscored the entrepreneurs' understanding of the challenges of intergenerational transfer of the FB and how these considerations should determine their strategic choices and the management of the FB. Indeed, the FB predecessors' awareness of the importance and urgency of the intergenerational transfer issues had encouraged them to foresee and prepare the ground and the required conditions that would ensure a smooth process of change, even without drawing up a formal written intergenerational transfer plan. In this context, the succession considerations had become the FB managers' top priorities. It was because only through meticulous succession planning, the selection and socialization of potential successors who were considered competent and capable of carrying out the family entrepreneurial activities and endeavors that the family project's longevity would be ensured (Ibrahim, et al., 1999; Dumas, 1992; Ward, 1987; Ibrahim, et al., 2001). Conversely, the lack of succession planning has led to the alarming death rates of family firms, as has predicted in the literature (Handler, 1990; 1994).

Moreover, the predecessor's willingness to pass the torch to the next generation has motivated potential successors to get involved in and take over the family business.

"We were lucky; I did a little academic training so we found the marriage between the experience and the know-how of my father when he decided to quit the business in 2012 and even before [...]. I worked in the building sites, when I was in college, in high school, first year common core. Every summer we do internships at the sites, I accompanied my father, my uncles and you obey to their orders and you behave like any other employees, it motivated

us to join the company, and entrepreneurship since a young age” (Male successor of “Company A”).

“Since my older brother did not finish his studies. My dad had to integrate him into the company to help them out because he cannot do everything within the company on his own. The more the business growth is, the more people you need. So, our father said that I am going to integrate Nourddine (eldest son). So we can understand that the founding father had a vision to continue the business within the family by passing it on to the children” (Male successor of “Company B”).

“My parents are the type who got us involved with them from a very young age. By joining the project activities and we discuss about it in an informal way during meals or in a trip or other. It is the parents who shared information with us, who take our advice. We talked about business at breakfast and lunch, dinner, while traveling. It was parents who got us involved, who pushed us to ensure the continuity of the family business” (Female successor of “Company D”).

Poutziouriset al. (2006, p.405) have asserted that the creation of strategy at the enterprise level would allow for the creation of internal as well as external consensus, unify efforts, optimize processes and manage priorities. Indeed, the formulation of an integrative strategy that took into account the positions of the different stakeholders would provide a platform of exchange, communication and dialogue, as well as for the sharing of the experiences, background and knowledge (Poutziouriset al., 2006 p. 406-407). This, in turn would increase the chances of achieving the strategic objectives already outlined by the organization.

The development of a FB intergenerational transferal strategy would allow for the effective and smooth conduct of any FB enterprise during a changing of the guard process (Luan et al., 2018). Likewise, it would consequently impact the transfer success and the intergenerational continuity of the family structures (Luan et al., 2018). Accordingly, developing a succession plan would allow for the preparation of the conditions for the transfer, the selection, the integration, the preparation and the socialization of the potential successor or/and buyer. At the same time, it would set up the FB transfer procedures at the right time. Previous researches have described the succession process as involving three main stages, namely the selection and preparation of the potential successor, the integration of the successor, and the transfer of leadership, as well as the formal appointment of the successor as the new leader of the firm (Ibrahimet al., 2001).

As a matter of fact, research has shown that only 30% of family businesses survived from the first to the second generation, compared to the 15% of FB which could continue to the third generation (Luan et al., 2018; Leet al., 2003). These findings, on the increase mortality of the family businesses as a result of the predecessors’ disengagement could be explained by the ineffectiveness, or even the lack of a succession plan (Bjuggren & Sund, 2004). Researchers have pointed out that “it seems remarkable that successions are not planned in due time”.

“[...] for the suppliers, we had no problems with them, because they already know us. On the other hand, the problem we had encountered, especially as women managers, was the staff. They cannot accept a young woman manager, who has just arrived and start to

command and give orders, because they (the staff) are already there, they have been working in the company for a long time" (Female successor of "company C").

"[...] I joined the company and I did some administrative tasks. But my father never accepted the idea, and he never agreed to join the business [...]" (Female successor of "company E").

These statements of the female successors of Company C and Company E seemed to suggest the founder manager lack vision and a strategic intergenerational transferal plan regarding the future of the FB. Indeed, the reality of the intergenerational transferal process within these family entities, for example Company C and Company E) can differ from one company to another and from one founder-manager to another. This evidence has been highlighted by the embedded entrepreneur theory explaining the divergence of entrepreneurial processes from one entrepreneur to another and from one entrepreneurial act to another (Rachidi, 2016).

The intergenerational succession process in "Company D" was carried out under special and urgent conditions characterized by the absence of a guide and a strategy that could facilitate its conduct. Following the sudden death of the founding father in 2014 who had not sufficiently thought about the generational change problems and decided on who would take over control of the family business. Also, the second element that made the intergenerational transferal a bit delicate and special in the context of "Company D" was that the founder had only daughters (therefore, there were no male descendants) who were obliged to join the business world regardless of their willingness and adequacy or lack of interests.

Moreover, all justifies this reluctance and lack of a clear vision about the intergenerational transferal within this "Company D". In this regard, studies have widely argued that children's gender and birth order would have a strong influence on the choice of a successor in the FB (Ibrahimet al., 2001). Alcorn (1982), has even stated that "family businesses are similar to monarchies in which the eldest son becomes the undisputed successor".

Similarly, the intergenerational transferal process in the case of "Company E" was not as easy as the in the previous case of "Company D". The "Company E" founder had not setup a good plan for the intergenerational transition of the FB. As the successor interviewee supported, the founder wanted to pass the reigns of the business to his son and showed resistance and disinterest in passing the business on to his youngest daughter. In fact, the founder of "Company E" would bring his eldest son, who had no diploma, from a very young age to get him initiated into the FB. The founder had trained the son and encouraged him to learn about the FB, and to try and develop in the son an entrepreneurial culture and spirit.

After obtaining her diploma in the same field of activity as the FB, which was in "ironwork", the founder's youngest daughter joined her father and her eldest brother in 2001 to give them a helping hand regarding the management of the FB, especially after having acquired the relevant knowledge and experience in the ironwork sector. Nevertheless, her father did not agree to her taking over the reins and he never supported this choice of the FB successor as he did not encourage the daughter to become interested in the company and the professional world of work in general. As expressed in the following remarks about the would-be successor of "Company E" it became clear that "*it is not accepted in our culture that a woman commands and gives orders*". Therefore, for cultural reasons, the FB founder's manager was very reluctant to pass the torch to his youngest daughter and let her take over his position when he decided to hand over control of

the family business. It was in accordance with the widely held cultural belief that the place and role of women in general was to take care of domestic activities. However, the daughter was not to be deterred, with her persistent presence and continued supervision of the family venture, she had gradually been able to gain her legitimacy as the anointed manager of the FB. She was able to unravel the financial malpractices of the FB accountant and commercial manager, who were found to have been dishonest and had stolen the FB's money for a long period of time. This led to the dismissal of the parties concerned and she officially took over control of the business in 2003. She was able to demonstrate her competences and capabilities to lead and to ensure the proper functioning of the company. This despite the fact that she had never been motivated nor applauded for her efforts and engagement in the FB by her father and her elder brother. The latter had harbored feelings of hatred and jealousy since she could occupy the coveted position which he would have liked to have been handed over to him.

To sum up, it would seem that despite the importance of the role of intergenerational succession planning in the successful transferal of the FB (LeCounte, 2020; Umar & Kurawa, 2019; Luan et al., 2018; Bathija & Priyadarshini, 2018), there were still FB predecessors who were reluctant for different reasons, to setup clear and defined intergenerational succession plans (Luan et al., 2018), especially in the small and medium-sized structure context (Magasi, 2016). In this regard, the FB actors interviewed in the present empirical study, also supported this view. Some founder managers were seen as showing the right entrepreneurial spirit and embracing a business culture shaped by vision, business intelligence, planning, etc., as can be seen in the case of the founders of "Company" A, "Company" B, and "Company" D. On the other hand, two entrepreneurs, founders of "Company" C and "Company" E, continued with the old ways, adopting the archaic management systems, and day-to-day management which was characterized by the lack of vision in the intergenerational transferal process. As was perceptively pointed out by LeCounte (2020) the *"succession planning typically depends on founder-CEOs' worldview, family member relationships, and family business capacity"* (p.3).

There was therefore, a diversity of entrepreneurial profiles from one family entrepreneur to another, characterized by their own attributes and conditions as pointed out in many theories, such as the embedded entrepreneur theory and the upper echelons theory. According to Boling et al. (2016) and Hambrick & Mason (1984) cited in LeCounte (2020, p.6), the *"upper echelon theory in the family-owned SME context focuses on CEOs' cognition, perception, and values that influence strategic change choices for leading the business through transitioning of power."* Indeed, emotional attachment and over identification in the FB were the main values and characteristics of the FB founders (Ahlers et al., 2016). However, this excessive attachment impacts negatively on their decision-making processes. For example, the fear of losing one's social status and power pushes the FB founder to be attached to his position. This tended to hamper the intergenerational transferal process plan and strategy (Bjuggren & Sund, 2004).

Determinants of the Potential Successor of the Moroccan Family SME

When the founder withdraws from the FB for various different reasons, for example retirement, health problems, sudden death, the desire to quit the professional world in order to enjoy one's personal life, etc., a variety of options present themselves to the predecessor. It could be either to pass the torch of the FB to the family members who have been identified as potential successors (i.e. family succession), or to recruit an outsider manager (for instance employees), or to dispose of the company to an external buyer (Wang & Si, 2011). This is a real challenge as it makes the process of intergenerational transferal subjective. It is

often shaped by factors related to primogeniture and the cultural influence of patriarchy, as well as the information asymmetry between the FB and its potential successors (Schell et al., 2020). However, this issue has not been sufficiently addressed by the literature, especially from the successor's point of view (Borges & Rodrigues, 2015). Researchers are very interested in the study of the founder's role, as well as the intergenerational transferal process and the modalities (Borges & Rodrigues, 2015). It has become clear though that there had been no adequate interests taken in explaining the process and the choice determinants of the FB's potential successors (Wang & Si, 2011). Despite this inadequacy, issues of successor choice and socialization should be seriously considered a primary step of any intergenerational transferal process. Cabrera-Suarez (2005) has argued that "family business succession is conceptualized as a multistage process, which begins before potential successors enter the firm and extends after some of them are selected as successors"(p.92) as quoted in Yordanova (2012). Indeed, the Moroccan family business is a fertile research field, although it has just gained scientific interest and research curiosity in the last decade (Bentebbaa, 2017, p.65). Lately, Moroccan researchers have shown interests in the problems faced by the FB in their various aspects like, such as finance, investment, strategy, governance, intergenerational transferal, etc.

The theoretical models that have emerged from a rich and diversified international literature on the potential successors of the FB have identified numerous factors that could have had an impact on the process. These included individual, organizational, familial and environmental factors which had already been discussed in great detail in the literature review section. Fiegenger et al. (1996) cited by Yordanova (2012), explained that founders of FB proceeded in the majority of cases to favor internal succession by choosing and preparing relatives and family members to take over the business leadership and control the FB. This was because the predecessor-successor, as well as the successors and the other family stakeholders had already developed strong family ties.

The investigation of the Moroccan family SME succession process from the perspective of the successor is going to be structured on the basis of the research objectives, as well as according to the main themes of the present study. In sum the analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the five SME has revealed the following findings: the individual, familial and interpersonal factors were identified as the mains traits that would shape the successor selection process.

Interpersonal Factors

This cluster of factors was grouped together as interpersonal factors that the potential successor(s) regarded as important in the context of their relationship with other family members, mainly the predecessors. The review carried out on the relevant literature all seemed to regard the predecessor-successor relationship and the successor relationships with other stakeholders as the main factors impacting the selection process and preparation of the successor (Kandade et al., 2021;Gabriel & Bitsch, 2019). The empirical results of the present study have also supported the conclusions reached in previous studies. This can be clearly seen in the statements of the entrepreneurs interviewed.

"I think that there was trust, which is very important, he (founder) trusted us and I do not want to say that we were capable [...]" (successor of the FB "A").

"The father established a solid trust, because he knows very well the managerial and management capacities of the successor" (successor of the "Company B").

"It's possible, but sometimes, I could not say that there are parents who do not trust, because we're their children. I'm talking about trust on the professional side. Because parents always see their son as a child, so for them, there is always this feeling, these feelings, that is what we always see, that the father or the mother sees that their children need experiences, still need to work, we trust them 100%, but it is up to the children, future leaders, to show them that they are capable [...]" (successor of the "company D").

The obvious conclusion is that developing a friendly climate shaped by mutual respect and trust between the different members of the family structure favor on the one hand, a better preparation and socialization of the successor, and on the other hand, the success of the intergenerational transferal process. Additionally, there was evidence that through the transfer of explicit and tacit knowledge from the founder predecessor to members of the new generation of successors, as exemplified in the following remarks:

"Of course, my brother and sisters were always a source of motivations and support for me as a female successor of this private school. However, my uncle was bit reluctant and restrictive regarding this succession decision, because he had spent more than 20 years working with my parents and he wanted to take over the business control after my parents' withdrawal" (Female successor of "Company D").

These harmonious and good interpersonal relationships that the successor maintains with both family members and various external stakeholders promote the continuity of the firm even after the predecessor's disengagement (Schell et al., 2020). Similarly, the predecessor-successor relationship, marked by mutual trust, motivates and encourages the predecessor to pass on the management of his or her business to the next generation by planning and formally initiating the handover procedures. Therefore, these conclusions are in line with the findings prevalent in the literature. A classic example is seen in the following remarks: "the family's trust as decisive to stimulate stakeholders to recognize successor's role in the firm"(Ganzaroli et al., 2006;Gagné et al., 2021).

In addition, the empirical results of the present study have revealed another interesting outcome. There were issues of favoritism and unfair treatment of children by their parents considered as the sources of conflicts, tension, hostility and adversarial relationships between siblings. The successor of "Company E" confirms:

"My father always behaved in a manner that gave their male offspring preference and favor over the girls. He greatly motivated his male offspring to finish their studies and succeed in life and he neglected us as girls either we do well in our studies or not. Additionally, these inappropriate behaviors adopted by my father were the main reason of my brother and I conflict, disagreement, jealousy until now, because my father always pushes my brother to do well in school in order to be better and get great marks than me".

These findings collaborated that in previous studies which had highlighted the negative effects of the unfair treatment on the harmony within the family system (Alderson, 2015)and the management of the FB intergenerational transferal process (Neubauer, 2003).

Family Factors

In the FB context, it is widely accepted that there are no boundaries separating the family system from the other systems, such as the ownership and business systems. The three-circle model of Davis and Taguiri (1986) has highlighted the continuous and dynamic overlap of the different systems that made up the family business, i.e., management, business, family. Normally, the family system would rule over the various management and governance processes of the company (Nassiri, 2017). However, this increased predominance of family, sometimes impacted negatively the business choices and strategies. Previous studies strongly supported these conclusions (Berrone et al., 2012; Jayantilal et al., 2020) by highlighting that the family system was governed by subjective socio-emotional logics which would influence FB strategies, such as intergenerational transferal, choice of successor, financial and investment decisions, etc.

The empirical evidence of the present study, as seen from the statements of the managers interviewed seemed to confirm negative effects of the family on the selection and integration of its successor. However, one should be reminded that the participant levels and the family system involvement on business decisions differ largely from one family-controlled business to another. The following verbatim remarks should help to explain in depth the risk of over generalizing the prevailing situation on the ground:

"[...] the family environment did not allow us to do anything else; you are obliged to work and join to family business, to look for ways to evolve" (Male successor of the "Company A")

"My father, who is in charge of preparing the successor, he had succeeded his life and he thinks in the same way, he would like to make his children's lives successful too. So, the idea and the decision to take over of the FB start from that evidence" (Male successor of "Company B")

"We were obliged to do so, because there was no potential male successor. So, it was automatic and it was compulsory to take over the company in order to ensure its continuity" (a female successor of the "Company C").

"My parents wanted to see who was already motivated, who was interested in education sector. They try to show our interests and motivations, by asking some questions, who is involved in reviewing and taking over the institution. After the parents know their children very well, we are supposed to guide them and reorient them if it is necessary, so we don't say that, this or that person is going to take over the establishment management" (Female successor of "Company D").

As presented in the various excerpts of the interview results above, the effect of the family was deemed to be difficult to neutralize and control (Schelle et al., 2020), especially from the perspective of ensuring a successful intergenerational transferal process. According to Schell et al. (2020) the family had impacted negatively this process, such as the disrespect of the professional recruitment procedures, the adoption of subjective selection criteria, like issues of nepotism and primogeniture. According to studies by Ahrens et al. (2015) and Zerbet & Ouahi (2020), the traditional norms internalized by the family system such as nepotism and primogeniture favor in the majority of cases, the male gender and the eldest family members

when replacing predecessors both in their professional activities at the corporate level and in domestic activities. However, these norms are not always the main criteria for choosing a successor. Indeed, the professionalization of family businesses through the recruitment of external managers had been done via an objective and rigorous manner following a rigorous recruitment procedure (Schell et al., 2020).

Despite their initial reluctance and disinterest on the FB activity that they judged as a male activity, women successors of “Company C” found themselves obliged to join the company in order to ensure its continuity due to the lack of other intergenerational transferal alternatives, namely a potential male successor. For example, Constantinidis (2010) and Zerbet & Ouahi (2020) have highlighted that in the absence of the availability of sons and male members, daughters were considered as the potential successors of the FB. Usually these women successors would be supported and motivated by their families, perhaps to complete their studies, acquire knowledge and experiences related to the FB in order to be able to take over the reign of the FB whenever the situation permitted. On the other hand, in the case of “Company A”, “Company B”, and “Company D”, the FBs intervened indirectly in the successor selection process, without obliging their descendants to take over the FB if they were not interested or motivated to do so.

Whatever the family did to select a potential successor in an objective and neutral manner, it was always difficult to achieve this objectivity, especially in the context of the SME family structure where the family system reigned over the different processes of the company. More specifically, other criteria affecting the issue of succession, such as motivation, involvement, education level, attitudes would guide the FB selection process.

Individual Factors

According to Stewardship approach theorists and information asymmetry, family firms were characterized by lower agency costs (Madison et al., 2016). However, these scholars were also of the view that the non-economic goals and continued involvement of the family in the activities of the firm could determine their behaviors, for example the potential for opportunism, and gave rise to conflicts and information asymmetry (Madison et al., 2016).

From this perspective, recruiting the successor who is going to take over the business deserves to be examined in greater detail. Researchers have mobilized signaling theory to shed light on the complex issue of the choice of potential successors in the special context of the FB which has been impacted with information asymmetry (Madison et al., 2016; Schell et al., 2020). The literature has defined information asymmetry in the context of intergenerational transferal as the successor’s willingness and forced commitment in the taking over decision of the FB. In other words, the successor or buyer shows interests, as well as the willingness to take over the family business, no longer by his personal convictions and commitment, but rather in showing behaviors of obedience (modesty, humility) to his family, to his parents’ orders, etc. Nevertheless, the successor is not deeply convinced and interested in the FB, because perhaps he would rather go through other experiences and career plans.

For this purpose, researchers in family business succession use signal theory as a theoretical model that provides an analytical framework to comprehend the successor recruitment process (Schell et al., 2020). According to this theory, the recruiters (in the succession context, the family business founders’ are considered as recruiters) receive the signals (motivation, engagement, willingness to take over the business

control, the interest on the business industry, the willingness to make a professional career within the family firm, etc.) expressed tacitly or saliently by the candidates (family members are the candidate in the case of the familial intergenerational transferal, and external potential successors like employees, other FB partners, etc.) (Alayo et al., 2016; Schell et al., 2020). This model is often mobilized in the recruitment process, and it allows for the reduction of risks related to information asymmetry between the two parties involved in the recruitment process. In the present study, the actors interviewed supported this point of view, mentioning that the founders proceeded in the same way, via the test of the objectives, motivations, interests and the descendant's involvement in the family business in order to be eligible to resume the FB leadership.

"There was the coaching, but we didn't call it the coaching, it was just the discussions, through which we could come up with the ideas of your strategy for the future. They were the kind of assessment from the uncles who normally work in the same sector of activity" (the successor the "Company A").

"[...] the organizational involvement through the search for opportunities, prospecting and submitting for public contracts. On this basis, the predecessor integrated the successor and relay on his capabilities and he pass him the family business management and responsibility" (Successor of "Company B").

"Long before the transfer procedure, he (the father) was testing us, maybe with my sister, maybe with my brother, but he wanted to see who was interested in taking over the company. He didn't try to impose its choice because, in order to do an objective choice, we have to see if the parents have an authoritarian education or if they adopt the participative education's styles, so if they force their children to do something or if they take their opinions" (Successor of "Company D").

According to Signal theory, the predecessors occupy the position of recruiter during the potential successor selection process (Schell et al., 2020). In order to recruit a suitable successor for both the company and the family, the predecessor receives (apparently or in an implicit and tacit way) and evaluates the feedbacks obtained from the candidates in order to decide on who will take over the company. In this sense, the comments of the interviewees provided further evidence of the feedbacks in terms of the behaviors often shown by the candidates and which reflected their attitudes, willingness, interests, motivations and involvement in taking over control of the FB.

"There was trust and involvement, especially if the successor is invested, willing to take over and interested in this field of entrepreneurship" (Male successor of "Company A").

"I have motivated to study the education sciences, to perhaps integrate the establishment after. So, I had already proved to my parents the motivations and willingness to integrate the establishment since my siblings were indifferent about the firm activity sector. [...] to carry on working as a family unit, we had to maintain our ambition, aspirations, and commitment". (Female successor of "Company D").

“I have four brothers and two sisters, and I am the only one who is interested in the FB taking. But, even though it is a family business founded by my father, I still have to be up to the responsibility and acquire the necessary skills to enhance the company's performance”
(Female successor of “Company E”).

Among the signs that generally favor the choice of such a candidate, the results of the present study have highlighted mainly involvement, willingness, motivation, level of education, knowledge and experience accumulated within or outside the family business. These research conclusions significantly collaborated the results drawn from the literature regarding the successor selection criteria (Cabrera-Suárez, 2005; Yordanova, 2012).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The worrying rate of family businesses ceasing operation throughout the world has made the investigation of the issue of succession one of the priorities that the community of researchers and academics have focused on in recent years. This has led to a remarkable increase in the number of articles and scientific works that have been produced on the issue of family business intergenerational transferal. However, much of these researches have only addressed the formal aspects of intergenerational transferal (i.e., planning, intergenerational transferal modalities) (Magasi, 2016; Tanzwani, 2010) and many of the studies have examined this challenge from the founder's point of view (LeCounte, 2020), with a remarkable lack of research on the issue of intergenerational transferal from the successor perspective.

The present study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the FB intergenerational transferal issue, but from the successor's point of view, and to do so through the analysis of the process of succession and the determinants of the potential successor. Thus, the present research provides both theoretical and empirical contributions. The theoretical contribution is in the study's initiative towards the initiation and continuation of the debate on the complex issue and the development of the literature on FB intergenerational transferal from the successor's point of view. Furthermore, the present study is of the view that to date, it is still a fertile track that deserves more in-depth analysis, especially in the context of the Moroccan family SME. It is also worth noting that the present research brings managerial contributions through the empirical study of the determinants of the choice of successors offive Moroccan family SMEs.

Moreover, the results of this study have shown that there was heterogeneity of the potential successors in their choice of strategies which differed from one FB to another. Indeed, the trust between the predecessor and the potential successor, as well as between the latter and the other stakeholders, the norms internalized by the family (nepotism, primogeniture, patriarch), the involvement, the willingness, the motivation, the level of education, the knowledge, and the accumulated experiences, were found to be the main determining factors of the choice of the potential successor in the family SMEs examined.

However, the study suffers from some limitations and shortcomings that are open to criticisms but may yet pave the way for future research. Indeed, the conclusions reached only present the specific images and realities of the companies selected for this study. Therefore, it is recommended that the study of the issue of the determinants of the choice of FB potential successors adopt a more quantitative approach in order to be able to generate results which better clarify the reality of this social phenomenon in its global context.

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